Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences
Department of English Language and Literature

# THE REPRESENTATION OF RURAL IRISH CHARACTERS IN J.M. SYNGE'S *RIDERS TO THE SEA*, *THE TINKER'S WEDDING*, AND *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD*

Elif Özçeşmeci

Master's Thesis

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**KABUL VE ONAY**

Elif Özçeşmeci tarafından hazırlanan "The Representation of Rural Irish Characters in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea, The Tinker's Wedding*, and *The Playboy of the Western World*" başlıklı bu çalışma, 18 Ocak 2013 tarihinde yapılan savunma sınavı sonucunda başarılı bulunarak jürimiz tarafından Yüksek Lisans Tezi olarak kabul edilmiştir.

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## ÖZET

ÖZÇEŞMECİ, Elif. J.M. Synge'in *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding* ve *The Playboy of the Western World* Oyunlarında İrlandalı Kırsal Kesim Karakterlerinin Temsili. Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2013.

Bu tezin amacı yöresel özelliklerin kullanımı bağlamında on dokuzuncu ve yirminci yüzyıllarda İrlanda'daki kırsal kesimin temsilini incelemektir. Bu doğrultuda, İrlandalılığı ortaya çıkarmak için Synge'in üç oyununda İrlanda halk kültürünü ve yerel renklerini canlandırması tartışılmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra, İrlanda'nın belirli kültürel özellikleri, siyasi ve sosyal olayları kırsal kesim halkının temsil edildiği bu üç oyun açısından gerekli arka planı sağladığı için örneklerle açıklanmıştır.

Kültürel özellikler ışığında, kırsal kesime özgü İrlandalı karakterler Synge'in oyunlarında sırasıyla tartışılmıştır. *Riders to the Sea* (1904), bahsedilen çağdaki denizcilik ile ilgilenen bir halkın örneği olarak incelenmiştir. Dinsel, geleneksel, sosyal ve kültürel özelliklerin yanı sıra ada halkının yaşam koşulları ve Synge'in bunlar karşısındaki tutumu tartışılmıştır. *The Tinker's Wedding* (1909), İrlanda toplumundaki etnik bir grup olan tenekeciler bağlamında incelenmiştir. Bu gezginci topluluk incelendikten sonra, tenekecilerin on dokuzuncu yüzyılın sonundaki konumları değerlendirilmiştir. Yerleşik halkın bu gruba uygulamış olduğu ayrımcılık, İrlandalıların İngilizler tarafından ikincil konuma getirilmesine benzer görüldüğü için üzerinde durulmuştur. *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907)'de modern çağın sosyal ve siyasi değişimlerinin gözlemlendiği İrlanda'nın kırsal kesimine özgü tipler incelenmiştir. Bu oyun, ayrıca on dokuzuncu ve yirminci yüzyıllar boyunca İrlanda toplumunda önemli ölçüde etkili olan milliyetçilik ve ulusal kimlik yaratma çabası ile bağlantılı olarak değerlendirilmiştir.

Sonuç olarak, Synge'in yerel özellikler çerçevesinde kırsal İrlandalı halkı nasıl betimlediği yukarıda adı geçen oyunlarda tartışılmıştır. Synge'in oyunlarında yöresel özelliklere yer vermesi incelenerek, yazarın iddia ettiği gibi kırsal kesimin ve

yerleşimcilerinin gerçekçi fakat kendi tabiriyle “sevinç dolu” bir tasvirini yapıp yapmadığı sorgulanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:**

John Millington Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker’s Wedding*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, İrlanda tiyatrosu, İrlanda kırsal yaşamı, yerel özellikler, İrlanda milliyetçiliği

## ABSTRACT

ÖZÇEŞMECİ, Elif. The Representation of Rural Irish Characters in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding*, and *The Playboy of the Western World*. Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2013.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the representation of peasantry in Ireland during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with regard to local colour. In this context, Synge's reviving Irish folklore to assert Irishness is discussed in three of his plays. In addition to this, certain cultural, political and social aspects of Ireland are illustrated as they provide the context for the three plays representative of rural Ireland.

In the light of cultural characteristics, representation of rural Irish characters is discussed in three plays. *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is analysed in terms of its representation of a seafaring community in the beginning of the twentieth century. The living conditions of the islanders as well as religious, traditional, social and cultural elements and Synge's approach to them are discussed. *The Tinker's Wedding*[1] (1909) is examined with regard to the illustration of an ethnic group — the tinkers — in the Irish society. After this itinerant population is examined, the status of the tinkers during the end of the nineteenth century is analysed. Discrimination of the tinkers by the settled community is questioned since it is seen as an analogy to the subordination of the Irish by the English. *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) is analysed as an exemplar of rural communities in which the effects of social and political shifts of the contemporary age can be observed. The play is also evaluated in relation to nationalism and the struggle of creating a national identity that operated significantly within Irish society throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In conclusion, how Synge depicts rural Irish people through the use of local colour is illustrated and discussed in the above-mentioned plays. Through analysing Synge's employment of Irish folkloric elements in his plays, it is discussed whether the

[1] The years given in parentheses for all plays referred to in this thesis are the years of their first productions. Despite being produced in 1909, *The Tinker's Wedding* was actually written in about 1902. Thus, it is examined earlier — in the second chapter of the thesis—in accordance with Synge's writing career.

playwright draws a realistic yet, as he himself claims, “joyful” picture of the Irish countryside, country life and its inhabitants.

**Key Words:**

John Millington Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker’s Wedding*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, Irish drama, Irish rural life, local colour, Irish nationalism

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

## 1. JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE AND THE IRISH LITERARY REVIVAL

And that enquiring man John Synge comes next,
That dying chose the living world for text
And never could have rested in the tomb
But that, long travelling, he had come
Towards nightfall upon certain set apart
In a most desolate stony place,
Towards nightfall upon a race
Passionate and simple like his heart.

(Yeats, *Collected Poems* 132)

The above lines are from the celebrated Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats's poem "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" dedicated to Lady Gregory's only son Robert Gregory who died in action in Italy. This poem is a kind of elegy in which Yeats devotes a stanza "to each of three other close friends who had died earlier — Lionel Johnson, John Synge, and [his] uncle George Pollexfen" (Ronsley 139). In the poem's fourth stanza, Yeats eulogises his friend John Millington Synge. In the lines above, he acknowledges that the desolate landscape of Ireland and its inhabitants profoundly influenced Synge who has been considered as one of the most outstanding of Irish playwrights as well as one of the greatest dramatists associated with the Abbey Theatre. Of all the dramatists of the Irish Literary Revival, he is the one who is most associated with the development of modern Irish drama. Despite the fact that he wrote only six plays during his short life span, his drama has left an indelible impression on Irish literature, for he was also a prominent figure in the national struggle to form a new Irish identity throughout the nineteenth century.

The period in which Synge wrote his plays coincides with the times when the Irish nation was recovering from the effects of colonisation, and nationalism was gaining momentum. In order to provide a sound analysis of nineteenth-century Ireland and the

Irish Literary Revival, it is necessary to begin with brief general background information. Seen as a colony within the United Kingdom, Ireland had gradually lost its cultural identity after a long period of English rule that stretches back to the twelfth century. It has always been stated that "[t]he dominion of the English in Ireland, from their invasion of the country in 1169, to the close of the last century [the twentieth century], has been nothing but a tyranny" (Beaumont 5). When the condition of Ireland and the Irish during these seven hundred years is taken into consideration, the validity of this view becomes clear. Since the invasion of their country by the English, the Irish have been defined as a people living under the dominion of an offshore power, England. Throughout these times, in particular during the nineteenth century, there was "an intensification of a clash between a culturally pre-industrial society with its exact opposite" (Collins 29). Britain became the world's leading industrial nation while Ireland remained basically an agrarian society. In the *Sewanee Review* of 1976, Denis Donoghue reveals the condition of the Irish society and states that

> [t]he real trouble in Ireland is that our national experience has been too limited to be true. Since the plantation of Ulster there has been only one feeling: one story, the English, how to get rid of them or failing that to circumvent them, cajole them, twist their tails [....] We have no industrial revolutions, factory acts and no trade union movements. A limited history, correspondingly intimidating mythology, a fractured language, a literature of fits and starts and gestures [...] No challenge of a tradition. (150)

Moreover, traditional forms of Irish culture disappeared dramatically since the invasion of the country by an alien intruder. Through assimilation, the Anglicisation of the traditional Irish way of living emerged. Therefore, in the nineteenth century Ireland was "in a most anomalous position, imitating England and yet apparently hating it" (Hyde 72). In this respect, not only the lands of Ireland were conquered but also the culture and traditions of the country were suppressed. The suppression of the Irish culture resulted in a kind of social and cultural trauma in society. Hyde asserts:

> If we take a bird's eye view of our island today, and compare it with what it used to be, we must be struck by the extraordinary fact that the nation which was once, as every one admits, one of the most classically learned and cultured nations in Europe, is now one of the least so; how one of the most reading and literary peoples has become one of the least studious and most un-literary, and how the present art products of one of the quickest, most sensitive, and most artistic races on earth are now only distinguished for their hideousness. (71)

In addition to problems caused by social and cultural suppression, Ireland's national identity suffered enormously during the colonisation process. For the English "Ireland and its inhabitants have remained external 'others' with remarkable continuity over many centuries as the history of colonisation has produced resistance, often in a violent form" (Walter 86). The 'othering' process of this imperial power consistently went through various phases in which Ireland was subjected to specific forms of stereotyping degrading its honour. It can be claimed that "[t]he English, both fearing the wild Irish beyond the Pale and requiring justification for their conquest of them, needed a stereotype, an unflattering portrayal of the typical Irishman" (Clements 42). For instance, "Britain represented Ireland as Erin, a young, beautiful but weak woman who needed to 'marry' her strong masculinised neighbour for control and protection (Walter 19). In this sense, it could be claimed that Ireland and the Irish were constructed as a feminised and effeminate race that had not only the artistic and charming characteristics of a woman but her negative qualities as well. The personification of the Irish nation as a woman was highly important in terms of the relationship between the coloniser and colonised. Slominski asserts that "[t]his feminisation of land changes with the viewer's position: within the would-be national territory, the land is a bountiful (or barren) mother or a protected virgin, while in the eyes of the coloniser, the land is naked, a maiden to be deflowered" (42). There are many images in the media reflecting the animosity between Ireland and England in terms of gender-based depictions.[1] All of these depictions prove that "Irishness in Ireland is thus deeply gendered, while appearing to encompass all members of the nation in a common image" (Walter 21). As a matter of fact, this is of utmost significance in that "the personification of Ireland as a maiden requires the gaze of a male protagonist who strives to protect or liberate the woman-nation he loves" (Slominski 55).

It can be asserted that, as a result of the prolonged colonisation process, "[d]iscourses that portrayed the Irish as the 'Celtic fringe,' the cultural and racial Other, have existed since the Normans first invaded in the twelfth century" (De Nie 5). In addition to the feminine portrayal of the Irish, there were also other stereotypes. As a matter of fact, the portrayal of the Irish does not have a stable type of characterisation because of the fact that "the combination of traits given to different conceptions of the character could, from one play to the next, fluctuate radically across a spectrum of renderings that were more negative or positive depending on the political climate between Ireland and

England at any given time" (Richmond 5). To illustrate, the appearance of the Stage Irishman dates back to the Elizabethan era when William Shakespeare reflected anti-Irish feelings that dominated this age with the character Captain Macmorris in *Henry V* (1599). Declan Kiberd states that "[a]nti-Irish feeling was high in Elizabethan London, as the danger of an Irish-Spanish alliance grew weekly; so Shakespeare causes his Irishman to allay all fears of treachery" (*Inventing Ireland* 12). In the play, the dialogue between the two characters reveals the racial bias that was created by the English towards the Irish at that time:

> FLAUELLEN. Captain Macmorris I think, look you, under your correction, there is not many of your Nation —
>
> MACMORRIS. Of my Nation? What ish my Nation? Ish a villaine, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation? (III. 132-8)

In this dialogue, Captain Macmorris questions the existence of the Irish nation in accordance with the general political and social contexts of the time. Shakespeare's perception of the Irish identity illustrates the stereotypical image of the Irish other in his time. The depiction of the Irish as savage and uncivilised was observed throughout centuries, and race, ethnicity, religion and class status were regarded among the components which were included in the stereotyping of the Irish. In *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre*, Maurice Bourgeois provides a comprehensive description of the Stage Irishman[1]:

> The Stage Irishman habitually bears the generic name of Pat, Paddy or Teague. He has an atrocious Irish brogue, perpetual jokes, blunders and bulls in speaking; [...] he has an unsurpassable gift of blarney and cadges for tips and free drinks. His hair is of a fiery red: he is rosy-cheeked, massive, and whiskey loving. His face is one of simian bestiality, with an expression of diabolical archness written all over it. [...] In his right hand he brandishes a stout blackthorn, or a sprig of shillelagh, and threatens to belabour therewith the daring person who will tread on the tails of his coat. For his main characteristics [...] are his swagger, his boisterousness and his pugnacity. He is always ready with a challenge, always anxious to back a quarrel, and peerless for cracking skulls at Donnybrook Fair. (109-110)

But the characterisation of 'Paddy', which was used in the nineteenth century, was different from the earlier portrayals of the Irish that had been created for the English audience. In the Victorian Age, as Fleming claims, "'Paddy' was by contrast both fun-loving, careless, and hard-drinking, and at the same time mercurial, bad-tempered, and easily angered" (20). However, throughout the nineteenth century the stereotype image of the Irish was blended with theories about race, and grounded on scientific reasoning. De Nie also asserts that "new trends in ethnology and anthropology were used to justify existing ideas about inherited natural capacities" and thereby these new theories were used to "'prove' what many Britons already strongly suspected, that the Irish were naturally inferior to the Anglo-Saxons in almost every way" (6). This view is also evident in an article in *Punch* written in 1862: "A creature manifestly between the gorilla and the negro is to be met with in some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool... It belongs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages...When conversing with this kind it talks a sort of gibberish[2]" (qtd. in Kinealy, "At Home" 92). This racial stereotype encompassed a variety of characteristics ascribed to Irish nationality "that ranged from the blundering, drunken Irish servant or the braggart warrior type, both with Irish bulls and blarney dripping from their lips, to the more insidious Irish rebel of the second half of the nineteenth-century" (Richmond 20). This stock character permeated every part of English social life and culture ranging from the stage, novels, newspapers, magazines, caricatures to politics in the nineteenth century.

It can be claimed that Britain's imperialism and negative stereotyping of the Irish accelerated the process of Irish nationalism, and eliminating such an embarrassing image became the major goal of the Irish. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Irish made many attempts to win their sovereignty "through rebellion or parliamentary process included the Young Ireland movement in the 1840s and a series of Home Rule bills that ultimately led to the partition of Ireland in 1920" (Slominski 40). There were many political and military activities among which the Easter Rising in 1916 and the Irish War of Independence in 1921 were of high importance.

As the thoughts of independence from Britain flourished throughout the nineteenth century, many nationalist movements began to emerge in Ireland inspired by the Irish cultural revival of the late 1800's. Yet, "[u]nlike eighteenth century patriotism, nineteenth century nationalism rested on the knowledge of Ireland's cultural

distinctiveness, and increasingly on its Gaelic inheritance, which the colonial elite gradually identified with" (Ó Giolláin 94). The mid-point of the nineteenth century saw a revival in Irish political aspirations with the emergence of the Fenian Movement and the formation of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Land League (Sugden and Bairnier 26). The Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884, the Gaelic League in 1893, the National Theatre Society in 1897, and the Irish Literary Theatre in 1902 were founded (Slominski 5). However, the apparent lack of a collective sense of Irish identity around which to reconstruct a movement for national independence was one of the main problems these organisations faced. Moreover, it did not take much time for the Irish people to understand that not only politics but also culture, language, literature, arts and traditions are among the most necessary components in the foundation of a nation. Benedict Anderson's formulation of a nation also suggests that "nationality [...] as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (4). In this sense, "[n]ineteenth century antiquaries brought the history and culture of Gaelic Ireland to the attention of the Anglo-Irish Protestant elite and indirectly prepared the symbols that cultural nationalists could later draw on" (O Giollain 94). Irish myths, Irish language and forms of traditional Irish music and dance, oral literature and many other characteristics of the country provided the obvious vehicles for this Irish-Ireland movement. Thus, it is clear that

> [t]he construction of an Irish cultural identity emerged at the end of the nineteenth century within the context of colonialism. For the nationalist movement in Ireland, a cultural representation was needed to establish an Irishness that was positive and different from Englishness. Several cultural practices were chosen to assert a cultural nationalism. Irish culture, particularly the Irish language and later Irish step dance, became a focal point for Irish cultural representation. (Foley 35)

"In Ireland, as elsewhere, the years between 1870 and 1914 were central to the formation of national identities," writes Ian McBride in order to define the characteristics of that age (9). In constituting these national identities, "[m]any 'traditions' were consolidated, as incipient party organisations utilised commemorative occasions as a means of accessing a mass constituency" (McBride 9). With regard to these traditions, the rural countryside and its peasantry were to be the focus of those struggling to fulfil the ideal of national identity. "In Europe," as Benedict Anderson

argues, folklore studies "provided a powerful impulse for the development of vernacular cultures linking especially peasantries, artists and intellectuals, and bourgeoisies in their complicated struggles against the forces of legitimacy" (22). The nationalists began to look back on their countries' pre-colonial past in order to awaken the sense of liberation because, as in Said's words, "[a]ppeals to the past are among the commonest strategies in interpretations of the present" (3). In other words, folklore was regarded as a determinant of national identity. "As the newly imagined national community headed towards the magnetic future, nothing seemed more valuable than a useful and authentic past" (Anderson 22). Without remembering their past, communities cannot attain an identity.

This time of searching for the authentic past coincides with the Irish Literary Renaissance in Ireland. During this time, there was a turbulently nationalist Ireland. Many Irish writers felt that the restoration of their Gaelic past and an armed rebellion were necessary in order to gain independence from English colonisers. Due to Ireland's colonial status, the Irish were always considered inferior in opposition to the superiority of the ruling people. Thus, there was the notion of creating a national character owing to the fact that "[f]or the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored" (Said 271). This process of decolonisation encouraged the Irish to create images of what they regarded themselves to have been before the colonisation of the English began. As can be assumed, this new identity would be in direct opposition with the stereotypical representations of the Irish that were fabricated on the English stage for generations. It is partly because of this reason "why a group at the end of the century came to the conclusion that, if they were to create a truly national literature, they must also gather a national audience. If they were to invent Ireland, they must first invent the Irish" (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 136). Therefore from this time onwards the Irish intelligentsia would provide Ireland with cultural needs. "In April 1902, the Irish National Theatre Society staged their first plays under the slogan, 'We are out to kill the Stage Irishman'" (Richmond 185). This slogan had an ideological function of destroying the racial bias towards the Irish people as at the end of the nineteenth century a certain type of portrayal of the Irishman was exploited on the stage by English playwrights for the entertainment of the theatre audiences in England. Since

the Stage Irishman asserts the supremacy of English culture to indigenous and rural Irish culture, it can be regarded as a product of British imperialism. William M. Clements states that

> [o]ne of the functions of a stereotype like that of the Stage Irishman is to provide a model for intergroup contact which allows individuals to react to outsiders on the basis of preconceived ideas. A stereotype develops and persists when one group needs to maintain a degree of distance from members of another group, to react to them categorically rather than personally. This distance is essential when political and social hostilities between groups are operative or when one group requires a rationale for its mistreatment of another group. (42)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Irish theatre was going through a significant development through the contributions of a group of intellectuals and theatre artists. The nationalistic movement manifested itself in numerous ways but the most important thing brought forth by this movement was that Ireland began to search for a new identity of its own in order to prove herself as a sovereign nation. In a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* dated 15 July 1913, Yeats wrote that

> [t]here is a moment in the history of every nation when it is plastic, when it is like wax, when it is ready to hold for generations the shape that is given to it. Ireland is now plastic, and will be for … years to come … if the intellectual movement is defeated Ireland will for many years become a little huckstering nation, groping for halfpence in a greasy till. It is that, or the fulfilment of her better dreams. The choice is yours and ours. (qtd. in Foster, *W.B. Yeats* 494)

Therefore, with the Independence movement, Irish writers turned to their own cultural heritage in order to regain their lost cultural identity and began to use art as a vehicle to promote Irish nationalism. The nationalistic movements paved the way for the Irish Free State which was formed in 1922. In other words, centuries of conflict between the Irish and the English resulted in Ireland's being politically divided into two distinct parts. "The larger of these, the Republic of Ireland, is 27,000 square miles in area" in the South, while "[t]he smaller part, Northern Ireland, [which remains united to England], has a total area of approximately 5,500 square miles" (O' Neill 19).

The national and cultural movement for this end is called the Irish Literary Renaissance and the development of drama was one of its most remarkable achievements. Under the leadership of Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and William Butler Yeats, the Irish Literary Theatre was founded in 1899. The novelist George Moore was the fourth partner in the establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre. The founders of this movement aimed at reviving Irish drama and Irish peasant culture through national language and myths and they asserted their goals for the founding of a national theatre in Ireland in their statement of purpose. In *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography*, Lady Augusta Gregory presents the statement of the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre:

> We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will insure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us. (9)

With the aforementioned purposes, the Irish revivalist writers' first task "was to dismantle the 'Paddy' image, invert the stereotype, and make the peasant a spiritual figure, the living embodiment of the 'Celtic' imagination, a 'natural' aristocrat" (Hirsch, "Gallous" 1120).

*The Countess Cathleen* by William Butler Yeats and *The Heather Field* by Edward Martyn were the first theatrical performances that took place at the Ancient Concert Rooms in Dublin in 1899 (Bickley 69). However, the Irish Literary Theatre eventually came to an end in 1901, and in 1903 the Irish National Theatre Society was founded to continue the work of the former, without Edward Martyn and George Moore. The first productions of the Irish National Theatre Society took place in Molesworth Hall, Dublin. "In the following year Miss A. E. F. Horniman, a splendid friend to drama,

placed the Abbey Theatre at the society's disposal" (Bickley 72). Both Horniman and Yeats struggled for patent permission before the Abbey could open as a theatre, and the patent was issued in the name of Lady Gregory who would become the leading figure of the Abbey with Yeats and Synge (Mannion v-vi). Yeats's stanza in his *The Municipal Gallery Revisited* clarifies the ideologies that were shared by the three revivalists:

> John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
> We three alone in modern times had brought
> Everything down to that sole test again,
> Dream of the noble and the beggar-man. (276)

In the Irish Literary Revival, as Mannion claims, "[t]ogether, they gave a rurally dominated emphasis to the theatre's repertoire" (13). The Abbey Theatre came to be considered one of the most remarkable achievements of the nationalistic movement since it was regarded as "the most original and vigorous theatre to have existed in the British Isles since the Elizabethans" (Gillie 171).

As a cultural institution, however, the Abbey Theatre underwent many changes over the years as many writers came into the movement; they either stayed in or departed from the movement after a while, but each of them had his own methods and ideals. Among them, John Millington Synge had a significant position as his work had a character of its own which made him unique among the other writers of the movement. In Bickley's words "though neither parent nor child of the movement, [Synge] became one of its most prominent figures and has left his mark on its development" (49). When the Abbey Theatre opened, Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) and *Riders to the Sea* (1904) had already been performed, and "he was accepted by Yeats and Lady Gregory as the leading playwright of this revival, becoming a Director in 1905, and Managing Director in 1908" (Welch and Stewart 549). In this regard, Synge's contribution to the Irish Literary Movement was of primary importance since it was regarded as Ireland's contribution to modern drama.

The political and cultural nationalist movements had a significant impact on the Irish dramatic output during Synge's time. "In spite of a general agreement in intention

among the architects of the national theatre movement, they often could not agree on the means to achieving their goal, nor could they agree on which version of Irishness should be asserted" (Richmond 186). Some claimed that the function of a national theatre was to produce a national art through the country's own heritage, thus making Ireland equal to countries in Europe. Moreover, the primary goal of the nationalists was to unite the people of Ireland, and some of them regarded the theatre as an instrument of propaganda which could prepare the public for a political and militant uprising against English domination. Arthur Griffith, James Connolly and Maud Gonne were among the fervent supporters of Irish nationalism. What they meant by a national drama "was one which would aid them in moulding public sentiment against England and preparing it for the day of revolution" (Greene and Stephens 163). This made Synge's plays the target of many attacks and protests by his fellow nationalists as he did not support the propagandistic literature of his time. "When he began to write for the Abbey Theatre, he asserted himself as a free spirit, and never really fitted in with the 'cultural nationalism' of the Irish Dramatic Movement [...]" (Agostini 160). Furthermore, Tracy too indicates that Synge's "isolation from his own background and from those around him combine in his work with a third quality which made him many enemies during his brief lifetime — a refusal to idealise the Irish peasantry in the way that patriotic nationalist opinion demanded" (142). His disassociation with the nationalist ideals of his time caused much trouble both for himself and for the Abbey Theatre. Ewen argues that "if Synge did not support Irish nationalism, what did he support?" (9). In fact, the answer lies in the examination of his plays. Although Synge did not blindly support radical Irish nationalism that was shaping the Irish culture at the beginning of the twentieth century, he had a deep love for and curiosity towards his native land. As a result, his plays were full of true representations of the rural way of living despite the criticism and protests that his plays were 'un-Irish'. Since his only concern was to reflect Ireland and the Irish people, one cannot see any political or nationalist agenda in the drama of Synge. He was a member of no political group as he was not really interested in the political and nationalistic issues of his time. His mother's words reveal his views on the Irish situation:

> I asked him in one letter how he could be mixed up with nationalists, and he said I was not to think he is a rebel, but he thinks Ireland will come to her own in years to come when socialists ideas spread in England, but he does

> not at all approve of fighting for freedom. He thinks things will change by degrees in the world and there will be equality and no more grinding down of the poor [...]. (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 68)

This point is further strengthened by Yeats in "*J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time*" by noting that "Synge seemed by nature unfitted to think a political thought" (46). Moreover, Amanda Louise Yeates also states that "[Synge's] lifelong refusal to subscribe to any one ideology or system, to subordinate what he believed to be 'true' and 'real' for pragmatic gain [...] guarantees [his] marginality" (111). Synge also deprives his reader of his social and political commentary on the grounds that, as a writer, he "is content to render a scene, a character, a situation as carefully as possible, and attempts nothing more" (Tracy 141). Yeats's commentary on Synge guides us to understand that Synge's sole aim is to represent the peasantry. In his preface to *The Well of the Saints*, Yeats writes,

> [w]hether [Synge] writes of old beggars by the roadside, lamenting over the misery and ugliness of life, or of an old Aran woman mourning her drowned sons, or a young wife married to an old husband, he has no wish to change anything, to reform anything; all these people pass by as before an open window, murmuring strange, exciting words. (53)

In contrast to the other revivalist writers who supported the nationalistic views dominating the period, "Synge, on the other hand, having once found that drama was his own business and Ireland his quarry, would have worked on without external stimulus" (Bickley 49). Accordingly, it can be said that Synge differs from the other revivalists in the sense that

> [this movement] did not create him, as it does others, but it discovered in him that spark of originality which eventually burst into the flame of brilliant imagination. In that light he revealed Ireland to us, its beauty and its ugliness; but in so doing he enabled us to see beyond the limitations of place and time into the regions inhabited by the external spirit of mankind. (Boyd 335)

As Synge's works are profoundly shaped through his experiences, it will be necessary to have a look at his life. John Edmund Millington Synge was born as the youngest son of

a conservative Protestant Anglo-Irish family in Ratfarnham in Dublin on April 1871. His family was a typical representative of the Ascendancy, "the powerful English Protestant minority in Ireland which called itself Anglo-Irish and governed the Catholic Irish majority until early in the nineteenth century" (Tracy 136). He was baptised as Edmund John Millington Synge but he "never acknowledged his first baptisal name (Edmund) and he sought consistently to evade his inherited names by signing himself, J.M. Synge" (McCormack 48). A year after Synge's birth, his father John Hatch Synge died of smallpox and left his family without a father figure. Therefore, Synge's mother, Kathleen Traill, who was "a woman characterised by an unrelenting religious zeal and by an unyielding sense of class obligation" (Gerstenberger, *John* 3), had to bring up five children on her own. The fact that Synge was raised by his devout Protestant mother should have obviously had a strong impact on his life. His comments on his upbringing reveal the strict atmosphere: "The well-meant but extraordinary cruelty of introducing the imagination of a nervous child has probably caused more misery than many customs that the same people send missionaries to educate" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 5). In consequence, as Harrington also states, "[t]he product of a long established Church of Ireland family with strong evangelical leanings, J. M. Synge, a freethinker who dabbled in music, languages, and philosophy, became disenchanted with his parents' religious views at an early age" (210). Moreover, Charles Darwin had a great influence on Synge's making such a decision now that exploring Darwin's thoughts, when he was only sixteen, resulted in his questioning the veracity of Christian faith and this "reinforced his growing agnosticism and led him two years later reject Christianity" (Benson, *Synge* 3). In addition, Synge's growing interest in nature and natural history opened up the thoughts of Darwin for him. As a boy he wandered among Wicklow hills and wrote down his experiences later in his poem entitled "Prelude," also revealing his idea of communication between nature and man:

> Still south I went and west and south again,
> Through Wicklow from the morning till the night,
> And far from cities, and the sights of men,
> Lived with the sunshine, and the moon's delight.
> I knew the stars, the flowers, and the birds,
> The grey and wintry sides of many glens,
> And did but half remember human words,
> In converse with the mountains, moors, and fens. (444)

This can be regarded as a discovery that "irrevocably led him, during his college years, to the decision that Christianity did not offer a tenable view of the universe — a decision that completed the intellectual break between Synge and his family and their friends" (Gerstenberger, *John* 4). Furthermore, Synge states that

> [b]y the time I was sixteen or seventeen I had renounced Christianity after a good deal of wobbling, although I do not think I avowed my decision quite so soon. I felt a sort of shame in being thought an infidel, a term which I have always — and still — used as a reproach. For a while I denied everything, then I took to reading Carlyle, Stephen and Matthew Arnold, and made myself a sort of incredulous belief that illuminated and lent an object to life without hampering the intellect. This story is easily told, but it was a terrible experience. By it I laid a chasm between my present and my past and between myself and my kindred and friends. Till I was twenty-three I never met or at least knew a man or woman who shared my opinions. (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 9)

This decision had a dramatic impact on Synge's life. "Because his family was so dedicated to their religion, the young Synge's renunciation caused considerable family strife, leaving Synge adrift, seeking in various ports for a culture he could consider his home" (Harrington 210). As Synge suffered from an increasing sense of isolation, he decided to leave Ireland in order to search for his real identity. Hence, he tried to fulfil his spiritual emptiness with a deep interest in Irish culture. Synge states: "Soon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland" (qtd. in Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 422). In this sense, as Synge writes in his Introduction to The *Aran Islands*, "he no longer regarded himself as a Christian, but as a worshipper of a new goddess, Ireland" (xviii).

Synge started his education in Dublin, and after graduating from Trinity College, he left his native land and went to Germany with the intent of becoming a professional musician. His fondness of music took him to Europe and this allowed him to develop a musical ear. His fascination with literature "grew as much as much out of his musicianship as from his boyhood studies of nature" (Saddlemyer, *Collected Letters* 60). Synge thought that, as he writes in the 1901 version of his first play *When the Moon Has Set*, "[e]very life is a symphony, and the translation of this life into music, and from music back to literature or sculpture or painting is the real effort of the artist" (qtd. in Skelton, *Celtic* 36). Music was of prime importance for him, and he could even

make words function like music. He also draws an analogy between music and drama in terms of their goals and writes in his Preface to *The Tinker's Wedding*: "The drama, like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything" (28). However, Synge gave up his musical career and travelled to France and there he read a great deal of French literature, chiefly the classics of Baudelaire, Maupassant and Flaubert; and "wrote a little for Irish periodicals, occasionally to the augmentation of his income" (Howe, *J.M. Synge* 20). Furthermore, he studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and read extensively in European literature. William Butler Yeats, who is regarded as the leader of the Irish Renaissance, encountered Synge in Paris in 1896 when Synge "was struggling to articulate himself in the language of the material he was reading: that of the aesthete and the urbane scholar-poet" (Sisson 53). The meeting with Yeats changed the course of Synge's life entirely at a time when he was leading an unsatisfying literary life in Paris. Yeats "saw that [Synge] was working on wrong lines, that his milieu was likely to force him irrevocably into the rut of unreal, derivative poetry morbidly at the end of the nineteenth century" (Morgan 158). In the summer of that year, Yeats had visited the Aran Islands and planned to write a novel called the *The Speckled Bird* but he could not complete it. As Bickley states, "[Yeats], too, had ventured, none more boldly, into the mysterious caves of symbolism, and had returned from his journey with much garnered wisdom, but with a new love for the sun" (12). When Synge revealed to Yeats that he became acquainted with the Irish language while he was studying at Trinity College, Yeats advised his new friend to go to the Aran Islands and said to him: "[…] Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature" (qtd. in Gerstenberger, *John* 1). It was this advice that was to create a writer utilising from his native sources rather than foreign ones. "Yeats's exhortation to Synge to find a life that had not yet been expressed in literature rang true to the young man who was writing second-hand pastiches of a kind of life already well documented within contemporary literature" (Sisson 53). Fleming asserts that both Yeats and Synge were "interested in the theme of the artist's alienation from society because of the pursuit of the artistic vision" (159). In this sense, Yeats's advice to Synge can be regarded as the key that was to open new paths of artistic vision for him. Yet, it would be wrong to consider Synge's stay in Paris as an erroneous turn in his life because

> for Synge, as for Yeats himself, an immersion in European thought and art was really a necessity; it saved him from parochialism and encouraged him in his modern attitudes; his scepticism, his remarkable capacity for detachment, his sense of the solitariness of the human self and its strange, virtuoso ability to dramatise and people its solitude. (Worth 121)

Synge's contact with some of the European countries and especially with France "taught him that clean, disillusioned view of life, which gives his plays their lucid reality" (Bickley 13). Synge's voyage to the west coast of Ireland was a milestone in the development of the Irish Literary Movement. After taking Yeats's advice, Synge went to the Aran Islands and became a part of its life by living as one of the islanders, learned their language, discovered his own capabilities and drafted some notes from his observations. Later, using these notes, he displayed a simple living people and a rooted culture in his plays. He realised a way to express his own identity in the Aran Islands and its preindustrial way of life since he found "among forgotten people a mirror for his bitterness", too (Gerstenberger, *John* 2). Yet, he did not only see his reflection in this mirror but, as Murray suggests, "[t]he Aran Islands were for Synge a two-way mirror, of his and the nation's soul" (65). These islands were important for the playwright insofar as they provided him with a real social panorama of the country. Murray further asserts that these islands were to give Synge "the standard by which to measure the flaws in Irish rural life. In the Aran scenario the landlords, agents and police were all off-stage and a classless society seemed to be on offer for Synge to join as an equal" (83). It should be acknowledged that the Aran Islands as a setting contributed to Synge's writing career enormously and the writer's "primary role in presenting the life of the islands to the reader is that of organising intelligence, the ideal observer, the selecting eye of the camera" (Gerstenberger, *John* 8).

Synge knew that to define an Irish peasant was to define Ireland itself. In this sense, his accounts of peasant life and lively portrayals of the islanders can be regarded as a challenge to the stereotypical representation of the Irishman. Synge found that the peasantry dwelling on the Aran Islands, in Connomera and Wicklow was the perfect material for his drama. Therefore, he deals with a variety of characters in his plays which reveal different aspects of rural Irish countryside. Yet, there is a common trait among them now that "[i]n all his work they become, like the author himself, lonely

figures in a stark landscape, symbols of man enduring" (Tracy 142). He set out to celebrate the Irish peasants' and fishermen's ways of life in which he saw a fascinating reality and this reality was hard for him to idealise. Similarly, Jacqueline Genet states that "Synge's rural Ireland, or peasants — East, West, and the Aran islands blended together in their reality and representation, are first and foremost human beings who live, love, age, and die" (173). "Synge's peasant characters are not bucolic and rustic but vibrant, athletic, savage, and spirited and they embody the Irish character which he believed was imaginative and demonic" (Fleming 169). Since Synge thought that the lives of these people were more lively and richer than the life of an ordinary man, he was to make tramps or tinkers prominent in three of his plays. Tracy states that "[h]e knew the crudity and cruelty of their lives, the Elizabethan coarseness of their language, their gloom" (142). As he said in *The Aran Islands,* Synge wrote about ordinary men like tramps, beggars, and fishermen:

> These strange men with receding foreheads, high cheek-bones, and ungovernable eyes seem to represent some old type found on these few acres at the extreme border of Europe, where it is only in wild jests and laughter that they can express their loneliness and desolation. (140)

Synge wrote most of his plays that are based on his journeys to the Aran Islands and County Wicklow in the late 1890s and these plays could be regarded as the representations of real and authentic Irish culture. In the Aran Islands, there is "a vast, wild and primitive 'art-gallery,' at which Synge sometimes looks as an anthropologist would, simultaneously trying to impress on us a sense of what art is all about, or the source of art" (Agostini 160). The search for the real Irish cultural identity especially focuses on the rural Western Ireland since this part of the country is thought to symbolise the real Ireland. Inisheer, Inishmaan, and Inishmore are the three islands that constitute the Aran Islands and they "occupy a unique and dual position of marginality and liminality [as] they not only reside off the border of the western coast of Ireland but also inhabit an indeterminate space between America and Europe" (O'Brien 169). As Yeats suggests in *J.M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time*, he was aware of the importance of the works of his companion Synge:

> As I read *The Aran Islands* right through for the first time since he showed it me in manuscript, I come to understand how much knowledge of the real

> life of Ireland went to the creation of a world which is yet as fantastic as the Spain of Cervantes. Here is the story of *The Playboy*, of *The Shadow of the Glen*; here is the ghost on horseback and the finding of the young man's body of *Riders to the Sea*, numberless ways of speech and vehement pictures that had seemed to owe nothing to observation, and all to some overflowing of himself, or to some mere necessity of dramatic construction. (18)

Other materials Synge chose to write about include "detailed anecdotes of the folk-ways of the islands, stories, songs, rituals, and ceremonies (especially burial ceremonies and the 'keening' associated with them), the structures of work and housekeeping, forms of recreation" (Castle, "Staging" 274). These source materials were gained through observation and the personal accounts of the islanders. "What Synge seeks in translating the interpolated tales in *The Aran Islands* into live performances – translation from oral to written to dramatic idioms—is not the preservation of an essence, but a new original crafted out of indigenous material, faithful to the source text" (Castle, "Staging" 275). His comprehensive knowledge of the real life and real people of Ireland was the source where Synge's plays derived from, yet the material he chose was quite unusual for his class and background. The stories of Synge's plays are based on the incidents of the daily life of a group of insular people and their mundane realities of Irish life. In other words, the simple lives of the Irish peasants in the country are represented through references to everyday activities. Synge set out to deal with people dwelling on remote islands, and he created a peasant drama reflecting themes that are of universal concern. "Synge's drama succeeds in translating cultural texts from an oral-performative to a dramatic performative context and language […]" (Castle, "Staging" 273). Moreover, "[p]layed on by his vivid imagination it [develops] into a richly coloured work of art" (Bickley 27). Hence, his peasant drama has turned out to be an essential part of the Irish Literary Revival and world literature as well.

Synge's usage of language reflects the qualities of these insular Irish people. He regards their speech as a "curiously simple yet dignified language" (*Aran* 28) spoken with "a delicate exotic intonation that was full of charm" (*Aran* 27). Yet, he does not use all the characteristics of this folk-language in his plays. Bickley suggests that "[h]ere, perhaps, more than anywhere are visible the effects of his training in Paris, his knowledge of elaborate literature" (28). He achieves to reflect the essential characteristics of his

material while modifying the language of the peasants for the stage. Bickley further points out that there are some similarities between Synge's dialogue with an old man in *The Aran Islands* and Michael James Flaherty's speech in *The Playboy of the Western World*. In the former, Synge reports the words of the old man as follows:

> Listen to what I 'm telling you: a man who is not married is no better than an old jackass. He goes into his sister's house, and into his brother's house; he eats a bit in this place and a bit in another place, but he has no home for himself; like an old jackass straying on the rocks. (*Aran* 133)

A similar meaning can be deduced from the words of Michael in *The Playboy of the Western World*:

> MICHAEL. [*standing up in the centre, holding on to both of them*] […] What's a single man, I ask you, eating a bit in one house and drinking in another, and he with no place of his own, like an old braying jackass strayed upon the rocks? (140)

As can be seen, Synge altered some of the words he heard from the islanders as he also admits in his Preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*: "Anyone who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed when compared with the fancies one may hear in any hillside cabin in Geesela, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay" (96). Having realised the characteristics of the language of the Irish peasantry, Synge remained loyal to the local material he heard among the rural people and used it in his plays. He chose the ordinary people and their life for his drama. "As with his characters and situations, he bettered what was already good by fastidious selection and blending" (Bickley 28). "For the Aran Islands taught Synge to listen as well as to see, and from the unconscious poetry of their everyday language and the formalistic quality of the Aran speech he formed his own distinctive style" (Tracy 140). Thus, he created a stylistic form of speech which is apparent in all his plays and which makes his art unique.

By using the indigenous material he found on the islands, Synge was to produce his first published work *The Aran Islands* (1907). The book, which is a profound source in order to understand Synge's subsequent plays, is a collection of essays compiled through observations and first-hand experiences. Synge closely observed the life on the islands

and reflected it in vivid detail to his readers, and his journey to the Aran Islands "represents a quest for a natural community to replace an absent center, the death of a transcendental God" (Hirsch, "Imaginary" 1126). The islanders lived in absolute poverty, yet Synge finds "an aesthetic dimension in the very poverty of the people whom he meets on his travels in the Irish countryside" (Rockett, Gibbonds and Hill 197). A mood of loneliness is prevalent in this book since "[e]ven among the isolated peasantry at the farthest end of Europe, Synge was an exile, remote from many of their concerns" (Tracy 141).

Synge's other book entitled *The Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara* (1912) is also composed of his notes on his trips. It is a collection of essays and articles many of which were originally published in the *Shanachie* and the *Manchester Guardian*. Gerstenberger suggests that the sense of desolation and solitariness is so apparent in this book that "as in *The Aran Islands*, it heightens awareness of the 'ceaseless fading of beauty,' an awareness that is perpetual in Synge's work, finding its way even into the statements made by the comedies" (*John* 16). Hence, it is explicit that Synge's observations about the people of Aran, and those of Wicklow, Kerry and Connemara, influenced his plays. In Bickley's words, "*The Aran Islands,* and his other similar articles, are like cases of uncut crystals; beautiful in themselves, but from which will be fashioned jewels still more beautiful" (14).

Synge who had the ability to hear the poetic language of the peasants also wrote poetry, the majority of which were produced towards the end of his lifetime. "You will gather that I am most interested now in my grimmer verses, and the ballads (which are from actual life)" wrote Synge in a letter, dated September 1908, to his friend Yeats (*Collected Letters* 42). His poems are "the most complete personal revelations which he has left us, showing us the man with all his 'astringent joy and hardness'" (Bickley 92). He explains his theory of poetry in the short preface of *Poems and Translations* which was published in June 1909 after his death. Synge thinks that modern poetry does not reflect the real life of the ordinary man and states that "[t]he poetry of exaltation will be always the highest; but when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life and cannot write poetry of ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation" (Preface to *The Poems and Translations* 25). Therefore, in contrast to the traditions of poetry, he chose to write poems about the peasant life on the Aran Islands

and they have been regarded as the best examples of his poetry due to the fact that "[t]hey have the same selective realism as his plays and a purely spontaneous vitality" (Bickley 95). His poems entitled "A Question" or "Beg-Innish" can be regarded among the most successful works in which Synge reflects his understanding of poetry. Not only did Synge write his own verses, but he also translated some poems by famous poets. For instance, he translated seventeen sonnets from Petrarch and " yet "[i]n the context of the Irish Revival and in the context of Synge's other work, his translations of medieval and Renaissance Italian, French, and German poets have seemed eccentric, peripheral to the main body of his work and to the source of his inspiration" (Dasenbrock 33). The poems or translations of Synge may not be considered as valuable as his plays but they convey the real and inner thoughts of the writer. In other words, his poems and travel sketches provide his reader with the raw material from which his plays were written. Therefore, they are important since they allow one to understand "how it was that Synge was satisfied neither with modern romance, nor with modern symbolism, nor with modern realism, but turned into the path which English literature had left for nearly three hundred years; leaving which, it had lost its drama" (Bickley 96).

John Millington Synge's first completed play *When the Moon Has Set (1900)* was not published in his lifetime. Nevertheless, the play is important as it provides the reader with crucial information about Synge's artistic development. This play is about a girl who "gives up a nun's vocation for her lover and 'marries' him in a mystic rite" (Worth 122). The play "most unusually for [Synge], also looks towards Ibsen in many ways; in its contemporary middle-class setting, the strand of plain contemporary usage in its language, its cosmopolitan, intellectually torn hero [...] (Worth 138). "It contains the seeds of theme and character, later developed in his published plays, as well as a motif of generation that becomes an underlying structure for the entire Synge canon" (Johnson 35). However, "after Synge's death Yeats was adamant that *When the Moon Has Set* should be left in obscurity, and he forbade publication" (Murray 69).

Synge's first play to be produced by the Irish National Theatre Society was *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), which was first performed at the Molesworth Hall, Dublin, on 8 October, 1903. The play deals with a theme well-known from many folk tales, but it received very harsh criticism concerning the portrayal of the Irish women in that "satire on the Irish peasantry — the time-honoured idol of sentimentalists — was in no

wise to be borne" (Bickley 15). Furthermore, Arthur Griffith penned a damaging attack on the play in *The United Irishman* and "[the] crux of Griffith's attack was that Synge's play was not Irish at all but a dishonest recycling of the Widow of Ephesus story taken from Petronius and Boccaccio" (Murray 74). Griffith, further suggested that an Irish woman "lives in bitterness — sometimes she dies of a broken heart — but she does not go away with the Tramp" (qtd. in Frazier 83). However, Synge replies to Griffith's attacks in one of his letters dated 1 February 1905: "It differs essentially from any version of the story of the Widow of Ephesus with which I am acquainted. As you will see, it was told to me in the first person, as not infrequently happens in folktales of this class" (*Collected Letters* 106). Synge was right in his claim and he further asserted in his Preface to *The Playboy of the Western World:* "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" (96). The story of the play may seem fairly innocent for the contemporary audience but it should be remembered that most of the controversy surrounding Synge's works stems from the women characters of his plays. Set in a cottage in the rural mountains of County Wicklow, the play has a simple plot revolving around a woman, Nora Burke, who runs away with a tramp, Michael Dara, and her jealous husband, Dan Burke who tests his wife's fidelity. Synge was criticised severely for this play; and a review in *The Irish Times* says: "Mr. Synge has a distinct power, both in irony and in dialogue, but surely he could display them better in showing in some other way — the way that should above all cat no slur on Irish womanhood — the wrong of mercenary marriage" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 158). However, John Butler Yeats, the portrait painter and the father of Jack B. Yeats and William B. Yeats, defended the play and further stated that Ireland should "begin the work of self-examination and self-accusation ... Mr. Synge has attacked our Irish institution, the loveless marriage" (qtd. in Ritschel, "Shadow" 85). Actually, what Synge achieved in his play was a pertinent observation on one of the basic institutions of the society — the family, yet the story was seen as a libel on Irish womanhood and aroused much debate over the virtues of Irish women. In one of his letters written to a friend, who also thought that a nationalist society should not produce such plays, Synge states that

> [on] the French stage the sex-element of life is given without the other balancing elements; on the Irish stage the people you agree with want the other elements without sex. I restored the sex-element to its natural place, and the people were so surprised they saw the sex only. (*Collected Letters* 169)

Therefore, it can be claimed that Synge challenged the drama of his time by creating diverse female characters for the Irish stage at the turn of the last century. He reflected all the realities of life both good and bad in his drama and this created unrest among the nationalist people of the country now that art and theatre were regarded as a political means by the majority of the Irish. Worth's statements about the play summarises its importance: "The shadow that falls upon the glen is the shadow felt in all [Synge's] plays, anxiety at the thought of approaching age and death" (127).

Synge's next play *Riders to the Sea* which has been regarded as the author's first mature work and a perfect one-act play dealing with the inhabitants of the Aran Islands will be discussed in detail in the first chapter of this thesis.

His fourth play *The Well of the Saints* (1905) brought some disapproval since it was considered as "a play brutally contrasting the world of illusion and rhapsody with that harsh fact and meanness of spirit" (Welch and Stewart 549). This play is his first full-length play and regarded as "Synge's first concerted attempt at the three-act form, and is often depicted as a rung which he had to set before he could scale the heights of what is generally regarded as his supreme dramatic achievement *The Playboy of the Western World"* (Feeney 51). The play's plot derived from the Burgundian Andrieu de la Vigne's fifteenth century farce *Moralité de l' Aveugle et du Boiteux* (Feeney 52). Synge painted this French medieval morality play with the local colours of rural Ireland while he told

> the story of two blind, ugly, weather beaten old beggars... whose lifelong sitting at a lonely crossroads, "hearing the birds and bees humming in every weed of the ditch and the swift flying things racing in the air,' has thought them to replace reality by dreams. (Bourgeois 183)

The story of this play revolves around an old blind couple, Martin and Mary Doul. A saint restores the sight of the old blind couple with holy water, thus leading them to rage instead of gratitude. In their visual imaginations, the Douls create a dream space in

which they live with the fantasies of each other's beauty. They live in the world of their own illusions. Avoiding the harsh realities of the world, they find comfort and strength in their illusionary world as they were told that they were the most beautiful woman and the strongest man living there. However, when their blindness is cured, they face the harsh reality of life through their own ugliness as they realise the fact that it was their mind that saw the beauty in each other. In other words, "[o]nce Martin has been led 'into the light' — which involves being cured of blindness and forced to take a stake in the religio-capitalist order — he labels the world of work, property and propriety as 'dark'" (Burke 47). Therefore, their blindness returns at the end of the play and the illusion is lost forever. Bickley states that "Synge's laughter is nowhere more bitter than in this play" (38), and therefore it is not wrong to say that the play "is a somewhat intellectual style of comedy, in spite of its rather folksy and medieval-farcical trappings" (Murray 77). The play deals with "the question of blindness, physical as well as spiritual" (Setterquist 96). Thus, it is different from Synge's other plays as it includes a supernatural element which makes it unique.

Synge's next play *The Tinker's Wedding* which is an "anticlerical and inflammatory comedy" (Styan 104) explicitly reflects the common people of Ireland and tells the story of three tinkers who dodge a priest. This play which was declined production at the Abbey Theatre will be analysed in the second chapter of this thesis.

Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* which is regarded as the masterpiece of the author's canon and a challenge to the established image of the noble peasant created by the writers who are in line with the nationalistic movement of the age will be discussed in detail in the third chapter of this thesis.

*Deirdre of Sorrows* (1909) is the last play written by Synge, but unfortunately he could not complete it. Starkie asserts that the story of Deirdre "which sprang from ancient Irish folklore had become for every Irish man and woman what the legend of Helen of Troy was for the Greeks, and Deirdre's beauty has inspired the Gaelic poets for centuries" (109). Therefore, Synge was not the first Irish writer making Deirdre, who is one of the national heroines of Ireland, the main character of his tragedy as many plays about Deirdre had already appeared before his play. First, George Russell's play titled *Deirdre* was published in 1901 and debuted a year later but, as Kiberd states, "[i]t

lacked psychological or sociological realism, being a reverie on the fated doom of Deirdre" ("Deirdre" 66). Then, W. B. Yeats wrote about the tragedy of Deirdre in his play entitled *Deirdre* and made her the queen of his play which was staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1906. However, Yeats's version of Deirdre "treated the characters more as symbols than as persons of flesh and blood" ("Deirdre" 66). Like many of his contemporaries, Synge, too, based his play on an old Irish story and made Deirdre the heroine of his tragedy. In a letter he wrote to an American journalist, Synge revealed that he was "half inclined to try a play on 'Deirdre' — [since] it would be amusing to compare it with Yeats' and Russells'" (*Collected Letters* 56). Synge's *Deirdre* differs from the plays of these two famous writers as it consists of more human aspects. As Bickley argues "[i]t would seem that he used the story not because he wanted to do reverence to a national legend, but because he saw dramatic possibilities in it; just as Shakespeare used the tale of Lear or Macbeth" (41). In this play, Synge had a cast of kings and queens rather than peasants for the first time. Thus, the play can be regarded as a radical departure from his earlier plays. Yet it is suggested that Synge makes a logical progression in dealing with the myths of Ireland by focusing on the Deirdre legend:

> In *The Well of the Saints* Synge examined man's need for a myth out of which to carve the reality of his dream; in *The Playboy of the Western World* he had explored the process of myth-making and had celebrated its dangers and glories; now he turned to his most difficult task yet, the re-creation, in terms significant to modern man, of the myth itself. (Saddlemyer, "Deirdre" 196)

Furthermore, the play has also some points that are closely related to Synge's life. When the first draft of the play was completed in the November of 1907, Synge was aware of his illness. Over the fifteen months, "his illness sharpened his sense of the beauty of the world, his relationship with Molly increased his belief in the purity of passion and his mother's death reminded him of the untidiness of old age and presence of death" (168). Synge's letters written to Molly Allgood reveal that he intended to create a role for the woman he loved. After Synge's death in March 1909, the manuscript was arranged for production by William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and Molly Allgood and it was first performed at the Abbey Theatre on 13 January, 1910, with Molly Allgood directing of this first production of the play and also performing in the leading role (Benson, *Synge* 16).

All these plays reveal the fact that Synge's dramatic achievement was not a mere coincidence. They all contributed to the re-construction of Ireland and the new Irish identity. In one of his letters written to the Gaelic League, and entitled "Can We Go Back into Our Mother's Womb?," Synge states that "[t]his young man will teach Ireland again that she is part of Europe, and teach Irishmen that they have wits to think, imaginations to work miracles, and souls to possess with sanity" (qtd. in Price, *Synge* 71). In spite of the fact that Synge acquired much of his material for his plays from various storytellers whom he met during his wanderings in the countryside, he also had a wide knowledge of classical, French, English, and Irish literatures, history, and mythology that he gained through his education. He picked up many ideas from various sources and blended them with rich Irish material. Worth suggests that

> despite all that is of the nineteenth century in his style and technique, Synge is in a way one of the most modern of the moderns. He claims that place by the use he makes of sardonic humour and by his subtle handling of the self-conscious theatricality that seems so natural to his characters, but in the end persuades us it represents a mysterious, universal process of the human mind, the endless self-creation of 'men who are dark a long while and thinking over queer thoughts in their heads. (139)

In his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge reveals his concept of dramatic realism and aesthetic goals. As he states, the description and celebration of the Irish peasant and his cultural essence became Synge's ultimate goal. As a dramatist, Synge "had no sympathy with the drama that is concerned with the problems incidental to modern conditions" (Bickley 21), and regarded the countries, with a rich imagination and a living language, as proper to reflect the reality. But, he thinks that

> [i]n the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy, and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality. (174)

As Abbot remarks "[h]ere 'reality' may be defined as life as it is usually lived in Ireland with all of its physical hardships, the threat of death, the shadow of poverty, the loneliness, the starkness, the terror of night, the tyranny of the British" (60). Hence, "the nature of the nation was Synge's fundamental concern" (Cairns and Richards 78). Synge depicts the lives of the Irish peasants with a realistic touch reflecting the essence of Irishness; however, his realism is different from that of Henrik Ibsen or Emile Zola. "While the works of these two eminent writers are labelled as 'joyless' or 'pallid,' Synge found a language that was both beautiful and real in the folk idiom" (Kiberd, *Synge* 160).

In spite of his criticism and rejection of Ibsen's "joyless and pallid words", the influence of this famous playwright is evident in Synge's drama. In one of his letters to his friend Stephen MacKenna, he reveals his thoughts about Ibsen and his drama:

> You seem to feel that we should not deal with modern matters on the stage in Ireland, because Ireland is 'blessedly unripe' for them. – Do you think that the country people of Norway are much less blessedly unripe than the Irish? If they are not should Ibsen never have been played in Norway, and therefore never have become an efficient dramatist? Do you think that because the people I have met in the valleys of Würzburg and the Rhein, are quite as unripe as those of Wicklow or Kerry, that Sudermann and Hauptman should be driven from the boards of Berlin? (*Collected Letters* 74)

Therefore, in order to find 'reality' and 'joy' at the same time Synge established his own individual style in drama by reflecting the local colour of his country and its people. In his unique style, "his whole work is dominated, permeated, by a tension between the ideal of a primitive world and modern civilisation" (Agostini 167). As a matter of fact, nearly all of Synge's drama offers an interesting problem presented in a form that agrees with the author's ideas of the humorous twist and of mind and the poetic language of the Irish people (Setterquist 94). In short, "the truth of Synge's dramatic action, the truth of his dramatic language is a poetic truth, not a social truth as in Ibsen or Zola" (Knapp 61). Hence, Bernard Shaw states in a letter to Lady Gregory: "I am with Synge in thinking that the Irish should do their own Ibsenizing" (qtd. in Murray 64).

Synge's ability to transform the local material into the universal can be regarded as his success in dealing with peasantry, and one feels that "there is no sense of historical time to distract in his portrayal of peasant characters" (Partridge 214). In this sense, Synge

created a new form which is called "peasant drama" in the literary tradition of Ireland that led him to discover the roots of Irish culture. Yeats's words may sum up the importance of Synge for the Irish Literary Movement:

> Mr. Synge alone has written of the peasant as he is to all the ages; of the folk-imagination as it has been shaped by centuries of life among fields or on fishing-grounds. His people talk a highly coloured musical language, and one never hears from them a thought that is of to-day and not of yesterday. (qtd. in Fleming 158)

In a letter to John Quinn, Yeats also states: "We will have a hard fight in Ireland before we get the right for every man to see the world in his own way admitted. Synge is invaluable to us because he has that kind of intense narrow personality which necessarily raises the whole issue" (qtd. in Murray 68). Synge holds a unique place in the history of world drama as it can be best understood from the comments of George Moore in his famous autobiographical work that tells the account of his experiences in Ireland and is entitled *Hail and Farewell* (1911). Moore claims that

> Irishmen have written well before Synge, but they have written well by casting off Ireland; but there was a man inspired by Ireland, a country that had not inspired any art since the tenth or twelfth century, a country to which it was fatal to return. (337)

John Millington Synge suffered from Hodgkin's disease or lymphatic sarcoma and died at the age of thirty-eight on March 24, 1909. Since he had a very short life span, he wrote only six plays in his lifetime. The theatrical history in Ireland owes a great deal to him since his influences and contributions have altered the course of drama in Ireland. Samuel Beckett, the great Irish writer, also has an admiration for the plays of Synge. Beckett's official biographer James Knowlson wrote in an early essay on the connections between Synge and Beckett and asserted that

> [i]n answer to a somewhat bold question relating to the most profound influences that he himself acknowledged upon his dramatic writing, Beckett referred me specifically to the work of J. M. Synge. Such an acknowledgement is relatively rare with Beckett and the nature and extent of his debt is therefore all the more worth pursuing. (qtd. in Dobbins 132)

One of the most outstanding contemporary Irish dramatists, Brian Friel also acknowledges the importance of Synge for Irish drama: "On this occasion, on this island, it is very important to me to acknowledge the great master of Irish theatre, the man who made Irish theatre, the man who reshaped it and refashioned it, and the man before whom we all genuflect" (qtd. in Roche 173).

Murray, too, states that "[a]longside Yeats and Lady Gregory, Synge thus created an art form which enabled the nation to grow into violent self-discovery" (87). In order to understand the importance of Synge, one must note that Synge's plays have not faded from the Irish stage or the world stage, unlike the works of many other playwrights of the Irish Dramatic Movement. "Synge wrote six plays; one of them left incomplete, two of them very short, none long enough to fill the stage for a London evening" (Bickley 19). However, during his brief creative life, he produced some of the finest examples of drama, both tragedy and comedy. Hence, the following chapter of this thesis will thoroughly analyse Synge's plays entitled *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Playboy of the Western World*.

However, the local colour of Ireland is crucial in understanding the representations of rural life and Irish characters in Synge's plays. Therefore, some elements of Irish social and cultural life will be first examined in the second part of the Introduction.

## 2. SOME ELEMENTS OF IRISH CULTURE

The main aim of the second part of the Introduction is to explore some of the existing folkloric, traditional, social and religious elements of Ireland so as to later illustrate how they function in Synge's plays. The focus will particularly be on rural regions in that Ireland was mainly a rural and agricultural country even as late as the beginning of the twentieth century and it was rural Ireland that Synge used as a setting in his plays. Moreover, in the following chapters Synge's three plays, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Playboy of the Western World* will be discussed and analysed as illustrations of local colour of rural Ireland. Therefore, in an attempt to better evaluate the rural way of life that prefigures itself in Synge's plays, this part of the Introduction dwells upon the aforesaid elements.

Ireland is a small island nation in which "the insular qualities of [the country] as place has meant that many different experiences have had to be contained and shared within a narrow, often introverted, ground" (Smyth 19). There is no denying that many significant events during the formation of a nation and a national identity occurred within the cities of Ireland throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Therefore, without examining the cities where a number of political, cultural and national movements began to emerge in order to reconstruct the nation and to revive the rich Irish culture and traditions, it is not possible to understand the role of the rural regions in moulding a new country and a new identity. In this light, in order to understand Ireland and the Irish comprehensively, it is necessary to analyse certain folkloric, traditional, economic and social conditions that prevailed in urban areas in Ireland.

Initially, the distribution of the total population between the rural and the urban in Ireland should be examined in order to see how the urban population increased gradually while the rural population decreases. Throughout the nineteenth century, the vast majority of the Irish population lived in the rural regions of the country. However, Ireland was to experience a rural decline and an urban growth between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.[3] The urban population was increasing; yet, the standard of living was low since the conditions of cities were highly sordid and

appalling for the inhabitants. Many lived in crowded tenement houses where many serious diseases became endemic as a result of insanitary living conditions. O'Connell makes a comparison between the urban areas of Ireland and Britain in order to depict the conditions of Irish cities and states that these cities were quite different from those in Britain

> insofar as they never experienced the direct impact of the Industrial Revolution which provoked massive environmental and infrastructural pressures in relation to population concentrations, waste management and sanitation, clean water supply, and decent living conditions. (7)

Furthermore, this situation affected the economic structure of the cities in a negative way since these cities could not provide people with adequate employment. Therefore, "the workforce relied largely on unskilled casual jobs and suffered severely from unemployment, underemployment and inadequate wages" (O'Connell 5).

In fact, in cities "[u]rbanisation was proceeding at a steady pace but its pattern was not uniform throughout the country" (O'Neill 32). Only certain areas within the country did prosper with their neighbouring towns. When the urban and rural populations of Ireland between 1841 and 1926 are examined, it can be seen that

> [t]he island had only two major centres of population — Belfast with 350,000 in 1901 and Dublin 305,000. Cork had a population of 76,000 while Limerick and Waterford had 40,000 and 25,000 respectively. Only Belfast could be classified as a truly industrial city with its main manufacturing activities being linen and making and shipbuilding. (O' Connell 2)

It is clear that unlike the population in rural regions of the country, the urban population of Ireland was rather small in the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, the cities especially gained importance and became over-crowded after the Famine that caused thousands of migrants to flock into the cities from rural areas.

As for the geography of Ireland, its examination will certainly throw light upon the subsequent subjects related with the country and Irish society in that "Ireland is an

island, the size, shape and space relations of which have had a profound influence on the cultural history of its people" (Smyth 19). "Anciently known as Hibernia (Latin) or Erin (Celtic), Ireland is the smaller of the two large British isles covering 32,374 square miles" (Hollis 2). It is relatively a small territory and the most remote island lying in the Western ocean. It is divided into four provinces: Leinster in the east, Munster in the south, Connacht in the west, and Ulster in the north. Each of these provinces is also divided into counties which have "become one of the most basic land divisions in Ireland" (Ouimette 23). Geographically, Ireland stretches out to the most western part of the European continent and is separated from the continent by England. Gustave de Beaumont, a well-known social and political commentator of the 1800s, provides a great commentary on the geography of Ireland and states that "Ireland, by a fatal destiny, has been thrown into the ocean near England, to which it seems linked by the same bonds that unite the slave to the master" (121). However, despite their geographic proximity, there are deep contrasts in many aspects of social life between Ireland and England as Croker also states that "in political feeling, in language, in manners, and almost every particular which stamps a national character, the two Islands differ essentially" (2).

The insular qualities of life may have probably contributed to Ireland's being an economically underdeveloped and politically isolated nation in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the history of Ireland was full of struggle for either the independence of the country or survival after many famines and their accompanying disasters or other hardships of life. These are all fundamental to understand the identity of the Irish people.

Due to the fact that the Great Famine had a profound impact in the shaping of Irish history, it should be examined closely. In fact there were many extensive famines that occurred during the nineteenth century. However, the Great Famine of 1845-49 was a landmark in Irish history. It caused a dramatic decline in the population of the country since it resulted in the starvation of many people and triggered mass emigration from Ireland. It also caused many epidemics such as typhus or relapsing fever among the people who were suffering from hunger. Accordingly, "[d]uring the Great Famine, it is estimated that between 1845 and 1850 one million people died as a result of hunger and its accompanying diseases, and that another million emigrated" (Brewster and

Crossman 42). Apart from the demographic contraction, the Famine had also many important effects on society. It initiated emigration, thus altering the demographic structure of the Irish nation. In order to understand the rural depopulation which resulted from the Famine and migration, the global population of Ireland should be examined firstly. During the pre-Famine period, the population of Ireland was around 6.8 million. This figure reached its peak in 1841 with approximately 8.2 million. Yet, after the Famine a gradual decline was seen from 1841 to 1881[4] (Brennan 33).

It is a fact that the Famine was a real disaster that had extreme effects on the Irish people. However, there are some different views on the effects of the Famine. First of all, it should be acknowledged that catastrophic conditions already existed before the Famine. Mike Cronin asserts that "[s]mall plots of land, over-dependence on a single crop (the potato), poor living conditions and high rates of fertility, had all resulted in periods of poverty and destitution prior to the 1840s" (136). In this respect, the Famine of the 1840s aggravated the existing situation. Morris also makes a similar comment on the situation of Ireland before the Famine and states that

> [t]he resources of Ireland, before that calamity, were unable to support, in anything like comfort, the teeming multitudes crowded on her soil; […] The great and continuing exodus of the Irish race, which has gone on for more than half a century, has not been without untoward results; but it has relieved the country from a destructive incubus; and this has certainly wrought a beneficent change, though the population has declined from about eight millions in 1837 to about four and a half million in 1895. Ireland, indeed, is still, mainly, a poor country — in some districts she is exceedingly poor; but the disappearance of overwhelmingly redundant millions has enabled her to maintain the millions that have remained much better than of old, and has distinctly raised the standard of living among all the humbler classes. (4)

As can be seen, there was a dilemma about the effects of the Famine among the Irish population. Although it was often seen as a real catastrophe, it was also regarded as a way to raise the living standards of the poor country.

The effects of the Famine were also felt in England. An 1847 article in *The Times* informed its readers about the conditions of the Irish during the Famine: "Before our

merciful intervention, the Irish nation were a wretched, indolent, half-starved tribe of savages... notwithstanding a gradual improvement upon the naked savagery, they have never approached the standard of the civilised age" (qtd. in Kinealy, "At Home" 92). It seems that the British should have also regarded the Famine as a relief since this catastrophe was never on the agenda of the British in the nineteenth century. Kinealy comments about the Great Irish Famine and argues that such a catastrophe

> was unique in nineteenth-century European history, not only because of the timing, duration and outcome of the crisis, but also because it occurred within the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom, which at the time was the most industrialised state in the world and lay at the centre of a vast empire. (48)

Thus, the response of the British towards the Famine has long been a controversial issue. Throughout history, there emerged some "tendencies to describe it as an act of genocide by Britain, or as comparable to the Nazi Holocaust" (Howe, *Ireland* 38). A leading political economist of that time, Isaac Butt, questioned how it was possible that "in a country that is called civilised, under the protection of the mightiest monarchy upon earth, and almost within a day's communication of the capital of the greatest and richest empire in the world, thousands of our fellow creatures are each day dying of starvation" (qtd. in Kinealy 48). These questions were being asked and discussed in Britain without reaching concrete answers. In the meantime, however, the Irish were struggling to survive in these hard times, during when all classes of society including aristocracy and peasantry united for survival. The effects of the Famine were also evident in the following years.

Emigration that changed the demographic structure of both rural and urban Ireland in several ways was one of the most notable outcomes of the Famine. "Even after the effects of the Great Famine of the 1840s had largely disappeared the emigrant flood continued; the number leaving ultimately amounted to about five times the number who died in the Famine" (Hatton and Williamson 575). In the post-Famine era, the economic and social underdevelopment that characterised rural Ireland was the main factor contributing to the migration that was a movement out of Irish rural areas to urban cities in Ireland and other countries. Kennedy states that "[t]he attraction of the urban living

for many Irish was great since desired standards of living in Ireland were and are much influenced by American and British living standards, but the economic development of Ireland has lagged behind that of all other northwest European countries" (66). As a result of all these factors, vast numbers of people did choose to emigrate in order to have a new life mainly in new and foreign lands of the English-speaking countries around the world.

The rapid tide of emigration resulted in a significant decline in the number of young people and a relatively aged population. The emigration rates were significantly high and they "meant that Irish parents saw many of their children leave Ireland and never return" (Guinnane 26). Due to the inaccuracy of the statistics, there are no trustworthy figures to enumerate the exact number of emigrants since "the first census was not taken until 1821 and the estimates of earlier years may lead far astray" (McDowell 85). Yet, it has been estimated that at least eight million Irish people emigrated from Ireland between 1801 and 1921 (Brennan 43). Many of the emigrants were of rural origin and they were neither educated nor skilled in any kind of job except agriculture. Therefore, Ireland became the principal source of unskilled migrant labour throughout the nineteenth century. "[T]hey occupied jobs at the bottom of the social ladder: house maids, chamber maids, charwomen for the female emigrant, navvies, building workers and more generally unskilled workers for the males"[5] (Brennan 43).

The destination of the emigrants varied considerably. "Historically, Great Britain was the first host country for Irish emigrants" (Genet 9). There were different reasons for the influx of people to the urban areas of England. For instance, many could not afford the long and expensive transatlantic voyage to America; hence they preferred the less costly passage to England. Yet, the principal destination for Irish emigrants throughout most of the nineteenth century was America since "not all Irish immigrants in England became permanent residents; many stayed only long enough to earn the cost of passage to the United States" (Kennedy 22). These two countries were favourite destinations in the Irish emigrants' search of a new life. Besides, Canada, Australia and New Zealand were also among the important destinations for many emigrants.[6]

There were also many that remained in Ireland after the devastating years of the Famine. It can be said that life continued in its usual way for those who preferred to stay at home. As the nineteenth century progressed, substantial changes occurred in many aspects of social life. In this sense, in order to understand the way of living in Ireland, the social structure should be analysed. First and foremost, life changed enormously after the Famine. As a result of massive emigration, traditional family dynamics of Ireland changed considerably in that "[r]ural emigration from Ireland did not take on the form of family migration; the emigrant was therefore young and celibate, a state which, no doubt, increased his or her chance of integrating the host society" (Brennan 43). Many young men and women left the country in search of a future for themselves and their children that they did not have the hope to achieve in Ireland. One point is worth illustrating here: in Ireland, the number of female emigrants was nearly equal to — sometimes even higher than — the number of male emigrants.[7] Hatton and Williamson state that "[u]sually, in comparison with male-dominated emigration from other European countries, Irish emigration was composed almost equally of males and females" (587). Much as the number of male and female emigrants was nearly the same between the years of 1871-1891, this changed in the following years. The early 1900s saw an increase in the number of female emigrants. This can be best explained with the Irish cultural traditions as there dominated "the persistence of the custom of retaining a son rather than a daughter at home to look after the land and finally inherit the farm" (Brennan 42). In this sense, it can be claimed that the extremely subordinate status of women in rural areas accelerated the migration of females. Furthermore, "in terms of relative deprivation rural females had more to gain by going to urban areas in the United States and in England than did rural Irish males" (Kennedy 167).

The impact of depopulation was paramount throughout the nineteenth century and it was exclusively confined to rural areas. The Famine's direct role in Ireland's depopulation over this period cannot be underestimated as "[l]ess than half of the total depopulation in Ireland from 1841 to 1911 can be attributed to the Famine itself" (Guinnane 4). Yet, depopulation continued without cease after the Famine as a result of various actions including emigration, postponing or avoiding marriage till an old age. This retreat from marriage is perhaps the nation's most widely known demographic

characteristic.[8] "The country people are the ones among whom marriage is latest in Ireland, bachelorhood and spinsterhood most common, fecundity greatest" (Arensberg and Kimball 195). Higher proportions of persons who remain permanently single and are willing to postpone marriage were an established feature of the post-Famine period. The increasing rates of emigration were among the major factors that contributed to the high rates of postponed marriage. For instance, when the majority of women emigrated from the rural areas to the urban cities, "[t]he surplus of single males remaining in rural Ireland contributed to the higher male rate of permanent celibacy after the 1880s" (Kennedy 172). Besides, it was hard for the Irish men to establish a household as economic conditions became worse. In order to maintain a certain standard of living and social status, many young people avoided taking on the burden of supporting a family. Arensberg and Kimball commented that "instances of families of brothers and sisters who stuck together celibate until old age, are more often examples of the force of failure to find a mate of acceptable status than any other cause" (225). Furthermore, the ideology of Roman Catholicism can also be regarded as a factor for celibacy in the country. It has been often argued that Irish Catholicism affected the high rates of postponed marriage and permanent celibacy among the Irish population in rural regions because "[t]he number of priests, nuns and brothers grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century" (Brennan 45). Religion, thus, becomes a potent cause for the late marriages since "[t]he Irish are said to have a greater reverence than other Europeans for priests, monks, and nuns, a respect which becomes a veneration of the celibate way of life" (Kennedy 145).

On the other hand, in spite of the fact that there were high rates of emigration, permanent celibacy and postponed marriages, there were unusually high marital fertility rates among the Irish, which led to the extended families in society. This can be regarded as a paradox in terms of Irish demographic trends. Many factors could be attributed to this high ratio of fecundity. Religion is, again, the main factor having a considerable impact on family structure. The high percentage of large families is often thought to be due to the Irish's being a predominantly Catholic nation since

> abortion and the more effective methods of birth control are considered sinful in Catholic doctrine and devout Christians are thus unable to

> effectively limit their fertility; and the Catholic emphasis on marriage for procreation, and on the large family ideal, result in Catholics being less willing to use even the acceptable birth control method of periodic or permanent abstinence until after having had several children. (Kennedy 15)

However, when other countries that have higher proportions of Catholics in Europe are taken into consideration, it can be understood that the conservatism of Irish Catholicism about the family is not the only factor contributing to high fertility rates in Ireland. Kennedy, further, suggests that "the selective effects of the extreme degree of emigration from Ireland, and permanent celibacy and late marriage among those who remained, are the major reasons for the persistence of the large ideal family size among the married population of Ireland" (15). Moreover, the fact that Ireland was still a rural nation had a profound impact on high marital fertility because "[t]he farm family was conducive to a larger desired number of children" (Kennedy 201). Thus, marriage is by no means a private affair between two individuals but a social contract and economic necessity in that "[…] the small farmer marriages are for the purpose of producing children and assuring continuity of descent and ownership" (Arensberg and Kimball 207). Furthermore, "[t]he higher marital fertility of Irish Catholics can be traced to a greater reluctance to use, rather than an ignorance of effective birth control methods or an inability to obtain them" (Kennedy 184). Due to unwillingness to limit fertility, a large family turned out to be an ideal family for many people living in rural areas, and the birth of children became the primary purpose of marriage. The proportion of childless marriages was low among the Irish. On the other hand, the high fertility rates resulted in residential overcrowding in the rural areas where household amenities were scarce. According to Cawley

> [t]he deprived areas have a marked western distribution and include many coastal districts from Donegal to west Cork together with a sizeable inland belt extending from east Mayo through south Sligo, north and west Roscommon into Leitrim and Longford and with an upland rural district outlier in County Carlow. (152)

The West of Ireland, which was more disadvantaged than the rest of the country, in particular turned out to be a central motif to symbolise Ireland and Irishness. The West was constructed in opposition to the rest of the country since its authentic landscape was different from the comparatively industrialised landscape of the East in the

contemporary Ireland. Even the climate of the country contributes to the creation of this soul by making life harder for the inhabitants of this particular region. Cambrensis states that "Ireland, indeed, lying at equal distances between the cold of Iceland and the heat of Spain, with its temperature moderated from these opposite quarters, the country is happily favoured both in having a temperate climate and a wholesome air" (19). Yet, there are some differences in the climates between the regions of the country. Cambrensis further talks about these differences and states that

> [f]or the further you go towards the East, the brighter and clearer is the face of the sky, the more penetrating and inclement is the atmosphere; but when you turn your steps nearer and nearer to the extremity of the West, you find that, the air being more cloudy and thick, as well as milder and more wholesome, it renders the land more fruitful. (19)

The geographical distribution of rural areas provides insight into the various social and economic aspects of rural life. Dispersed populations and limited development opportunities prevail in the remote rural locations of Ireland. Furthermore,

> such areas share a number of common characteristics, which makes it convenient to group them together — notably, questions of distance, accessibility of services, the relative importance of land-based activities, and the degree of spatial segregation between social groupings. (Curtin et al. xvii)

Ireland "has a residential pattern in relation to the countryside which is unlike many other European countries" (Jackson and Haase 62). This pattern led to a scattered and isolated population dwelling in dispersed areas. As a result, the settlements were considerably scarce "because an ever-advancing rent obliged the peasant family to get its living from a minimal area; an area that would sustain one family but seldom two" (McDowell 91). Since the families were dependent on small plots of land, distances emerged among the houses in the rural regions. This, of course, resulted in the alienation and isolation of the rural people living apart from each other. The families performed their daily activities within the spatial unit of land and house. As Arensberg and Kimball states

> the farmhouse is most often, though not always, a comparatively isolated house standing upon its own ground and forming an integral part of the

> holding. In it the farm family group spends its entire life, sleeping eating, giving birth and dying there, and sallying forth every day for work upon the fields. (31)

Apart from this, in Ireland, "there was, in practice, a much broader access of kin to the home base than is found in some other European settings" (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 113). Therefore, the farmhouse was regarded as a place where all the members of a household could meet.

The fact that religion has been an essential part of Irish life should be acknowledged. To begin with Patrick O'Farrell's remark will probably highlight the significance of religion in Ireland. "If religion be opium of the people, the Irish were the addicts," he asserts (O'Farrell, 11). There is no doubt that religion has always been a central aspect in the lives of Irish people from time immemorial. "Ireland is more strongly tied to Rome than many other Catholic countries in Europe" (Hackney 114). In particular, throughout the nineteenth century, religion became much more important because, during this era, religious and national identity conflicts were inextricably related to each other in Ireland. It was St. Patrick who brought Christianity to Ireland in the fifth century AD. "The great mass of the Irish people became practicing Catholics, which they have uniquely and essentially remained both at home and abroad down to present day […] (Larkin 58). Therefore, the religious choice of Irish people can be regarded as one of the most important causes of the conflict existing between England and Ireland. The Irish were Catholic whereas the English had become Protestants during the reign of Henry VIII. Hence, religion played a crucial role between the relations of the two countries.

In addition to the conflicts between Ireland and England in terms of religion, there were also many sectarian controversies among Irish people. The most common illustration of the religious conflict that existed in Ireland has been between the Protestants and the Catholics. The fact that the majority of the Irish population remained Catholic can be regarded as the reason why these two communities have been at odds with one another. There was a huge division in the religious structure of Ireland between the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. The number of Catholics within total population was extremely high when compared with other religions.

Besides, Protestants constituted a big portion of the population after Catholics[9]. Given the fact that there was a long history of coloniser-colonised relationship between mainly Catholic Ireland and generally Protestant Britain, religion becomes more significant. It would not be wrong to consider Catholicism even as a sign of opposition to the British rule. "For Irish farmers and labourers, Catholicism became synonymous with political freedom, [and] rebellion against tyranny, […]" (Hackney 114). To be a devout Catholic was associated with the real Irish identity. Besides, Catholics generally regarded their Protestant fellow countryman as the descendants of the British. This resulted in animosity leading to religious conflicts that gained momentum especially in the post-Famine era. When the country was in search of independence and a national identity in this period, "[t]he Roman Catholic Church took upon itself the role of 'keepers of the Ireland's historical identity' by placing early Christian Ireland at the centre of its historical perspective" (Collins 30). Moreover, "Catholic communities built chapels at an unprecedented pace, and while church attendance hovered around thirty percent in pre-famine Ireland, by the late nineteenth-century, it had risen to almost ninety percent" (Delay 7). Protestants, on the other hand, "developed no collective mythology about the Famine, save for […] how generous many Protestant landlords had been in supporting relief efforts" (Akenson 144). In this respect, it can be asserted that Irish Protestantism "was naturally a more individualist affair [since], given the history of the island, [it] was a thoroughly political formation" (Eagleton 227). When the distribution of Protestants throughout the country was examined, it is understood that this was closely related to the nature of colonisation and settlement, "their proportion being highest in the areas of sixteenth- and seventeenth- century plantations, and in districts where British influence historically had been strongest and where the highest proportions of foreign born people currently resided" (Gillmor 77).

In fact, studying religion also throws light upon Irish the social structure in terms of occupations. As mentioned in the above paragraph, Protestants were seen as the descendants of the British. In this regard, the occupations held by two distinct religious sects in Ireland are of utmost importance since they illustrate that, in the wider social structure, Catholics are often positioned as middle or lower class people. Protestants were usually employed in occupations in urban areas while Catholics were mostly

employed in jobs associated with rural regions.[10] In this regard, it can be asserted that the rural population was mostly composed of Catholics.

Undoubtedly, agricultural activities dominated the lives of rural Irish people as Ireland remained basically an agrarian society. Through the ages, most of the Irish families grew their own food and they were often close to self-sufficiency in clothing and housing and many other aspects of living. It can be asserted that the traditionally Irish society has been highly dependent on agriculture and this did not change even in the nineteenth century when many nations began to industrialise. The traditional view of Irish agriculture portrays Irish rural society as synonymous with backwardness, poverty and destitution as the rural agricultural industry of the country was outdated. At this point, the views of H.V Morton, who is a travel writer, will be helpful to summarise the condition of Ireland and its people. For Morton, "Ireland was a country yet to be dehumanised by industrialisation, its typical inhabitant the only eternal figure the world has known; the man who guides a plough" (qtd. in Graham, 1).

Since agriculture was the mainstay of the rural Irish people, land was of utmost significance as a source of status and of livelihood. Especially the cultivation of potato was important in that it supported the large population in Ireland[11]. "The first and the most important object in the rural economics of Ireland is the crop of potatoes; for on this exclusively depends the existence of all the lower orders not resident in towns" (Curwen 107). K. H. Connell asks "No other western people, generation after generation, has starved or survived with the bounty of the potato: why did the Irish depend on it so long, and so nearly exclusively" (57). There were also many other products available. Cultivation was certainly practised from Neolithic times, but the older crops, wheat and barley, were in course of time supplemented and in many parts replaced by oats, which became the corn of Ireland, food for men as well as animals (Evans 8). This highlights the importance of agriculture for the Irish. It was not only for people but for the livestock, as well. About three-quarters of the crop production was fed to livestock or used as seed on the farm, and a substantial proportion of the remainder was consumed by the farm household (Gillmor 67). Livestock was one of the major Irish rural industries. For most of the Irish households, agricultural income was

highly significant and it was derived largely from the sale of livestock. Not only did the Irish share the agricultural yields with their livestock, but also they lived together with their animals. As Connell remarks: "The Irish […] practised a primitive farming: food, clothing and shelter were about the extent of their material comfort; the potato was their food; they were clothed in rags; their hovels, not infrequently, they shared with their animals" (60). As can be seen, the low farm incomes and inadequate levels of rural employment opportunities had a profound impact on housing standards and general living conditions of rural people. There were also other employment opportunities for the rural Irish apart from agriculture, though their number was small.

Owing to Ireland's geographical location, fishery was one of the main occupations for the Irish people. Fishing in the seas around Ireland was more abundant than in its neighbours. John Aloysius Blake writes about the Irish fisheries and states "[t]hat they were superior to those of England and Scotland, is proved by the fact of the preference long given to the Irish coasts by Scotch and English fishermen over their own" (16). Thus, the insular qualities of the country helped the Irish to make a living from the Atlantic Ocean. "Sea-fishes are found in considerable abundance on all the coasts. The rivers and lakes, also, are plentifully stored with the sorts of fish peculiar to those waters, and especially three species: salmon and trout, muddy eels, and oily shad" (Cambrensis 25). This abundance enabled the Irish people to gain a considerable amount of what was required for the consumption of people as well as the economic activities.

The agricultural and other economic activities of the Irish people not only contributed to the living of the people but also enabled them to socialise more frequently. In other words, agricultural shows and county fairs provided people with a break from the routine of rural life. For instance, the livestock fair was one of the most distinctive features of agricultural marketing in Ireland. Various bloodstock sales took place intermittently throughout the year. Annual ploughing competitions were held in every county in Ireland. Therefore, "[t]he commercial function of the fair was uppermost, but social aspects were important, epitomising the fact that farming was not simply an economic activity but a way of life" (Gillmor 67).

In fact, fairs or competitions were not the only way of socialising. The fact that the culture and the social lives of Irish people are bound with alcohol and pubs is well-known. “In many societies, drinking behaviour is considered important for the whole social order, and so drinking is defined and limited in accordance with fundamental motifs of the culture” (Mandelbaum 281). In this sense, alcohol can be regarded as a cultural artefact since the forms and meanings of drinking alcoholic beverages can be culturally defined. “The form is usually quite explicitly stipulated, including the kind of drink that can be used, the amount and rate of intake, the time and place of drinking, the accompanying ritual, the sex and age of the drinker, the roles involved in drinking, and the role behaviour proper to drinking" (Mandelbaum 281). In Ireland, drinking has commonly been a social activity rather than a solitary one and it is carried out in a society of peers rather than with elders or in the family circle. “Among the peasantry, the consumption of alcohol was very high, particularly in pre-famine Ireland when beer and whiskey were cheap and enjoyed wide popularity” (Gmelch and Gmelch 232). These drinks were popular, yet drinking habits of the Irish would not be complete without mentioning poteen. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “poteen” (*poitín*) refers to “alcohol made illicitly, typically from potatoes” (986). Poteen certainly ranks among the most popular distilled beverages in Ireland. “It was a truly spiritual thing that the Irish did long ago when they trapped the purity and magic of nature to create from sunshine and rain, in the mountains and valleys, the original treasured spirit poteen of the Celtic isle of saints and scholar” (Foley 30). Although poteen was one of the most well-known beverages in Ireland, its manufacture for consumption was forbidden within the country until recently. Yet, many people, particularly the rural Irish, still distilled poteen illegally in the countryside.[12] Apart from the prevalent consumption of alcohol, in particular illegal beverages, “[m]ost authorities agree that tobacco smoking was [also] widespread in Ireland before the Famine and not limited to the upper classes alone” (Mokry and O’Grada 216). Tobacco was also smoked by labourers and peasants and was probably their only luxury. Unfortunately, precisely because of its mass consumption, tobacco was heavily taxed and therefore smuggled on a large scale (Mokry and O’Grada 217).

The consumption patterns of commodities such as alcohol and tobacco reveal that they are an integral part of Irish social life. Yet, it should also be asserted that “[t]he poverty

of the people prevented excessive drinking except on rare occasions" (McDowell 52). And, these "rare occasions" probably took place in pubs or shebeens because "[t]he structure of Irish villages and towns, with their crowded and inadequate housing and scarcity of recreational facilities, provided conditions in which shebeen or drinking place could become the central socialising influence for adults" (Clark 62). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary, "*shebeen" refers to "(especially in Ireland, Scotland, and South Africa) an unlicensed establishment or private house selling alcohol and typically regarded as slightly disreputable" (1178). Sheebens were illegal and unlicensed, yet they were also a vital aspect of Irish culture and social heritage. They were particularly widespread in rural areas. The meetings of Irish people were frequently shebeen or pub-based because such places offered good opportunities for socialising for many people in both urban and rural regions, respectively. As for the importance of pubs in social life, and the high consumption of alcohol in Ireland, Thomas M. Wilson states that

> [d]rinking culture in Ireland, at home or in more public domains, has not been a major interest in the ethnography of Ireland, but it should be. The pub, or public house, is a particularly important ethnographic arena, wherein drinking practices and other aspects of Irish culture merge, and where the questions of identity and identification continually matter. (3)

In addition to social gatherings in shebeens or pubs, there is another special occasion, this time a religious one, called "wake" in which people come together and drink alcohol.[13] "Today, before the hour for the funeral, poteen was served to a number of men who stood about upon the road, and a portion was brought to me in my room," (30) writes Synge in *The Aran Islands* when he tells about the wake of an old woman in detail and reveals some facts about the drinking habits of the Irish people in the rural regions. Death in Ireland assumes a vital role in public in that it consists of quite elaborate rituals peculiar to Ireland. The country has been called "one of the most funeral-conscious countries in the world" (O' hEithir qtd. in Macintosh 30). Wakes rank first among these rituals now that they are considered as important religion-based social events in rural life. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary,* a "wake" is "an occasion before a funeral when people gather to remember the dead person, traditionally held at night to watch over the body before it is buried" (1339). In other words**,** a wake is the process of laying out the body of the deceased in the house where he or she lives.

This vigil involves a constant watch over the dead body and lasts from the time of death until the burial. Traditionally, the female neighbours at the wake lay the corpse and laments are sung. This is a night of frivolity for the attendants. As Puckle remarks, wakes are important as they appeal

> to the Irish peasant as an opportunity to indulge in a 'good time,' when whisky, snuff and tobacco will be pressed upon the quest, in return for a prayer for the departed; in fact, for the time being, the house of mourning has all the advantages, and none of the disadvantages, of an inn. (n.pag.)

In order to pay respect to the departed, people attend wakes in which there is a lot of food and plenty of drink to be consumed. In particular, drunkenness has been associated with the Irish wakes. Different kinds of beverages including alcoholic drinks are offered to those who attend the wake and heavy drinking is accompanied by the telling of obscene jokes. In wakes, gaiety and mourning are intertwined. They consist of music, dance, games, storytelling and even matchmaking. Kinmonth states that

> the games varied, from singing and dancing to tests of strength, endurance and agility, imitative games (often involving a mock priest), catch games, riddles, surprises and card playing. Some involved retribution—soaking people or covering them in soot or dirty butter—many more were rough and resulted in bloodshed and even death. (174)

In addition to the above-mentioned activities, wakes are traditionally associated with keening and wailing. "To keen", according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is "to make a loud high sad sound, when somebody has died" (649). In particular, it is women who gather to keen or wail over the body of the departed.[14] In some occasions, "[k]eeners were often paid to add to the mourning lamentations" (Kinmonth 171). Such a practice created some problems with clergy. In fact, this was not the only practice that outraged the Catholic clergy as they also "condemned the extravagance of wake feats and conviviality which threatened to impoverish subsequent generations" (Kinmonth 171). "Excesses are strongly discountenanced by the Church, whose priests are forbidden to attend a wake where drinking is likely to take place, and as a further measure to restrict abuses, the body is ordered to be buried much sooner than is the case in this country" (Puckle n.pag.). They further tried to ban drinking at wakes. The main reason of such attempts can be traced back to the roots of this practice. The Irish wake

was traditionally held among the Irish since the pagan era. As Wilde suggests that the wakes were "evidently a remnant of paganism, and formed part of those Druidic rites meant to propitiate the evil spirits and the demons of darkness and doom; for the influence of Druidism lasted long after the establishment of Christianity" (154). Hence, this so-called immorality and immodesty was associated with pre-Christian times and was disapproved; but the objections to wakes "seemed to have little effect on such entrenched and apparently pagan traditions, which endured until well into the nineteenth century" (Kinmonth 175). Thus, wakes turned out to be significant rituals creating a sense of identity among the Irish, in particular the rural populations.

The retention of such pagan customs reveals that Ireland is a country in which Christian and pre-Christian traditions are intertwined. People especially in rural areas did not leave the pagan superstitions and old beliefs or legends of their rich past. These superstitions guided them till their death. In other words, they chose to believe in Catholicism with their traditional and local worldview. "They adapted the new popular Catholic devotions, the prayers, processions, and pilgrimages, to daily life, integrating them with vernacular customs, such as fairy belief and a sacred landscape" (Delay 6).

In addition to these pre-Christian activities, Ireland's great myths also played a pivotal role in forming a national identity in the nineteenth century. The recovery of Irish myths and mythical characters intersect with the novel Irish identity. In this regard, their relation to social life in the nineteenth century is significant. It is a fact that Ireland is a country with a rich past including fairy tales, myths and legends Douglas asserts that

> [p]erhaps no other country in Europe — not even any other Celtic country — has such a wealth of legends, old beliefs, and long-told tales as Ireland. In a way, that is only be expected. Anciently, each succeeding wave of Celtic — and pre-Celtic — coloniers would bring its own beliefs and stories; and to these, at a later period, would be added those of marauding Scandinavians. Still later there would come Norman tales and Saxon beliefs. Impinging on each other, and imposed upon each other, all the native stories and beliefs, and all the incoming tales and superstitions, mixed and mingled and ran through each other to become in time the gloriously coloured fabric that is Ireland's folklore. (231)

Myths are very significant for the Irish. Celtic myths are also full of powerful heroes and heroines. Among them, Cuchulain is perhaps the most known warrior and hero of

ancient past. Such is his strength and courage that he is sometimes "called roughly the equivalent of Achilles in Greek mythology" (Conner 41). Not only are there male heroes, but there are many strong women in Celtic mythology. Cathleen Ni Houlihan is, for instance, a traditional figure representing Ireland. In this respect, she becomes an icon of Ireland and Irish motherhood in particular during the reconstruction of the Irish nation. The figure of Cathleen Ni Houlihan proves that Ireland as a nation "is personified as beloved, mother, and Muse—Dana, Eire, Erin, Fotla, Banba, Dark Rosaleen, the Shan Van Vocht […]" (Keane 7).

In a society where myths are mostly associated with women, particularly mothers, the condition of women should be examined. Women are of prime importance in the Irish social structure. The reason that lies behind this is a general understanding of the society that "[i]t was a woman who founded, or found, Ireland, according to the earliest legend contained in the lost manuscript, *The Book of Druim Snechta"* (Sawyer 1). Then, the mythical female figure became transformed into the dream women who inspired Gaelic poets and patriots. The overarching figure of 'Mother Ireland' has been a powerful point of identification throughout Irish history. Yet, this image is a contradictory one, both disempowering and empowering, because

> [o]n the one hand it illustrates the restriction of women to the passive symbolic sphere, rather than the active social realm. It limits the acknowledgement to women who are mothers, that is those who choose, and are able, to conform to the strong pressures of the Catholic church towards marriage. It also elevates the qualities associated with motherhood, protection of children and the selfless devotion of caring for them. (Walter 21)

Hence, it is certain that "[t]he way women should behave in a society and within their families had long been a concern for moralists, philosophers, clerics, scientists and doctors" (Luddy 3). It is understood that "an image of the mother as a crucial figure in the politics and governance of ancient Ireland" is proffered (Stubbings 4). Moreover, in accordance with Christianity, the Virgin Mary was promoted as a role model for all women. "Her resigned qualities, which were promoted as ideals for all Irish women, included duty to family, self-sacrifice, submerged sexuality and the elevation of a caring function above all" (Walter 18). Even so, such a position does not reflect the real social status of women in the Irish society since women were busy with the harsh realities of living while many were concerned with idealising the role of women in society (Luddy

4). In the nineteenth century, women were regarded as symbolically nonexistent and materially more disadvantaged than the males. Therefore, "[t]he schism between familial mother and mythical mother was, superficially at least, a wide one: the familial mother must practise service and obeisance, while the mythical mother was potent, revered and to be served" (Stubbings 7). Women had a rather passive role since they always seemed to exist for the benefit of their families. Thus, it can be said that there were traditional rules for family members in the Irish rural areas. Arensberg and Kimball describe the situation between the sexes in Ireland and state that

> [m]en and women are much more often to be seen in the company of members of their own sex than other wise, except in the house itself. [...] They go to mass, to town, or to sportive gatherings with the companions of their own sex. Till recently and even now in remote districts, a conventional peasant woman always kept several paces behind her man, even if they were walking somewhere together. (196)

In fact, "[t]he act of a female walking behind the male was symbolic of the inferior position of females generally in Irish rural society" (Kennedy 52). Furthermore, "the women and children do not eat until the men have finished. They take their places together when the men have left or have moved off to smoke an after-dinner pipe, an indispensible part of the meal for them" (Arensberg and Kimball 37). Even this practice of men getting the better food can be taken as a symbol of women's lower position against the favoured sex. Kennedy further suggests that "[t]he subordinate status of females in rural Ireland was also probably a factor contributing to the reluctance of many Irish women to marry rural men", which result in the permanent celibacy among women (65).

In a traditional rural Irish family, man was supposed to be the head of the household and the subservience of women to the home was broadly accepted. Therefore, women's contributions to the economy were limited to a great extent. As Kennedy states

> [g]enerally men took care of the fields and the animals when they were in the fields, while women were responsible for feeding the animals when they were in the barn, milking the cows and processing the milk, and taking the care of the vegetable garden, in addition to the usual duties of cooking, housework, and child care. (54)

Women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere looking after husband and children. Although the domesticity of Irish women in their role as housewives and mothers was favoured by the Catholic Church, they were also expected to help the men do their work at the turf making, the potato planting and the hay saving. "Women were usually called out into the fields during turf cutting, during the planting, cultivation, and lifting of potatoes, and during haymaking time when the pitching, raking, and some building of haycocks was left to women" (Kennedy 54). It can be concluded that males were dominant over the females in Irish society.

As Kennedy remarks "[r]egardless of the possible reasons why the Irish accepted the limitation of a married woman's life to her home and family, the important result for marital fertility was that she was expected to find her purpose in the rearing of children and the care of her husband and home" (201). Yet, married women were considered lucky to some extent because "[l]ife was [more] difficult and harsh for poorer women, who had neither the time nor the inclination to abide by a code of femininity that bore no relevance to their lives" (Luddy 4). Besides, widowed women had a more restricted social life than their counterparts who were married. Single women were also more vulnerable than their married counterparts. Some of them entered religious orders, which resulted in the dramatic increase in the number of convents and nuns in the nineteenth century. "In 1800 there were 6 religious orders with 120 nuns inhabiting 11 houses in the country; by 1851 that number had increased to 1,500 nuns residing in 95 convents and to over 8,000 by 1901 with a total of 35 religious orders or congregations" (Luddy 10).

Males were regarded superior within the social structure while females were subordinated. Yet, it was the females, in contrast to the males, who had a much more close relationship with the children in the family. Arensberg and Kimball state that "[h]er authority most often makes itself felt through praise, persuasion, and endearment. Only when a grave breach of discipline demands a restraining power greater then hers, or when an appeal to ultimate authority is needed, does the father begin to play his role" (59). In this respect, it is the role of the mother to educate children in the family, yet the role of education in society should also be analysed.

Literacy can be regarded as an important component of life in a country. The fact that "[t]he Irish, in the worst of their own conflicts, reverenced the shrines of worship and study" (Giles 186) has proven that education has always been a thing of high importance to the Irish from the earliest times. Since the advent of Christianity, learning and religion were carried out together and education was provided by the priests and the monks. However, many laws were enacted in order to ban the education and training of the Irish people in line with Catholic denominations. Ronald McDonald Douglas states that "[o]ne of the most brutal attempts of the English government to subdue Ireland to their will was not one of armed force: it was an attempt to degrade the 'mere Irish' to an animal level by the deliberate deprivation of learning" (156). British attempted to alter the Irish education in order to make Ireland British. Yet, these efforts did not hinder the Irish from educating their children and "in those hard times when education was thus forbidden them, [they] carried their literary studies into the silent fields, and amidst bushes and brambles conned Homer, Virgil, Euclid, or the spelling-book" (Giles 187). This resulted in the system of 'hedge-schools' that kept education alive for many years. Hedge schools can be described as "an underground system of local education which primarily sought to avoid the oppressive penal laws" (Kinmonth 243). The importance of the hedge-schools was frequently emphasised. Giles, for instance, states that "[t]he old Irish hedge-school should be held in immortal honour, as the last refuge of a people's mind, and as the last sanctuary of persecuted intellect" (187). This system of schooling was foregone in 1831 when "[t]he Education Act provided for all instruction to be carried out through the English language, and while the school curriculum included 'British poets', neither Irish history nor the Irish language was taught" (Kinealy, "At Home" 84). As a result of this act, National Schools emerged. These schools "were government funded, and originally intended to cater for all denominations" (Kinmonth 250). However, this system turned out to be highly denominational rather than a mixed system. Therefore, the early decades of the nineteenth century witnessed many debates and controversy about mixed education since "in a climate of hostility and suspicion between the churches and with the fears of proselytism rife, Ireland presented a difficult arena for the success of multi-dimensional schooling" (Coolohan 14). In fact, only a small fraction of the population benefited from these schools since the attendance was constrained by poverty as

> [t]he cost of tuition-about a penny a week on aver1age in pay-schools at a time when a labourer's daily wage ranged between sixpence and ten pence-was the main element, but presentable clothes and books, and even the opportunity cost of the children's labour have been cited as factors limiting school attendance. (Mockry and O Grada 222-3)

Moreover, "for many the reality of education was that it took second place to work" (Kinmonth 259).

In the nineteenth century, the status of the Irish language was also a concern of debate in terms of national identity. Irish or Gaelic is the Celtic branch of the Indo-European language family [which] arrived in Ireland with the Gaels and developed over the centuries into the language used today (Cowdry 7). Irish is a rich language which borrows words from Latin, Norse, French, and English and which produced one of the oldest literatures in the world. Yet, the fact that Ireland is a country of paradoxes proves itself in terms of the language used in daily life. "The Irish language is celebrated but rarely spoken; the English language is often condemned as being in part responsible for the loss of the country's distinctive culture; yet it is used with joy and vigour by poet and peasant alike" (Todd 53). The dilemma between the spoken language and the mother tongue of the Irish had its roots in the country's past. In the post-Famine period, many social, economic, demographic and emotional transformations modified the rural society in Ireland. These impacts were felt most strongly in the poorer Irish-speaking communities in the west of the country. The rate of Irish speakers dropped dramatically to around 1,500,000 or roughly 23 per cent of a total population of 6,600,000 by 1851 (Barter 11). The effects of the Famine, immigration and the death rates could be regarded among the causes of the disuse of Irish among people. Yet, the adoption of English as a spoken language in the population that survived and remained in Ireland after the Famine had many reasons. "Although the earlier accounts acknowledged that the vernacular languages of Ireland had been in flux since at least the seventeenth century, the significant decline of the nineteenth century came to represent the true nadir of British rule" (Wolf 5). The poor realised that they should learn the English language if they were to raise their status. In other words, the Irish people chose to speak in English due to economic and social reasons brought forth by an increasingly commercial and industrialised world.[15] Hindley states that this was "further depressed

by a widespread reluctance to admit a knowledge of Irish because it was associated with illiteracy and low social status" (15). In other words, there was a strong link between declining numbers of Irish speakers and the disapproval towards the language by the close of the nineteenth century. At that time, Hiberno-English, which was a dialect of English, was the main language spoken by the Irish whereas the use of Gaelic was widely accepted as a kind of embarrassment, associated with the country folk and illiterate people. After travelling in county Galway in 1818, J.C. Curwen declared that

> [t]here is nothing now to tempt the people to continue their native language; the rising generation apply themselves to learn English; and probably a century will not pass away, before the Irish will become obsolete. We met with few who did not understand English, and who seemed to have a pride in being able to speak it. (346)

In this sense, it can be claimed that "[t]he pressure of the modernising forces of industrialisation and emigration to the urban centres of the English-speaking world required a degree of literacy in the dominant language" (Barter 11). Thus, acquisition of English was a matter of necessity rather than a choice for the Irish. "Unfortunately then, it can be seen that materially the bread and butter realities of everyday life, and psychologically the irreversible draw of social mobility, gnawed at the very foundation of national identity" (Barter 11). Under the imperial rule of the English, Irish rejected their own culture and language "because of their desire to seize the advantages of official largesse and commercial advancement being offered by the English-speaking world" (Wolf 7). "Within the middle and upper levels of society, there was little debate [...] about whether English would continue to dominate as the language of social and intellectual interaction in Ireland" (Wolf 23).

By the end of the nineteenth century there was a remarkable shift towards the English language in the number of native speakers in the city and towns of Ireland. In these regions of the country, the Irish language was regarded as the language of ignorant and uneducated people. It was a hindrance to development. But in the rural regions the picture differed considerably as "English colonisation advanced across the island, the traditional culture was often pushed to the remotest, poorest districts" (Cowdery 7). Furthermore, the rural Irish people had veneration for their own language and attached

great importance to it. Especially, their devotion to their own language within the rural Irish-speaking West could be regarded as the essence of Irish nationalism.

There were also people insisting on the virtues of Irish language. A revivalist movement, the Gaelic Leauge founded in 1893 served as a reviving force to reverse "this socio-psychological tendency to understate proficiency in Irish" (Hindley 15). The Gaelic League successfully promoted the use of Irish in daily life. Today, most Irish people are still monolingual, speaking English or Hiberno-English; but rudimentary Irish is taught in public schools, and most Irish people are proud of their ancestral language, even if they barely understand it (Cowdery 8). Yet, some isolated rural districts are bilingual and the people prefer to use Irish in both private and public affairs. Thus, the Irish language is regarded as a mother tongue which is "transmitted to the nation's children along with an Irish cultural heritage of history and folklore" (Quinn 41).

Apart from the Irish language, the Irish, especially the rural Irish, were deeply committed to certain peculiarities that make Ireland a unique country. Music, dancing and singing are not only common forms of entertainment among people, but also they have turned out to be an embodiment of rural life in Ireland. In this respect, various cultural practices should be illustrated as they are of utmost importance in creating a national identity. On ceremonial occasions such as wakes or religious holidays, the Irish performed various dances. Dancing was an integral part of social life. "Central to the Irish dance tradition is the technique of 'stepping' which involves a concentration on foot movements close to the floor in which the tempo of music is beaten out by the dancer" (Brennan, *Story* 63). Out of these movements did emerge the well-known Irish step dance. The wealth of Irish talent in traditional dancing, particularly Irish step dance, becomes a focal point for Irish cultural representation. The perception of the Irish step dance "as a symbolic embodiment of a cultural nationalism is ideologically located in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, but particularly after the newly founded state of the Republic of Ireland was formed in 1922" (Foley 35). The Irish step dance was commonly practised "in connection with seasonal farm work such as harvesting, religious ceremonies, fairs,

races and weddings, and was an area where rich and poor, young and old, and even clergy and laity come together" (Wulff, 7).

Music is also of primary importance in forming the Irish identity. It is an important component of life because "[w]hen individuals or communities are faced with an ongoing crisis, they tend to formulate, over time, certain rituals, which reflect unique patterns of understanding and coping with what is transpiring" (Litvack 70). Because of its Celtic heritage and its predominantly rural population, Ireland was a particularly appropriate setting for the development of such ceremonials since the Irish were regarded to have a natural gift for music. Many instruments were used in Irish music. "Traditional instruments featured regularly include the fiddle, bodhran, pan flute, accordion and the spoons" (Pratschke 289). Besides, the harp that carried many meanings and memories for the Irish has always been the official symbol of Ireland. "The image of the ancient bard and his harp is strongly embedded in Irish identity" (Yoakam 1). This musical instrument and the man playing it have come to represent the Irish visually and aurally throughout the ages. Cambrensis praises the skill of the Irish upon musical instruments and states that

> [t]he only thing to which I find that this people apply a commendable industry is playing upon musical instruments; in which they are incomparably more skilful than any other nation I have ever seen. For their modulation on these instruments, unlike that of the Britons to which I am accustomed, is not slow and harsh, but lively and rapid, while the harmony is both sweet and gay. It is astonishing that in so complex and rapid a movement of the fingers, the musical proportions can be preserved, […]. (126)

These instruments were not only means of entertainment among people, but also they improved communality. As Litvack argues "[c]ommunal singing is invoked on many important occasions during the course of daily life and provides a stylised interpretation of events" (70). Songs were primarily used to improve coordination and to make work more enjoyable. They were mostly sung by women in their routine chores such as spinning, weaving or knitting. In this respect, "song was a central part of rural people's lives, providing examples of how it lightened the solitary work of milking or churning, helped with the synchronisation of 'pulling the quern' or incited a team spirit in group

activities" (O Madagain qtd. in Kinmonth 97). Moreover, "[s]uch seemingly random singing during the day was reinforced in a communal atmosphere in the evening through a round of *céilidhs*, the staple of rural Gaelic social and intellectual life" (MacLellan, Ornstein and Shaw 14). Thus, it can be asserted that in *céilidhs*, which are a kind of traditional social gathering, people enjoyed themselves through music, singing and dancing.

"In a culture where the various genres of oral tradition and music complement and support each other, the links between song and oral narrative are of primary importance" (MacLellan, Ornstein and Shaw 14). In this musical atmosphere, great tales can be told through words and music from generation to generation. "Subject matter ranges from love to lamentation, from nature poetry to the themes of immigration, from world figures like Napoleon to local heroes and villains, and from strong religious sentiment to the joys of flirtation and drink" (Cowdery 9). It is partly because of this musical atmosphere that oral traditions are maintained and transmitted. It is commonly observed in ancient cultures that the oral tradition was the principal source of information about prehistory and early history. Ireland is one of the last homes of the oral traditions of prehistoric and medieval Europe, which mirror the routine of rural life through the seasons, the contacts of peoples in war and in commerce, and the heroic deeds of half-legendary leaders (Evans 3).

When the English encouraged the adoption of their own social and cultural mores in place of Irish traditions, it also included "the introduction of a range of sports and recreational activities which had their origins in English public schools and which were distinctively anglophile in flavour" (Sugden and Bairnier 26). Yet, the popularity of Gaelic sports were so enormous that they became fashionable in order to protect and promote Ireland's traditional identity in the face of industrial, technological, political, economic and international changes. The intense passion of the Irish in sports was well-known and it "invoked nationalist, political, cultural as well as purely sporting sensibilities, [and] […] these passions came together in Gaelic sport with the formation of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in 1884" (Bradley 166). There were various sports. "When men gathered together they tried their strength at long-jumping, lifting weights and throwing sledge" (McDowell 52). There were also other games such as

hunting and shooting which were considered suitable sports for the landed class. In addition to such pastimes, hurling, handball and football matches were regularly held among the Irish men in order to test each one's endurance and skill. "Of these, hurling is the purest Irish pedigree [and] it is a territorial team game involving running and the throwing and hitting of a hard ball with open-faced wooden clubs called hurleys" (Sugden and Bairnier 24). Hurling has always occupied a prominent place among Irish sports. "Even today, while Gaelic football may be the most popular of Irish sports, because hurling suggests an unbroken link with the island's ancient past, it is considered by purists as the definitively Irish game" (Sugden and Bairnier 24). Moreover, "hurling became a mark of Irishness, especially of that kind of Irishness which refutes and opposes English claims to sovereign authority in Ireland" (Maolfabhail 155).

Although these Gaelic games all had a great role in defining traditional Irish identity, they also "helped construct a highly gendered national identity during the period from 1884 to 1916, by stressing the masculinity, violence, skill in the newly invented games" (Pratschke 293). It should be underlined that women, during the games mentioned above, were expected to be spectators applauding the success of their menfolk. "The exclusion of women from Gaelic games was addressed by nationalist women in 1902, by the invention of a female version of hurling called camogie" (293). The lack of interest in camogie can be taken as the proof of masculine aspects of these games. In spite of such gender discriminations, sport has always been of primary concern in Ireland because "[f]or over one hundred years identity in much of Ireland has often been defined with a significant strain of passion for Gaelic sports" (Bradley 166).

In conclusion, Ireland is remarkable for its rich culture and traditions which are peculiarly its own. In the nineteenth century, there began a deep interest among the Irish themselves in this rich material in order to uncover and promote the true Ireland and the Irish in order to create a nation through the revival of old customs and traditions. The next three chapters will examine how these customs and traditions are illustrated in Synge's three plays, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding* and T*he Playboy of the Western World* respectively, and how they function as elements representative of a nation and its culture.

# CHAPTER I

## *RIDERS TO THE SEA* AND THE FISHERMEN OF THE ARAN ISLANDS

> "Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression"
>
> (Yeats, Preface to *The Well of the Saints* 52)

The advice above is written by William Butler Yeats in his Preface to the first edition of *The Well of the Saints* (1903) by John Millington Synge (52). In this exhortation, the famous Irish poet encourages his friend Synge to find a life that had not yet been expressed in literature. This was to be an important factor that led Synge to the Aran Islands in the west coast of Ireland in order to explore the customs and traditions of the islanders. As Synge's biographers Greene and Stephens suggest, "[t]he decision to go was made at Yeats's suggestion, and Yeats was not reticent about claiming credit for it" (83). It is beyond doubt that Yeats helped to awaken the enthusiasm in Synge to search for a means to express the native Irish culture and traditions. Yet, it would be wrong to say that Synge would not have taken an interest in ancient Ireland and Irish culture without Yeats's suggestion. Indeed, he had a long-standing amd intense interest in everything that belonged to Irish culture for a long time. Declan Kiberd writes of the impulse that attracted Synge to go to the Islands:

> Doubtless, the advice from Yeats was an important factor in Synge's decision; but the passionate studies in Breton culture must have awakened his enthusiasm for the Gaelic lore of his own country, to which he already held the key in his knowledge of the Irish language. It would be naïve to follow Greene and Stephens in asserting that he went to Aran at Yeats's suggestion. He was heading in that direction from the very beginning. (*Synge* 37)

As can be seen from the quotation above, Synge's interest in peasant culture and the local colour of rural Ireland can be closely traced back to his life. During his boyhood, his wanderings in County Wicklow probably contributed to his thoughts about the rural Irish people. As stated in the Introduction, Synge's life "was one of alienation from his

class and personal background: bourgeois Protestant, well-to-do, respectable, clerical, landowning" (Maxwell 46). Moreover, not believing in Christianity led him to a search for his own identity as he could not find a proper expression for himself in his own faith. As a result, throughout his life, Synge travelled to many parts of Europe in order to find himself. He spent many years on the continent and all these years contributed greatly to his intellectual and aesthetic growth as a writer because his "European sensibility accompanied him" (Sisson 53), throughout his journeys. Undoubtedly, his education was of utmost importance as it helped Synge to grasp the significance of the country's rich past, as well as shaping his literary life. In this respect, Synge's interest in the peasant culture of his own country can be said to have begun "through a diverse education in continental Celticism under the tutelage of Henri D'Arbois de Jubainville, whose lectures at the Sorbonne on Celtic culture and mythology Synge had attended while living in Paris, and the Breton writer Anatole le Braz" (Castle, *Modernism* 99). Clearly, Synge was greatly influenced by them in forming his perception of rural life, in particular island life. In a similar manner to the descriptions of the Breton people, Synge contrived to portray the rural Irish people. "The Bretons of which Le Braz wrote in such a work as *The Land of Pardons* (1894)," writes Foster in F*ictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changing Art*, "are not unlike the Aran […] islanders, being a legend-loving, credulous, yet humorous people, steeped in Catholicism and an elder paganism" (99).

In writing *Riders to the Sea*, it was Pierre Loti, with his writings about Breton fishermen, who deeply influenced Synge. In her book *Our Irish Theatre*, Lady Augusta Gregory comments on the achievement of Synge and his plays and states that "[o]f Synge's plays only *Riders to the Sea*, an un-Irish adaptation to Connacht fishermen of Loti's *Pecheurs d'Islande*, is fit for a decent audience" (307). In this sense, it can be claimed that Loti had an important impact on the writings of Synge including *The Aran Islands* and his one-act play *Riders to the Sea*. Synge thought of Loti as "the greatest contemporary prose writer and often expressed the wish that he would like to do for the West of Ireland peasantry what M. Loti had done for the Breton fisherfolk" (Spehn 20). It was because of this wish that *Riders to the Sea* has many common points with Loti's work. "Both are charged with the heavy atmosphere of doom, both deal with the vain struggles of a primitive people against the sea, both present an aged woman bereft of her sons" (Spehn 35). "Synge in Ireland," writes Maurice Bourgeois in *John Millington*

*Synge and the Irish Theatre*, "felt the tragedy of the sea just as Loti had felt it in Brittany" (169). Bourgeois further suggests that

> Synge greatly admired Loti, and the novel — which he was re-reading about the time he wrote his two one-act plays and parts of the Aran book — was among the volumes which he had formerly borrowed in Paris from a circulating library in the Latin Quarter at the suggestion of his friend Mr. D. J. O' Donoghue. One may indeed detect a striking parallelism of subject, atmosphere and situation in the two works. Some details and sentences in Loti are quite in keeping with the keynote of Synge's one-act tragedy. (168)

Synge's life continued in search of a meaning till he met Yeats. Upon the advice of Yeats, Synge left his life in Paris and docked on the Aran Islands which he was to visit frequently for the rest of his life. As Sternlicht states, "[f]rom 1899 to 1902, Synge was a regular and accepted summer visitor on the Islands, listening, observing, and taking notes on the ancient and isolated life of the fisher folk" (69). Furthermore, he began to live on these islands as if he were one of the islanders and learned their language. Synge "lived among the Aran peasants as if to escape from the civilised world, and to learn about a life which, among other things, became his 'terrestrial nourishment': it is like a search for the spring of life, a pilgrimage, a quest, or an investigation, somewhat outside time" (Agostini 161).

The lifestyle of the islanders affected Synge enormously. He was in natural sympathy with the peasants of the Irish countryside. According to Gregory Castle, Synge "regarded the Aran Islanders as a wild and primitive, inherently noble people cut off from modern Europe" (*Modernism* 101). He actually expressed his own vision of the world through the islanders' lives. Thus, it can be claimed that "those islanders produced a sort of mirror effect" (Genet 163), for Synge. As an observer among the islanders, he understood their anthropological importance in terms of Irish culture and within rural Ireland's local colour. For Synge, the countrymen or the peasants had the real cultural identity that the writers of the Irish Revival had been seeking for. As in Deborah Fleming's words, "[t]o [Synge], they were the people who could tell his Dublin audience about its own country" (10). When Synge went to the islands, he "[…] collected stories, songs, folktales, local histories, and anecdotes and described burial ceremonies, domestic arrangements, clothing and the rituals associated with work and recreation […]" (Castle, *Modernism* 110). He tried to interpret and depict rural Ireland

through these materials till the end of his creative life. He succeeded in reflecting the real Ireland for he "had an artist's eye for colour and described tableau-like scenes that reinforce his conviction that the peasants' ancient way of life was superior to that of urban dwellers" (Fleming 101).

Yet there were also some criticism directed towards Synge as a result of his hyperbolic portrayal of the peasants or the islanders. As Kearns suggests, "[e]xaggerations of strength, courage, and native skills have so imbedded Aran culture in a context of romanticism that it has too often become difficult, if not impossible, to discern myth from reality" (423). Moreover, the fact that Synge remains oblivious to any political or religious problem related with his time such as eviction, famine or military oppression also caused some criticism during his life time. However, "the nature of the nation was Synge's fundamental concern" (Cairns and Richards 78). In this regard, the reason for his not including political and nationalistic issues in his plays can be best understood when the folk community of the Aran Islands is analysed. There had not been any regular contact with the continent for centuries since "[i]solation has always been the most salient factor in the human geography of the islands" (Kearns, "Aran" 424). Very few people went beyond the insular domain and "[t]his detachment from mainland life allowed the islands to remain culturally intact" (Kearns, "Aran" 424). In *The Aran Islands*, Synge states that "[t]ill recently there was no communication with the mainland except by hookers, which were usually slow, and could only make the voyage in tolerably fine weather, so that if an islander went to a fair it was often three weeks before he could return" (34). Furthermore, it was the natural causes that dominated the lives of people rather than the political ones. This could be regarded as the reason why Synge overtly abstains from representing political and national ideologies moulding the Irish nation in the late nineteenth century on the stage.

In his Preface to the *Poems and Translations* (1909) Synge eulogises some poets who "used the whole of their personal lives as their material" (25). Synge dramatised the material and themes he collected from Irish peasants and fishing people during his wanderings in Wicklow, Kerry, Connemara, Mayo and the Aran Islands as he innately understood the heart and mind of people living on these islands. He compiled his observations of the rural people firstly in his book *The Aran Islands* (1907). Synge dealt with a group of insular people and their life on Aran islands. He thought that these

primitive people were essential for the fecundity of contemporary drama. His notes in this book could be resembled to a guide revealing the depths of his characters and literary thought. “Unlike the travel essays it contains a more sustained interior narrative and records the growing consciousness of a writer and a poet” (Sisson 61). With the emergence of this prose work, these islands gained the attention of the world and enabled Synge to be renowned.

Yet it would be wrong to consider Synge’s stay on the island as delightful as it seems. There were also moments when Synge described his own sense of isolation among the islanders inasmuch as the inhabitants of the Aran group could be regarded as being reserved in their manner with strangers. In Part Two of *The Aran Islands*, Synge states his own sense of isolation among the inhabitants:

> In some ways these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals have, yet I cannot talk to them when there is much to say, more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog. There is hardly an hour I am with them that I do not feel the shock of some inconceivable idea, and then again the shock of some vague emotion that is familiar to them and to me. On some days I feel this island as a perfect home and resting place; on other days I feel that I am a waif among the people. I can feel more with them than they can feel with me, and while I wander among them, they like me sometimes, and laugh at me sometimes, yet never know what I am doing. (66)

The islanders may not have been aware of what Synge was doing among them. Yet Synge was aware of the fact that these wanderings and observations profoundly affected his life and work. They provided Synge with a specifically Irish reality existing in their authentic peasant life. The retention of a past and true Irish culture by the inhabitants made the Aran Islands the target of Synge’s dramatic art. He found what he had been seeking throughout his life on these islands and discovered a new life that had not been expressed by anyone in literature. “Synge’s creative urge responded to the Aran scene, desolate and magnificent, and to a tragic joy, […] in the islanders’ endurance of a hard and dangerous life” (Maxwell 47). The life presented in *The Aran Islands* provides the source from which Synge’s subsequent plays that were to be produced at the Abbey Theatre were constructed.

Moreover, the stories Synge heard among these people of the rural countryside were to create the themes of his plays while the people he met were to be some of the characters in these plays. Synge wrote down in his book *The Aran Islands*: "The loss of one man seems a slight catastrophe to all except the immediate relatives. Often when an accident happens a father is lost with his two eldest sons, or in some other way all the active men of household die together" (88). In this regard, his intimate observations and experiences in these rural regions and especially on the Aran Islands could be regarded as "the catalyst which precipitated his own private despairs into the impersonal, healing lament of his tragi-comic art" (Maxwell 47). This catalyst enabled Synge to depict a picture of life led on the islands. Similarly, Carol Hoeg Oliver writes that "Synge becomes merely the tool through which the material writes itself and efforts to account for the genesis of the play go no further than recounting real life counterparts on Aran" (105). He developed a love and veneration for the peasants and depicted them in most of his plays. "In *Riders to the Sea*, in an aesthetically pure form, but with an added mythological dimension: those people of the earth and of the sea and reaching up skywards, become a microcosm of general human relevance" (Agostini 163).

It is his play *Riders to the Sea* that overtly deals with the events and moods he observed and reported in *The Aran Islands*. Roche states that "[w]hat struck Synge in *The Aran Islands* was the dramatic impact such a wonder had on the habitual procedures of the people, what was released in their usually reticent and resigned temperaments by the loss of a member of their community" (84). Especially Synge writes about the threat of drowning on the Aran Islands on very many occasions since it is the destiny of the inhabitants of the island. The drowning of a young man from Inishmaan has significantly contributed to the writing of *Riders to the Sea*. The incident about the drowning of a man was recorded in Part Four of *The Aran Islands* can be regarded as the source from which the story and the title of Synge's play comes. In this part of the book Synge states that

> [w]hen the horses were coming down to the slip and old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them. She didn't say what she was after seeing, and this man caught the horse, he caught his own horse first, and then he caught this one, and after that he went out and was drowned. (116)

Benson suggests that "[t]he difficulties in dramatising such an incident, in making a modern audience accept a ghost story based on 'second sight', are formidable" (*Synge* 52). Synge, however, manages to persuade his audience about the reality of Aran life by showing man's struggle in this hostile world with the implacable sea.

*Riders to the Sea* (1904) by Synge could be regarded as the second product of his sojourns among the islanders in the West after the publication of *The Aran Islands*. The play has been hailed as being one of the most remarkable achievements in contemporary Irish drama insofar as it lays bare some of the most tragic experiences faced by humans on a remote island. Traditionally, *The Shadow of the Glen*, the short one-act comedy, is considered to be the first play written by Synge. Given that *Riders to the Sea* is Synge's first attempt at drama after the debut of his first play, it had a remarkable success as a masterpiece in the author's canon. It is a significant play marking the culminating point of a certain stage in Synge's development in writing. Frawley asserts: "In discovering that he could quite literally grant voice to the people he had long observed, Synge found his forte" (15). Apart from the personal development of Synge in terms of writing and drama, his one-act plays initiated a new way for the Abbey Theatre. "With these two strikingly original one-act dramas the budding playwright lent considerable impetus to the early experiments of the Abbey Theatre movement" (Frawley 15).

On the 25th of February in 1904, the Irish National Theatre Society premiered John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, which has been regarded among the most perfect one-act plays of all time. The play was performed in the Molesworth Hall which "was the society's home until they acquired the Abbey Theatre a year later" (Greene and Stephens 157). Despite his ill health, Synge, as Saddlemyer remarks, "was present to acknowledge the audience's call for the author at the opening night on 25 February" (*Collected Letters* 62).

The play met with both approval and controversy from the first time it was staged. In the first production of the play "[t]he popular press, perhaps clinging to the morality objection to *In the Shadow of the Glen*, did not welcome the new play" (Ritschel, "Arthur Griffith" 117). Thus, most of them condemned the play and subdued its achievement. Saddlemyer states that "the *Independent* grudgingly acknowledged the 'careful treatment of a simple theme', but felt it 'too dreadfully doleful to please the

popular taste'; the *Irish Times* also found the treatment 'repulsive'" (*Collected Letters* 62). On the other hand, there were also some positive criticisms directed towards the play. Surprisingly, in the *United Irishman* the review of Arthur Griffith, who fiercely attacked Synge's first play's production, was more positive although he objected to the appearance of the body of a drowned man on stage. Griffith states:

> The National Theatre Society's performance last week at the Molesworth Hall was fairly well attended, but not so well as they deserved … Mr. J. M. Synge's "*Riders to the Sea"*… was produced for the first time, and its tragic beauty powerfully affected the audience. We think, however, Mr. Synge could get his efforts without the introduction of the body of the drowned man on the stage — this is the cheap trick of the Transpontine dramatists. (qtd. in Ritschel, "Arthur Griffith" 117)

In comparison with the severe criticism of the press, the play was generally well received by the audiences.[16] "The audience which saw *Riders to the Sea* was a small but enthusiastic one" (Greene and Stephens 170), and this small audience responded favourably to the play.[17] It could be claimed that this play turned out to become "Synge's only play that did not occasion controversy, for many Irishmen took offense at what they perceived as slights against the national character in Synge's comedies" (Hill 175). The authentic lifestyle presented on the stage by Synge was similar to the one that the revivalist writers were attempting to recreate from the history and myths of Ireland. The primitivism of the islanders could be regarded as the essence of the many cultural movements taking place in Synge's time. In other words, Synge presents what the revivalists wanted to see on the stage through his play, *Riders to the Sea*.

*Riders to the Sea* has been regarded as "a short but marvellously poignant tragedy, perhaps the most perfect thing Synge ever produced" (Morgan 159). In fact, it is clear that the audience was aware of the dreadful outcome of the play from the beginning. All the details on the stage had prepared them for it. Finney acknowledges that

> [t]he fatalistic atmosphere of impending doom and death, given clearest voice in Maurya's repeated direful predictions that her two surviving sons will go the way of the other four, is enhanced by frequent references to the elements – the wind, waves, and rocks that have been so powerful in determining this family's destiny. ("Modern Theater" 476)

Yet these did not distract the interest of the audience who await the inevitable news about the death of the last son. Joseph Holloway reports that upon seeing the premiere of the play "[t]he audience was so deeply moved by the tragic gloom of the terrible scene on which the curtains close in, that it could not applaud" (35).

Not only the play's tragic mood but also the performances of the actors and actresses contributed to the theatrical achievement of *Riders to the Sea*. The characters of the play which consist of three women, a man and the islanders are totally surrendered by the Atlantic sea, which makes them, as in Kearns's words, "geographically sequestered people" ("Aran" 422). Synge depicts these islanders and their moods successfully through his characters in the play. He reflects the Aran man in the character of Bartley.[18] However, the play deals with the women who wait for their men, and bury them.[19] While the action seems to be concerned with the men, it is the women whom the play focuses on. Therefore, the characters of the play mainly consist of women who are subject to the tragedy of living without their men. This point is worth noting here because, by this means, it can be claimed that Synge "inaugurates an Irish national theatre that not only attempted to diminish the stage Irishman, but also initiated the Irishwoman into the drama in a new and significantly vocal way" (Frawley 16).

*Riders to the Sea* hinges on the lives of poor sea-faring Irish peasants and their close relationship with nature. The plot of the play is very plain. It starts with the mentioning of a drowned man in Donegal and ends with Maurya's resignation to her fate. Thus, it is death that determines the mood of the play. Maurya is the aged wife of a fisherman who had drowned in the sea, and the mother of six sons of whom only the youngest one Bartley is not taken by the sea. The sea has already taken six men including her husband, father-in-law and four sons as understood at the very beginning of the play. She has also two daughters named Cathleen and Nora. In the beginning of the play, Maurya has been waiting for news from her son Michael who got lost at sea nine days ago. The young priest brings some fragments of clothing found on the coast of Donegal to Cathleen and Nora to identify their brother by examining them. This will be the fifth victim that the sea has taken from the desolate cottage of Maurya. Cathleen and Nora have to determine whether these fragments belong to their absent brother. However, they are concerned about their old mother and her health. They speak in hushed voices lest Maurya hear them, and hide the bundle brought in the turf-loft. Every detail is given

while the girls start to open the bundle. They want to compare the shirt that they found in the bundle with that of Michael's on the hook:

> NORA. I'll get his shirt off the hook the way we can put the one flannel on the other [*She looks through some clothes hanging in the corner*] It's not with them, Cathleen, and where will it be?
>
> CATHLEEN. I'm thinking Bartley put it on him in the morning, for his own shirt was very heavy with the salt in it. [*Pointing to the corner*] There's a bit of a sleeve was of the same stuff. Give me that and it will do. (*RS* 160-5)

The two daughters of Maurya decide to conceal the pieces of clothing in order to prevent their mother from learning the truth. Having a vision of the approaching doom, Maurya and her two daughters strive to dissuade Bartley who is planning to go to the Galway fair. Bartley is one of the central characters of the play insofar as he is the only son left to the mother. He becomes the man of the house after Michael has gone. As the head of the family, he is determined to take his animals to the horse fair on the mainland since it is a must for him to support his family. However, as Fleming asserts, "Galway's fair beckons ominously to Bartley" (106). In vain do Maurya and his sisters try to prevent Bartley from sailing as he does not listen to their pleas. In spite of the entreaties of his mother and sisters, he leaves on the back of his red mare without taking his mother's blessing. He has little notion of the significance of his mother's blessing. But Maurya is an old woman who has witnessed the deaths of almost all the males in her family. "[Her] only concern is for Bartley, not for the physical welfare of the family, and she is so grief-stricken that she forgets the blessing of leave-taking" (Fleming 108). Moreover, Maurya's prescience makes it clear that Bartley unaware of his fate will never return to his home:

> BARTLEY. [*taking the halter*] I must go now quickly. I'll ride down on the red mare, the grey pony'll run behind me…. The blessing of God on you. [*He goes out*]
>
> MAURYA. [*crying out as he is in the door way*] He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world. (*RS* 100-5)

The departure of Bartley deepens Maurya's agony. The vision of dead Michael riding on a horse could be taken as a portent of the approaching death of Bartley. It is also this vision that prevents Maurya from giving her blessing to Bartley. Meanwhile, the girls realise that they have also forgotten to give Bartley some bread that he will need during his journey to the mainland. Thus, they persuade their mother to go after Bartley and give the food and her blessing since leaving without a blessing is considered as a bad omen by the fishermen on the island. Aware of this, Cathleen says to her mother: "Isn't it sorrow enough is on every one in this house without your sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear?" (*RS* 110) Afterwards, Cathleen tells Maurya to go to the spring well so that she can give Bartley the bread. She says: "Let you go down now to the spring well and give him this and he passing. You'll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say 'God speed you', the way he'll be easy in his mind" (*RS* 122). In order to give both her blessing and the bread Maurya leaves, and the two daughters begin to examine the bundle of the drowned man that was brought by the priest in the beginning of the play. Fearing that this bundle may belong to Michael, they have concealed it from Maurya. When they open the bundle, they take out the flannel scrap in order to compare it with the flannel that hangs in the corner in the cottage. Cathleen cannot find conclusive evidence and says: "It's the same stuff, Nora; but if it is itself aren't there great rolls of it in the shops of Galway, and isn't it many another man may have a shirt of it as well as Michael himself?" (*RS* 167) However, "[d]istinctive knitting stitches are often tragically cited as the method by which fishermen's drowned bodies could be identified by their womenfolk" (Kinmonth 101). After examining the bundle, Nora recognises her own stitches that she has dropped in one of the stockings belonging to the drowned man. She says: "It's the second one of the third pair I knitted, and I put up three score stitches, and I dropped four of them" (*RS* 175). As the girls know what Michael was wearing when he went to sea, they immediately realise that the owner of the clothes is their brother. They confirm that this time "[t]he sea has taken Michael as its prey" (Setterquist 27), and they decide to hide this information from their old mother.

Not having been able to catch up with Bartley, Maurya returns to the cottage still carrying the little parcel of food. She tells her daughters about her vision of Michael riding on the horse behind Bartley while a few women enter the cottage for keening.

"These are not just characters getting on stage, as they come, one by one, the women are the wraith like eternal mourners who always show up at death" (Oliver 111). Through the end of the play, suspicions are confirmed. On being told the truth about the death of Michael, Maurya also realises that Bartley will be the next victim. Then, the dead body of Bartley is brought into the cottage by the men of the island. When Bartley dies, the foreboding of Maurya becomes true. All the women except her begin to keen around Bartley's bier. Unlike the women gathering in the cottage, Maurya does not wail or keen as "[h]er lifelong struggle with the forces of Nature has come to an end. She is beyond the reach of any earthly sorrow" (Setterquit 28). She helplessly submits to the overpowering forces of nature. She accepts her condition without questioning. Thus, the tragedy of an Aran family is represented through the resignation of old Maurya.

The insular status of Aran greatly contributes to the emergence of this tragedy as Synge displays the characteristics of peasant life on a small and isolated island off the west coast of Ireland from which a documentation of rural Ireland can be drawn. In a letter dated 28 January 1904, Synge wrote to his friend Stephen MacKenna that "[n]o drama — that is to hold its public — can grow anything but the fundamental realities of life which are neither modern or un-modern" (*Collected Letters* 74). Therefore, the ethnographic authenticity of the people inhabiting these remote islands was of high importance for the evolution of Synge's concept of drama.

*Riders to the Sea* is the only play that takes place on Inishmaan, one of the Aran Islands "where centuries of isolation have produced a unique and rugged culture dependent on wrestling a livelihood from the sea" (Hill 176). This proves that the tragedy is not peculiar to the household of old Maurya but valid for the whole island. From the beginning of the play to the end, the bleakness of the Aran landscape and its effect on the islanders is established. "The Aran culture is tied in with the wind, the waves, the severe climate and the hard life" writes Rene Agostini (57). The climate of the island prepares the islanders for certain kind of calamities throughout their entire lives. The observations Synge makes about the climate of the island helps the reader understand the conditions of these people who "live here in a world of grey, where there are wild rains and mists every week in the year, and their warm chimney corners, filled with children and young girls, grow into consciousness of each family in a way it is not easy

to understand in more civilised places" (45)[20]. Undoubtedly, such an atmosphere contributes to the despondency and melancholy of the islanders.

Not only the climate and the atmosphere of the islands but also the scenery of the play contributes to the tragic mood enormously. The visual and aural imagery of *Riders to the Sea* has not been chosen randomly. It is of utmost significance since it promotes the apprehension of the play when it opens in an air of anxiety in a cottage on Inishmaan. For the setting of his tragedy, Synge chooses a "[c]ottage kitchen, with nets, oil-skins, spinning wheel, some new boards standing by the wall" (*RS* 3). All these elements "carry the meaning of the play quite independently of the content as content is usually understood: a foreigner not understanding a word on stage could still have a very real — and accurate — emotional experience of the play" (Oliver 110).

In the play, the kitchen serves "as center of both work and communication" (Fleming 105). There are articles that belong to men and women as well as the objects of the outside world in that cottage kitchen. Furthermore, Ritschel claims that "[s]et in the Aran Isles, the original production was careful to include odd authentic set pieces and costume items from the island life, such as an actual island spinning wheel[21], and the dark petticoats of the island women" (156). This was a great necessity in order to reflect the richness of contemporary rural Irish life to the reader. Besides, "[t]he company was made up mostly of Dublin men and women to whom the garb of an islander from the west was almost as exotic as it would have been to foreigners" (Greene and Stephens 170). Therefore, for the staging of *Riders to the Sea* Synge wrote to one of his friends living on Inishmaan "for samples of Aran flannel and a pair of pampooties[22] so that [Willie] Fay could costume the actors appropriately" (170). This endeavour to include some artefacts of peasant life in the play is highly significant for the apprehension of the play. "In this lonely world where human beings were so dependent on nature, artifacts possessed extreme significance; Synge may be suggesting that in this subsistence economy, things have more personality than people" (Fleming 104). In other words, all these materials contain some messages in themselves. Similarly, Synge states that

> [e]very article on these islands has an almost personal character, which gives this simple life, where all art is unknown, something of the artistic beauty of medieval life. The curraghs[23] and spinning-wheels, the tiny

> wooden barrels that are still much used in the place of earthenware, the home-made candles, churns, and baskets, are all full of individuality, and being made from materials that are common here, yet to some extent peculiar to the island, they seem to exist as a natural link between the people and the world that is around them. (*Aran* 13-14)

Furthermore, "[s]uch attitudes and attention to detail indicate Synge was trying to build into '*Riders to the Sea*' a strong realistic, even documentary, strain" (Hull 248). In this regard, the play achieves to reflect the local colour and the authenticity of peasants in a vivid and naturalistic manner through furnishings that are peculiar to the lives of the islanders. In doing so, "[c]olours, clothing, horses, the sea, certain actions and utterances, the hearth, all have superstitious meanings" (Hull 246). The props also include nets, a rope and white boards which all have symbolic meanings inasmuch as Synge uses them as motifs that foreshadow the tragedy of this Aran family. Benson suggests that "[t]hese are everyday Aran household items which persuade us that the action is naturalistic, but as the play unfolds they become charged with enormous symbolic voltage" (*Synge* 53). For instance, the white boards that are leaning against the wall and brought from Connemara are ominous since the beginning of the play as they prophesy disaster. They suggest that they may be used for Bartley's coffin instead of that intended for the lost son Michael. Like the white boards, the new rope that hangs on them with a nail also comes from Connemara for the funeral of Michael. But the rope is also used in the funeral of Bartley. The stick, which was also brought from Connemara by Michael, has the similar function like the white boards and the rope. Even this piece of stick becomes symbolic of disaster approaching. The reader learns that Cathleen saves the rope from being eaten by the pig with the black feet as she says to Nora: "Give [the rope] to [Bartley], Nora; it's on a nail by the white boards. I hung it up this morning, for the pig with the black feet was eating it" (*RS* 4). Fleming states that "[t]he pig is the central symbol of death, for in Irish mythology the pig was an eater of corpses. This one has been eating the new coffin rope and will soon be sold for slaughter: both references link him with death" (107). However, there are also references to man's survival in spite of all hardships and even death. Inside the cottage, for instance, the hearth never extinguishes. This point is of significance as "it was traditionally symbolic of human life, the prosperity of the house and farm" (Fleming 107).

The stage directions of the play about everyday activities such as baking the cake or taking horses to a fair on the mainland also contribute to the dramatic effect. At the start of the play, "Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading cake, and puts it down in the pot-oven by the fire; then wipes her hands, and begins to spin at the wheel" (*RS* 3). She is "the most active character in the play in terms of pursuing and completing specific actions" (Free 164). She begins to talk with her younger sister Nora:

> CATHLEEN. [*spinning the wheel rapidly*] What is it you have?
>
> NORA. The young priest is after bringing them. It's a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal.
> [*Cathleen stops her wheel with a sudden movement, and leans out to listen*] (*RS* 3-5)

This dialogue between the two sisters reveals that the mundane activities and homely acts of the islanders are so significant that they are interconnected with the events in the play. In the conversation, "[t]he abrupt stopping of the wheel intimates clearly that the clothes belong to Michael and that he is dead" (Benson, *Synge* 54). The cake being kneaded by Cathleen is another important element for the life-like aspect of the play. As Roche states "[e]ven as the dialogue commences, engaging the issue of whether their brother Michael is drowned, that cake is never lost sight of" (69). These detailed descriptions of everyday activities such as kneading cake or spinning at the wheel are in conformity with the authenticity of the peasant cottage and reveal the domesticity of a household. Therefore, "[t]he play opens on a level near enough to the everyday world to persuade an audience to accept it without difficulty as a valid representation of life" (Price, *Synge* 182)

All these characteristics of the island life are not only ornamental to make the play more realistic and naturalistic, but also functional as they prepare the reader for the atmosphere of the approaching doom. Bourgeois suggests that

> the little play illustrates Synge's uncompromisingly veracious and drastic realism — although he here presents a reality altogether destitute of "joy"—, his sense of the elemental and the dynamic, above all, his unsurpassed skill and craftsmanship, which match the play itself in its poignancy. (171)

It is nature that shapes the actions and fates of the islanders. Synge's use of nature "is not pastoral, romantic, or sublime but is, rather, a blend of uniquely Irish ambiguities towards place" (Kennedy 15). For Synge, "nature is not merely a background in harmony with the play" rather "[i]t is an actor recognised 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 fates" (Fermor 166). In this regard, it can be claimed that nature, that is the sea, functions as a striking duality in the play.

On this small island surrounded by wild ocean waves, the sea constitutes the lives of the islanders, and the essence of life means survival for these people. Fishing is the most important economic mainstay of the island as there is no alternative other than leaving the island. In this Irish fishing community, the conditions of the fishermen are appalling. The perilous sea threatens the fishermen's lives. On the other hand, the islanders depend on the tumultuous sea in order to earn their livelihoods. Gerstenberger states that "the sea, which is a source of livelihood for its harvest of fishand of kelp, may one day seem to yield itself to human needs, the next become the unappeasable destroyer" (*John* 11). As a result, there is a continual conflict between the sea and humanity. The sea is both the enemy and the means of their survival. As the islanders cannot farm because of the infertile land, they must either fish or take their livestock to the mainland across the tumultuous sea. Hence, seafaring constitutes the basic mainstay of the economy of the islanders. In this sense, it would not be wrong to claim that their life is totally dependent upon the sea "in which fishing nets are cast and on which boats transport the horses to be sold on the Irish mainland. On boats or horses, the men of the Aran Islands are riders to the sea, and their ride inevitably ends in watery death" (Berlin 119). In other words, most of the islanders will inevitably lose their combat against nature.

In the play, "[p]overty may be the direct consequence of experiencing the death of son, […] in particular the death of the last son" (Macintosh 167). It is a fact that death is inevitable for humans. It is a universal law of nature. Yet, the men of the island are destined to die at a very young age as in the case of Bartley because of the harsh living conditions of Aran Islands. Hence, tragedy is inherent in the lives of these poor fishermen. Synge reveals the awareness of mortality among the menfolk. This may be

directly associated with the dramatist's personal life since Synge himself also felt that he was approaching the end of his life. Likewise, Bourgeois states that "he had personally begun to anticipate something of the sadness of old age and death" (168). In this regard, the play could be regarded as Synge's response to mortality.

On this island, in order to provide their families with the necessities of life, men have to risk their lives. For instance, in order to take the horses to the Galway Fair on the mainland Bartley does not wait for the proper weather conditions. He "ignores the warnings of wind and tide: the southwest wind and eastern tide create two surf masses that collide loudly and produce dangerous weather conditions" (Fleming 107). When Cathleen and Nora recognise that the garments in the bundle belonging to their missing brother, they question the implacable destiny of men living on these islands:

> CATHLEEN. [*counts the stitches*] It's that number is in it. [*Crying out*] ah, Nora, isn't it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen him but the black hags that do be flying on the sea?
>
> NORA. [*swinging herself round and throwing out her arms on the clothes*] And isn't it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man who was a great rower and a fisher, but a bit of an old shirt and a plain? (*RS* 176-184)

As it is mentioned above, certain characters raise their voice against a fate of drowning in the sea. However, for most of the islanders, drowning at an early age is something ordinary and they do not question it. For instance, when the women are keening for the death of Bartley at the end of the play, an old man asking for nails comes in. Unlike Maurya who questions the destiny of men on the island, his mission here is just to prepare the coffin for the young Bartley. Here, Synge stresses that "[t]he Aran islanders live with the terrible sea, and therefore they live with death, but death is so naturally bound up with their lives that they never question its mystery" (Berlin 123). The old man's response to the death of Bartley may reflect the men's attitude towards death. In order to survive, the Aran men have developed a kind of stoic acceptance of their destiny. Both despair and acceptance became a harsh reality for the Irish peasant.

Women, on the other hand, who constantly worry about the safety of their men at sea, have to endure the pain of the dead ones. Synge states:

> The maternal feeling is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to the women. Their sons grow up to be banished as soon as they are of age, or to live here in continual danger on the sea; their daughters go away also, or are worn out in their youth with bearing children that grow up to harass them in their own turn a little later. (62)

The islanders' response to the death of Bartley reveals that the women and men face different kinds of suffering on the island. As Johnson claims "[…] tragedy comes in a variety of forms because the men are the breadwinners and must therefore rely on the sea for livelihood, but this sea is also the destroyer of them and the women they will leave behind" (8).

Furthermore, the aftermath of Bartley's death is of high importance due to the fact that there are some rituals that include the keening, the wake and the burial. In *Riders to the Sea*, Synge provides his reader with the dramatisation of the rituals related to death on the Aran Islands where pre-Christian and Christian beliefs are intertwined. In other words, the pagan and the Catholic worlds are both present in the play through rituals. These rituals are important in understanding the play thoroughly since Synge is "[…] portraying a world in which people, insecure and desperate for help against the forces of death and the tyranny of the natural world, seized upon any belief or superstition that might give them comfort and hope" (Skelton 449). Similarly, Gerstenberger states that "[b]y ritual, pagan and Christian, by formalising grief, death is endured […] these rituals are equally ineffectual in changing this universe, but they do enable man to endure it" (*John* 41).

Synge gives detailed descriptions of funerals and "the wild keen, or crying for the dead" that accompanies the burials on these islands as he witnessed them (*The Aran Islands* 31). Keening over the dead, which consists of vocal laments and wails in grief, is also very important for the play. Considering the maternal instinct and experiences of Aran mothers, women are expected to be more sensitive towards the death of their men. Therefore, this dramatic expression of sorrow is generally carried out by women as it can be seen in *Riders to the Sea*. In order to honour the dead person, the laments are

performed loudly. Bourke states: "Using a traditional meter and verbal formulas, the lament poet — always a woman — lavishly praised the dead person's character, family and home in a poem that could be remembered and quoted for generations" (160). Synge writes about the funeral of an old woman in *The Aran Islands*:

> While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken, and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of events. (31)

The wails are so common that they can be heard any time and interrupt the everyday speech of the characters. While Nora and Cathleen are trying to console Maurya after the departure of Bartley, they hear something through the door. Upon hearing this sound, Nora asks her sister: "[*in a whisper*] Did you hear that, Cathleen? Did you hear a noise in the north-east?" (*RS* 254). Cathleen answers in the same way by whispering: "There's some one after crying out by the seashore" (*RS* 255). The wails are constantly heard on the island. As the raging sea continues to threaten islanders, they have nothing to do except revealing their helplessness and grief via their cries. Thus, this dialogue serves as a reminder of the great power of nature, and man's despair. When the dead body of Bartley is carried into the cottage and laid on the table, "old women begin to come in, crossing themselves on the threshold, and kneeling down in front of the stage with red petticoats over their heads" (*RS* 110). This chorus of women mourns the death of young Bartley at sea. Their "red petticoats, swaying motion, and high pitched wail provide a ritualistic context in which Maura recites her homage to death" (Free 166). Maurya kneels down at the head of the table on which her last son is laid on a plank. Unlike her manner upon the death of Michael, she becomes "quiet" and "easy" upon the death of Bartley. Nora wonders why her mother behaves in such a way and asks: "She's quiet now and easy; but the day Michael was drowned you could hear her crying out from this to the spring well. It's fonder she was of Michael, and would any one have thought that?" (*RS* 317). Once more Cathleen answers the question of her younger sister: "An old woman will soon be tired with anything she will do, and isn't it nine days herself is after crying, and keening, and making great sorrow in the house?" (*RS*

320). In the play, it is Cathleen who understands the reaction of her mother towards such a big grief. Synge reveals in *The Aran Islands* that like the elder daughter of the household, he, too, heard "the profound ecstasy of grief" (31) on the island and realised the anguish of the helplessness of humanity against nature. According to Synge, this tradition of keening embodied

> no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. They are usually silent, but in the presence of death all outward show the difference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they are all doomed. (*The Aran Islands* 31)

In this regard, it can be suggested that islanders and rural people of Ireland express their rebellion against their fate by means of keening and crying. This practice shows the ultimate resignation of the islanders against the inevitability of fate when life returns to death. In this play, the sea becomes the target against which people wail. For Maurice Bourgeois the close observation of the keening tradition could be taken as the original source of "the strange litany of Maurya chanting the names of her dead men-children" (166). Maurya keens for all the dead men of her family. In the beginning of the play, she keens for her son Michael for nine days until his dead body was found. Then she keens for Bartley who has gone forever. Roche states that

> Synge is careful to stress the artistic elements of rhythm and intonation in the keening that help account for its status as a ritual rather than a random gathering of individually hysterical women. He will put this perceived equation between keening and the primitive elements of drama, the channeling of furious personal emotion into the rhythmic patterns of a prescribed communal act, to effective use in *Riders to the Sea.* (85)

The burial rituals are important as they symbolise the respect of the people for the dead. These rituals are staged so successfully that upon seeing the play Joseph Holloway writes in his diary: "The thoroughly in-earnest playing of the company made the terribly depressing wake episode so realistic and weirdly doleful that some of the audience

could not stand the painful horror of the scene, and had to leave the hall during its progress" (35).

Synge's familiarity with the funeral traditions of the islanders and their conventions of elegy is shown in the grief and resignation that Maurya displays in the play. "The play itself offers a brief glimpse of an old woman, Maurya, who, prior to [the] play's action, has already lost five sons, a husband, and a father-in-law to the sea" (Ritschel 156). Maurya enumerates all the men she lost to the sea:

> MAURYA. [*in a low voice, but clearly*] It's little the like of him knows of the sea… Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them. I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house— six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world — and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them… There were Stephen, and Shawn, were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth, and carried up to the two of them on one plank, and in by that door. (*RS* 240-50)

In this speech of Maurya, Synge tries to show the massive forces which are against the survival and the existence of mankind on this island. Similarly, Price suggests that "Maurya's narration evokes and concentrates a whole lifetime of suffering and conflict; eight men move vividly across her imagination, and ours, all riders to the sea, which is death" (*Synge* 187). The action of the play continues with Maurya trying to convince her last son, Bartley, not to go to sea. When the men of the island were taken by the sea, Bartley was a little baby:

> MAURYA. [*continues without hearing anything*] There were Sheamus and his father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There were Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. (*RS* 255-65)

Once a baby on his mother's knees, it is now Bartley's turn to face death brought by the Atlantic Ocean. He is the eighth man to have died in the sea from this household. This pattern of repetition proves that "[o]n the Aran Islands a man, even so young a man,

must go to the sea; he has no choice" (Berlin 121). Bartley's death stands for the deaths of the entire male members of a family — "thus suggesting a more universal theme of entrapment, futility and death" (Benson, "Demythologising" 3). "Significantly, Bartley has no traits which particularly distinguish him from the other men who have gone out to die" (Oliver 118). Now the sea calls him. "Past has become present, relentlessly and mechanically" (Berlin 123). As a man of the island, Bartley is aware of the close presence of death waiting for him, but he goes to meet the same destiny as his father and brothers. The close relation between the white boards of Michael's coffin and white rocks from which Bartley will sail to sea is important in the sense that "Synge evokes the inevitable death of men on the sea as both a personal tragedy of this family and a universal facet of Aran life" (Cusack 223). "Its small world of the cottage represents the larger world, and its conflict of man against the sea has large implications" (Berlin 123). Synge manages to express the tragedy of people living by the sea through Bartley and his family. It is clear that the death of Bartley symbolises all the deaths on the island. In this sense, the play achieves universality by depicting the past, present and future deaths of men on this remote island. This tragic gloom or the inevitable fate may be regarded as the essence of the play since "[m]en, […], continually enter the cemetery of the sea" (Sternlicht 71). The grief and resignation of the islanders affects Synge so deeply that in *The Aran Islands*, he states that

> [a]s they talked to me and gave me a little poteen and a little bread when they thought I was hungry, I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgement of death. I knew that every one of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the graveyard I had come from. (114)

What Synge tries to show is that drowning in the sea at a very early age is the destiny of these men. It is futile to resist to death for the men of the island. Bourgeois states that "[o]n wave-bitten, wind-swept Inishmaan Synge had perceived the awe-inspiring tragicality of the seamen's lives, with the shiver of peasant grief at the human toll exacted by the rapacious deep, and the agony of women young and old who can do no more than wait and weep at home" (159).

Maurya's conflict with the sea dissolves into a yielding, and ultimately into some sort of peace. When she kneels down at the head of the table on which Bartley's corpse is laid, "she moves from personal to general concerns in an utterance that underlines both her severance from the immediate circumstances, and her severance, in spirit at least, from the exigencies of day-to-day life" (Macintosh 166). She is free of her fears and triumphantly says:

> MAURYA. They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me… I've no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf in the east, and the surf in the west, making a great stir with the two noises and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. [*To Nora*] Give me the holy water, Nora, there's a small sup still on the dresses. [*Nora gives it to her. Maurya drops Michael's clothes across Bartley's feet and sprinkles the Holy Water over him*.] … It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking. (*RS* 287-310)

By admitting defeat, Maurya attains relief and peace. Thus, not agony but relief dominates her last speeches. In this regard, through Maurya, Synge asserts that "life is essentially tragic and the final reality is death, and that through the acceptance of this fact, along with compassion for doomed humanity, charity and peace may come" (Price, *Synge* 191). Not only does Maurya attain peace, but she comprehends the real role of religion on the island. As a matter of fact, she makes some references to Christianity in her speech. "Yet although Maurya uses Christian terms and symbols and sprinkles Bartley's body with Holy Water, she has come to a position where, for her, the comforts of organised religion are of no avail" (Price, *Synge* 188). In this speech Maurya proves that the young priest was wrong when he was trying to console her in the beginning of the play. His words were comforting, but they did not really comfort her. In contrast to his words, the Almighty God has left her destitute with no son living in the world. At the end of the play, before the curtain falls, she says:

> MAURYA. [*puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley's feet*] They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn [*bending her head*] … and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world. [*She pauses, and the keen rises a little more loudly from the women, then sinks away. Continuing*] Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely… What more can we want than that?... No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied. (*RS* 325-35)

The death of Bartley will reunite the men of this household. "Death has become the occasion of a family reunion, and with this realisation comes a note of resignation" (Macintosh 167). Upon realising this, Maurya's emotions reach a metaphysical level, leaving behind personal pain. Maurya understands that all the efforts of people towards this tragic end are futile. Thus, this tragic death of young Bartley turns into a sign of the universal mortality of mankind. In this sense, her resignation is "hardly perhaps of understanding, but of relief that the end has come to a heroic contest, even if in defeat" (Fermor 169).

On the other hand, the characters Synge created for the play can be regarded as truly representing Irish peasantry. "Further, the character names are so general as to be archetypal. Maurya, of course, is the Irish version of the name of the suffering mother of Christ, Cathleen is the name of Ireland as young woman, and Nora is an independent-minded young woman in Ibsenite drama" (Harrington 218). Maurya achieves to become an immensely human character representing maternity rather than just an old islander woman. She achieves to be "one of the first archetypal, all-suffering, all-sacrificing Irish mothers in modern Irish drama" (Sternlicht 71). Maurya speaks on behalf of all the mothers in the world and "Synge records all this with a terrified and terrifying accuracy, because he knows that, however spare and beautiful such a culture may seem to the outsider, its costs in human terms are just too high" (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 172).

The ritualistic burial activities after the death of Bartley reveal that grief is common for the islanders, in particular for the women of the island. Therefore, "the tragedy is centred on the figure of Maurya; she is the true tragic protagonist, and the rest of the

figures have only varying degrees of partial awareness of the meaning of the whole" (Price, *Synge* 181). Through "the rest of the figures" Synge tries to show that the inexperienced young population of the Aran Islands did not inherit such a grief nor did they learn from their past. "The young in *Riders to the Sea* are foolish, in contrast to Maurya's depth of understanding" (Fleming 107). For Bartley the horses at the Galway Fair are so important that he says "[…] I must go now quickly. This is the one boat going for two weeks or beyond it, and the fair will be a good fair for horses I heard them saying below" (60). Due to the risk of losing a good profit from the sale of the horses at the fair, he ignores the warnings of his mother about "the wind rising from the south and west" (40). Unlike Bartley, Maurya knows the dangers of going to sea in harsh conditions. Actually she knows the nature of the island they are living on. Thus, she is aware of the fact that "human beings, and especially an only son, are more important than horses" (Fleming 107). In the play, Maurya says: "If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?" (75). She knows that the life of a man cannot be measured by money. "Maurya's propensity to extrapolate from an apparently simple event to a philosophical principle is pervasive" (Remy 74). Yet the sayings of an old woman are not so important for the young of the household and the island. In this world of changing customs, young people are careless of the precautions that one has to take as a rule of surviving on the island. The fact that Maurya is a traditional woman reveals itself in the short conversation between her and Bartley. When Bartley comes into the cottage, Maurya speaks of the traditional beliefs:

> MAURYA. [*as before*] You'd do right to leave that rope, Bartley, hanging by the boards. [*Bartley takes the rope*] It will be wanting in this place, I'm telling you, if Michael is washed up tomorrow morning, or the next morning, or any morning in the week, for it's a deep grave we'll make him by the grace of God. (*RS* 56-60)

This speech could be regarded as Maurya's "first sally in her duel to save her son's life" and it does "not only highlight the poverty of a house which has but one good rope, but it also sets the tone for the rest of Maurya's argument" (Remy 70). Maurya refers to the custom and argues that it is not proper for Bartley to leave the island until his brother's dead body is washed ashore. "Like most primitive peoples these islanders are sticklers

for custom and social proprieties, and she stresses the importance of observing due form […]" (Price, *Synge* 183). However, it seems certain that Bartley is not influenced by Maurya's traditional convictions. He is also not interested in the customs of the island and has made his decision. After waiting for nine days, he thinks that it is illogical to wait any longer for the dead body of his brother and says: "How would it be washed up, and we after looking each day for nine days, and a strong wind blowing a while back from the west and south?" (*RS* 70).

Bartley appears for a short time on stage and he "has only eight lines in the play and in four of them he speaks of 'going'" (Remy 99). This urge to go is of high importance in terms of the general characterisation of Bartley. As one of the central characters of the play, Bartley is an example showing the approach of the young to the customs and traditions of island. Moreover, Remy suggests that he is "the play's exemplary peasant-in-transition" insofar as "[i]t is Bartley more than any other character who is compelled to deal directly with both the traditional culture and the modern world" (97). When the economic necessities of the islanders are taken into consideration, Bartley's intent on leaving the island for the sake of the fair could be better understood. He must risk his life in order to maintain the existence of his household. He thinks about making a good sale of the grey pony at the horse fair and turning a profit on this sale. Insofar as he is trapped between two different conflicting world views, that is the traditional way of life and modern way of life, he faces some of the cultural tensions which can be found in any culture in transition.

The departure of Bartley also makes Cathleen and Nora uneasy. They talk about the weather and voice the cause of their distress when Nora says that "[t]here's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind" (*RS* 22). However, when Cathleen, the elder daughter, "[f]aced with Bartley's determination to act, she naturally switches her motive from negative opposition to positive support of his determination to go" (Free 164). Cathleen's words also show the apathy of the young towards nature and the living conditions on the island. She sides with Bartley on his going to the Galway Fair since she thinks that it is more logical than staying on the island for the sake of custom or the pressure of the community. Cathleen says: "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over" (*RS* 98). Furthermore, when she talks to

her mother after Bartley leaves, she says: "There's no sense left on any person in a house where an old woman will be talking forever" (*RS* 117). Unlike the women keening for Bartley's death, she continues her life. At the end of the play, she skilfully completes her domestic duties. "Cathleen assumes the dominant role in the family, a role now vacated by the deaths of her last two brothers, and negotiates with the old man for the building of the coffin" (Free 165). She tries to arrange the burial of her brother and speaks to an old man about the practical details of the funeral: "Maybe yourself and Eamon would make a coffin when the sun rises. We have fine white boards herself bought, God help her, thinking Michael would be found, and I have a new cake you can eat while you'll be working" (*RS* 306). These incidences show that the young islanders are ignorant of the dangers of the sea and they have learnt nothing from the deaths of their ancestors. They have a non-traditional attitude towards the values and customs of the island. Remy also suggests that

> [t]hese three young people suffer the doublebinding and cognitive dissonance characteristic of individuals who are being forced out of their folk patterns, and into urban patterns. It is they who show us that the Aran Islanders, the most traditional of Irish peasants, have hardly been insulated against the changes of contemporary culture. (111)

Like Cathleen, Nora and Bartley, the priest on the island is also referred to as young, thus making him inexperienced and ignorant about the conditions on the island. Despite the fact that the young priest does not have a presence on the stage and such a character is not listed in the cast, his name is often quoted by the other characters, especially by the younger sister, Nora. In this regard, Nora becomes the mouthpiece of the priest throughout the play. From Nora's words, it becomes explicit that the villagers have a remarkable respect for the young priest who has a controlling authority on their lives although he never takes part in the action of the play. Robin Skelton's words clarify the position of the young priest: "He is absent physically from the cottage of Maurya just as he is, spiritually, a stranger to her world" (449). In fact the priest "has neither age nor experience [which are] the traditional indices of authority" (Remy 83). Nonetheless, the bundle of the drowned man in Donegal at the beginning of the play is given to him rather than to Maurya in order to identify the victim of the sea. More surprisingly, "Bartley is portrayed as being utterly vulnerable to the whim of the priest: nothing on

the island will make Bartley stay home from the fair, not social pressure, not fraternal responsibility, not the importunings of his mother" (Remy 82). Only can the young priest stop Bartley from going to the horse fair with a single word as he holds an authoritative position in the society. However, he says nothing to hold him back from his journey. In the beginning of the play, the conversation between Nora and Cathleen reveals the apathy of the young priest who is regarded as a representative of the Church:

> CATHLEEN. (*looking out anxiously*) Did you ask him would he stop Bartley going this day with the horses to the Galway fair?
>
> NORA. "I won't stop him,' says he, 'but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute,' says he, 'with no son living." (*RS* 16-20)

It is clear that he does not fulfil the roles attributed to a priest. The islanders are all concerned about Bartley's decision about whether he will go to the fair in this dangerous weather. Nora says: "I heard Eamon Simon and Stephen Pheety and Colum Shawn saying he would go" (*RS* 41). With the assertion that the Almighty God will save Maurya from facing the death of her last son, the young priest does not stop Bartley from sailing to the Galway Fair on the mainland. This incidence reveals the alienation of the priest from the islanders. When the geographical characteristics of the island are taken into consideration, it can be best understood that "[t]o be a man of the island is to be a sailor and to be a sailor is to risk the probability of death" (Remy 84). However, the priest, as a stranger, does not look at the events from the traditional islanders' viewpoint. In the play, Maurya is the only character who ignores the authority and the council of the priest by asserting that "it's little the like of him knows the sea" (241). Thus, as Skelton claims there is a dilemma between the young priest's concept of God and that of Maurya's and the other islanders': "The sea is, indeed, the 'Almighty God' of the play, and older and more formidable spiritual power than that presented by the priest who, it is emphasized, is 'young'" (449). Only the old know the dangers of the sea as they are aware of the struggle of man against nature.

Furthermore, the young cleric seems utterly in opposition to Maurya. Remy suggests that

> [h]e is her opposite on almost every level: he is young, while she is old; he is father, she, mother; he is an outlander, she a woman of the island; she is very much present on stage, he, like the God he invokes, seems utterly transcendent, for he speaks but is not present and acts (or fails to act) but never appears. (81)

It should be underlined that the priest's being young and inexperienced is different from the situation of the other young people in the play. The islanders are half-pagan peasants. Synge quotes from an islander in *The Aran Islands*: "Long ago we used all to be pagans, and the saints used to be coming to teach us about God and the creation of the world" (130). Bourgeois also asserts that "[t]o Synge, the Irish peasant is a latter-day Pagan, on whose old-time heathendom the Christian faith has been artificially and superficially grafted" (90). The presence of pagan customs and beliefs on the island contradicts with the presence of the young Catholic priest. Therefore, his role among the islanders is of importance. As a Christian missionary, he symbolises religious beliefs and values that are not native to the traditional way of the islanders. What is manifested throughout the play is the impotence of Christianity through the role of the young priest. Rictschel draws attention to the characterisation of the young priest from this perspective and states that "[i]n fact, he is a character absent throughout the whole play, which indicates the lack of meaningful or constructive service by the Church to the Irish" (157). Furthermore, the priest could be associated with the modern world as he is not native to the island. In this regard, his urban and non-traditional background is in contrast with the folk ways of the islanders.

Being reared as a member of the Ascendancy may have prevented Synge from comprehending the importance of religion in the lives of Irish people. It has been often argued that the play *Riders to the Sea* is an exception since it displays an appreciation of religion among people on the island. Yet this could not be regarded as a true understanding of religion. In the play even religious authority is given minor importance as reflected through the young priest whose presence on the island reveals "Christianity's new and somewhat unwelcome relationship to this society" (Cusack 228). The priest is given the role of a bridge between the island and continent; yet he is kept off stage throughout the play since he is too alien to the roots of the islanders. Therefore, as Ritschel claims, from the beginning of the play "Synge continued his

assault on Catholicism, criticising its role or lack thereof in the lives of the parishioners — people who through Church's teaching (or colonising) had come to depend on the Church for more than their souls' eternal salvation" (156).

*Riders to the Sea* is a remarkably short play. Yet one cannot deny the play's "achievement in capturing the tragic mood in so brief a time" (Hill 175). The tension of the waiting for the inevitable end is sustained and intensified throughout the play. "The compressed form of the one-act play provided for the tight focus of each piece, allowing the action to unfold in real time and heightening the dramatic quality of Synge's language" (Frawley 16). Sanford Sternlicht states that "[t]he tragedy of *Riders to the Sea* is the most ancient of all, the greatest grief: the death of the young before the old" (71). That Maurya takes the stick that her son Michael had brought from Connemara while going to give her blessing to Bartley indicates the agony of this hard condition. It should be underlined that "[t]he stick is not simply the one Michael brought from Connemara, it is a sign that the order of reality on the island is topsy turvy" (Remy 74). The fact that the basic structure of the society is destroyed is revealed in the play through Maurya's speech:

> MAURYA. [*taking a stick that Nora gives her*] In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that to be old. [*She goes out slowly*] (*RS* 132-35)

Consequently, as a rural-set play *Riders to the Sea* is one of the most frequently produced plays in the Abbey Theatre. Besides, it has been played all over the world since its first production at the Molesworth Hall and considered among the classics. Kopper states that it is "a heavily anthologised play and a universally acclaimed classic of modern drama" (401). Synge looked to the West of Ireland for his inspiration, and the authenticity he found on these islands has been shared with the rest of the world since then. Therefore, the play continues to mesmerise the audiences from different parts of the world with its intensity. The characters of the play are not only the ones living in a particular place or at a particular time. The Aran islanders become the representative of all humanity who face death. Moreover, through these characters, Synge reflects a culture in transition. Therefore, the play should not be regarded as a

play merely dealing with the death of a son since it is a lament to the destiny of a folk. Synge achieved to picture Irish life accurately by offering the audience the real Irish identity inhabiting the western islands of the country. It was the Aran Islands that awakened the genius in Synge who had been living as a recluse. It was also these islands that contributed to the revival of contemporary Irish drama. The play "strikingly exemplifies Synge's unique and felicitous blending of cosmopolitan literature and Irish social experience into a work of heart-rending universal appeal as well as of individual self-expression" (Bourgeois 171). The illustrations of the local colour of these islands together with their inhabitants have a universal appeal and it is Synge who achieves to utter it to generations of theatregoers and readers. Hence, the play turns out to be a romantic laudation of peasant life, yet the regional quality of the play transcends itself and acquires a universal significance.

*Riders to the Sea* is analysed as it presents different portrayals of Irish rural community. Though being written in the beginning of Synge's writing career, it could be regarded as a mature play in terms of his artistic development. However, his development as a dramatist is so great that "[s]cope and humour broaden and deepen successively from play to play" (Fermor 175). As the dramatic exploration of Synge continues, his dramatic technique changes from one-act to two and three act plays. In an attempt to analyse the representation of rural Irish characters in his plays and to evaluate his dramatic development, *The Tinker's Wedding*, a two-act play, will be examined in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER II

## *THE TINKER'S WEDDING* AND THE VAGRANTS OF COUNTY WICKLOW

"— a uniquely disadvantaged group: impoverished, under-educated, often despised and ostracised, they live on the margins of Irish society."[2]

The explanation above belongs to the Economic and Social Research Institute, and it could be a good starting point for the consideration of Irish tinkers[24] represented in Synge's play *The Tinker's Wedding*. In fact, this description of the itinerant population in Ireland appears on a paper in nineteen-eighty six, namely a very long time after the debut of Synge's play. In this respect, it can be regarded as a rather current definition for these people. Yet, such a description substantially remains valid for the tinkers in nineteenth-century Ireland[25]. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "tinker" is "(especially in former times) a person who makes a living by travelling from place to place mending pans and other metal utensils" (1256). Indeed, the term tinker is not the only name to define this travelling population in Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historically, it is possible to encounter a range of terms that have been used to define this vagrant population on the roads. They are also known as "Travelling People" or "Travellers" (Gmelch and Gmelch 225). However, this nomadic Irish traveller minority has been generally referred to as tinkers insofar as tinsmithing was their major occupation.

Tracing the history of the tinkers is difficult. There is no consensus about how tinkers emerged in Ireland in that "[t]he ethnogenesis of Irish tinkers is obscured by a paucity of historical documentation, their own illiteracy, and a curious absence of any folklore about themselves" (Kearns, "Irish Tinkers" 539). There have been various theories about their origins dating back to as early as pre-Christian times. Yet, there is not conclusive data about the tinkers in these early centuries. The American anthropologists

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[2] ESRI, July 1986, Paper no. 131 qtd. in "Travellers in Ireland: An Examination of Discrimination and Racism." n.p. , n.d. Web. 10 June 2012. < http://www.nccri.ie/travellr.html>.

Sharon and George Gmelch provide comprehensive data about the distant past of the tinkers. They state that "[a]s early as pre-Christian times (5th c. and earlier), itinerant whitesmiths working in bronze, gold and silver travelled the Irish countryside making personal ornaments, weapons and horse trappings in exchange for food and lodging" (227). This is the first reference to the existence of the tinkers on Irish soil. The records and materials proving the existence of the tinkers continue to appear through the ages. "By 1175, 'tinkler' and 'tynker' begin appearing in written records as trade or surnames; by 1300, they were common" (227). In the sixteenth century, written sources containing references to the tinkers became available. During this age, certain statutes against vagrants and rovers that prove the existence of tinkers as a distinct group from the sedentary Irish people began to appear. During the reign of King Edward VI (1551-1552), for instance, the tinkers were explicitly named in a statute which proves that they were discriminated and penalised even in those times. The following act was called "An Acte for tynkers and pedlers":

> For as much as it is evident that tynkers, pedlers, and suche like vagrant persons are more hurtful than necessarie to the Common Wealth of this realm, be it therefore ordeyned ... that ... no person or persons commonly called tynker, pedler, or pety chapman shall wander or go from one towne to another or from place to place out of the towne, parishe, or village where suche person shall dwell, and sell punnes, poyntes, laces, gloves, knyves, glasses, topes or any suche like things or use or exercise the trade or occupation of a tynker, except those that shall have a licence from two justices of the peace and then they will be allowed to travel only in the 'circuyte' assigned to them. (qtd. in Jusserand 128)

There were also some references to the tinkers during the Elizabethan times. In 1619 Thomas Gainsford, a soldier in the Irish wars, also stated the widespread existence of "gravers in gold and silver called plain tinkers, who make chalices, harps, buttons for their sleeves, crucifixes, and such-like" (qtd. in Gmelch and Gmelch 227). These references to the existence of the tinkers beginning from the pre-Christian times prove the fact that the tinkers were of Irish origin. Moreover, these references, particularly the acts and the penalties towards these people, also show that the prejudice against the tinkers was deep-rooted in Irish history. "As social outcasts from 'respectable society' they were an ugly blemish on the face of Mother Ireland and were disparaged as a

backward people who were to ‘settle down’ and became wards of the state if they were not to become a threat to the settled social order” (Mac Laughlin 29).

Thus, it is clear that the tinkers originated from the Irish community. “Like the sedentary population they are white, English-speaking, Roman Catholic, and indigenous to Ireland” (Gmelch and Gmelch 226). Still, they are considered as a distinct minority group living on the margins of the settled Irish population. Given that both the settled community and the tinkers were of the same origin, the reasons that lie behind the attitudes of the former towards the latter should be analysed in order to understand the discriminating split between them. It is a fact that both groups evolved separately in the same country. There could be many reasons behind this separation. Kevin C. Kearns suggests that “[m]ost plausible theories trace [the tinkers’] derivation to Irish peasants forced onto roads out of economic desperation following famine, eviction, and persecution” (“Irish Tinkers” 539). Generally, it could be claimed that the tinkers

> became nomadic for four main reasons - economic, social and cultural. Travelers may be direct descendants from those who chose to live outside the circle of Brehon laws, i.e. an ancient body of common law dating from the pre-historic Irish island. Secondly, Travelers could be direct descendants of native Chieftains, dispossessed during the English plantations of the 17th and 18th centuries. Thirdly, it is variously suggested that Travelers could descend from intermarriage between Romany gypsies and Irish peasants. Finally, the last and most agreed-upon theory is that Travelers are descended from displaced peasants and labourers, driven from their land by political and economic upheaval during the Great Famine. (McElwee et al. 106)

As it can be seen, many itinerants had left behind a way of life that was similar to the life of the settled community. Particularly, the period after the Great Famine was almost universally regarded as the main reason for the increase in the itinerant population on the roads. Similarly, Mac Laughlin states that the number of the itinerants “was particularly exacerbated by the decimation of plebeian agrarian society from the late nineteenth century onwards and by the growth of a bourgeois Irish nationalism and clericalism after the Famine” (15). Much as the Irish peasantry had confronted a number of famines throughout the history, the Great Famine of 1845-48 was a culminating point that caused a dramatic decline in the population of Ireland. As stated above, any people died of starvation and famine-related diseases during those years. The remainder either immigrated to the United States, England and other countries or stayed on the roads in

the motherland. In this regard, vagrancy, namely travelling on the roads, was an alternative to starvation and emigration that destroyed the country throughout the nineteenth century. There is a general assumption that tinkers' numbers increased dramatically after the Famine. As Sinéad Ni Shuinéar also states: "Conventional wisdom insists that Irish Travellers essentially dropouts from normal society [and] victims of their own inadequacy or of harsh colonialism, and a relatively new phenomenon, dating back to the Famine or at most to Cromwell" (66). That the tinkers were descended from "sedentary Irish [who] have been forced to adopt a nomadic existence" (225) is also argued by Gmelch and Gmelch:

> Many craftsmen became itinerant when the demand for their services was not great enough in one area to permit them to remain settled. Peasants and labourers were also forced to become itinerant as the result of widespread evictions, unemployment and famine. And occasionally individuals, who because of problems such as alcoholism or illegitimacy were stigmatised by settled society, sought refuge on 'the road'. (225)

During the hard times in the post-Famine period, the tinkers traditionally supported themselves by doing occasional works such as making or mending certain household utensils, pots or cans for the settled communities. There were some traditional trades that were primarily associated with these people. In her Introduction to *'Tinkers' Synge and the Cultural History of the Irish Traveller,* Mary Burke argues the occupations of this itinerant population and states that "[f]or many generations, travellers provided seasonal farm labour, horsetrading, hawking, entertainment, and tinsmithing services to both the urban and rural majority (2). Similarly, Sinéad Ni Shuinéar enumerates the occupations by which the tinkers were able to create a mutual economic exchange with the dwellers around them. According to this, the tinkers were primarily occupied with

> [b]egging, hawking / peddling, fortune-telling, poitin-making, repairing of china, skilled metalwork, selling feathers, making and hawking paper flowers, work in the construction industry, soldiering, fruitselling, harvesting, music, scrap, trading in goats' meat, cattle-dealing, car and lorry dealing, shop-keeping, rags, bottles, horsehair, chimneysweeping, […]. (64)

When the above mentioned occupations are analysed, it could be put forward that "[t]inkers best exploit those occupations which sedentary Irish are either unable or

unwilling to undertake" (Kearns 541). In this regard, it could be argued that the tinkers played a valuable role in the rural economy of the settled Irish population of those times. Since the tinkers occupied an important economic and social role in rural Ireland, they filled certain gaps in economic supply and demand. As Kearns further remarks, "[h]istorically, their relationship with the rural population was one of reciprocity; though occupying an inferior status, they played an important role in the economic and social life of rural Ireland" ("Irish Tinkers" 538). These occupations kept the tinkers in close contact with the sedentary society.

Yet, these occupations failed to dissolve the distinctiveness of the tinkers as a minority group. Since the tinkers were regarded as a despised minority in the socio-economic structure of Ireland, they always became the objects of stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes of the settled Irish population. They were generally considered as "second-class Irish citizens by many within the dominant or settled population" (McElwee et.al 104). Due to their reputation for dishonesty, immorality, theft and drunkenness, many vices were attributed to these people, and they were negatively stereotyped. Kearns suggests that

> [p]rejudicial roots may best be traced to the tinker's history of vagrancy, trespass, scavenging, and socially deviant behaviour. Their opportunistic and manipulistic character is a further source of suspicion and fear. Attitudes of settled Irish tend to vary according to the perceived cause of the tinker's plight. Some charitably see them as 'God's poor,' pawns of a neglectful society, and deserving of compassion and assistance. Others view them rather innocuously as a pitiable lot and general nuisance. Many, however, dispassionately condemn them as social aberrations, their encampments a visual and moral blight upon respectable communities. ("Irish Tinkers" 548)

It can be observed that the settled community had various views about the tinkers, most of which were primarily negative. Although the tinkers were indigenous to Ireland, they were continually othered by the settled community who opposed their presence among them. Michael Hayes makes a resemblance between the othering processes of the tinkers by the settled communities and the othering of the Irish by the British. He states that the tinkers "have been 'othered' in Ireland in a fashion uncannily similar to the way

in which the Irish and other indigenous peoples were ‘othered’ as part of the English colonial project” (137).

The British continually expressed the racial inferiorities of the Irish race since they always thought that the Irish were not their equals. “The Irish were a constant and undeniable presence, a group that was inside the political union, yet not ‘one of us’” (De Nie 269). Their prejudice towards the Irish manifested itself in many grounds. In other words, the othering process of the Irish was observed in different categories. In terms of religion, for instance, the British thought that the Catholic Irish were inferior to the Protestant British. Besides, the British also sought scientific evidence to prove the inferiority of the Irish. When the views of Darwinism became prevalent on the continent in the nineteenth century, the British found a scientific explanation to demonstrate their superiority over the Irish. “Scientists and social scientists measured skulls, jawbones, and other parts of the human anatomy and then ranked primates in such a way that Anglo-Saxons were on top and the Irish near the bottom, just above apes and blacks” (Hachey and McCaffrey 112). Moreover, many racist terms were developed to persuade people to consider the Irish as an inferior race. “From the earliest of times, nomadism, beggary, backwardness, superstition, anarchy, sexual profligacy, and violence have been portrayed as general characteristics of the Irish by those who ‘othered’ them” (Hayes 138).

Assimilating the Irish was the main aim of the British throughout history. Considered in terms of colonial discourse, these racial, cultural and historical differences become of high importance. According to Homi Bhabha, “[t]he objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (70). This definition could be applied to the marginalisation of the tinkers within the Irish society. Historically, the tinkers have collectively been subjected to discrimination and stereotyping as a marginalised group by the settled community. The suspicion towards and mistrust of the tinkers resulted in their social and physical isolation, thus establishing boundaries between the two groups in the society. These boundaries became so apparent that the Irish population which was gaining momentum in terms of nationalism in the nineteenth century could not bear seeing the distinctive identities of

the tinkers. In fact, the Irish nationalists traditionally claimed to embrace the population of the whole island, particularly of the West which was untouched by the British colonialism. Yet, it was impossible for them to view the travelling minority as part of the Irish nation. Mac Laughlin states that the tinkers' "will to travel and their propensity to homelessness were used to hide the very presence of 'tinkers' in an increasingly bourgeois society which struggled for international recognition in an age when these were the attributes of 'inferior peoples'" (29). This was the point that the Irish would use to justify their treatments of the tinkers. As a result of the nationalistic movements in the nineteenth century, Ireland began to construct a new identity which would prove that the Irish were different from the stereotypes created by the British. In this regard, the vagrants, namely the tinkers, could be regarded as the "degenerate types" who would never serve the ideals of the nationalists. Thus, the Irish wished to jettison the tinkers within this newly nationalist Irish society. In order to do this, some of the negative characteristics used in the othering process of the Irish by the British were all transferred onto a new othered — the tinkers. For instance, "Irish attitudes towards 'tinkers' and travellers in the nineteenth century were certainly influenced by social Darwinism" (Mac Laughlin 25). As mentioned above, this is very akin to the stereotyping of the Irish by the British after the emergence of Darwinism. Thus, it could be suggested that the Irish assumed the role of the British towards the tinkers and the tinkers superseded the Irish in this othering process. Michael Hayes defines the position of the tinkers in this othering process:

> In the case of Irish travellers, the situation is more complicated because they are framed within a reductionist discourse that operates on two levels. On the one hand, like all Irish people, they are subject to the cultural hegemony that characterises British stereotyping of the Irish. But as a marginalised and stigmatised group within Irish society, they also become a projection for those stereotypes that the dominant Irish population transfer onto the subaltern groups in their midst. (138-9)

The tinkers confronted a complex situation as they were not only discriminated by the British but also by the Irish. The marginalisation and discrimination of the itinerant population that was observed early in the history of the country reached its peak in the nineteenth century. Mac Laughlin states that "the roots of anti-Traveller racism are deeply embedded in the social fabric and agrarian society of nineteenth-century Ireland"

(30). From this time onwards, the tinkers began to be regarded as a minority ethnic group within the settled community of Ireland.

What constitutes an ethnic group is sometimes difficult to define. There are many definitions and comments written from a variety of theoretical approaches. In order to understand the relevance of the term ethnicity for the tinkers, how this term is used should be examined thoroughly. To begin with the definition of this term is necessary in order to understand what ethnicity means. *The Oxford English Dictionary* renders "ethnicity" as "the fact of belonging to a particular race" (427). In this respect, it could be asserted that in general terms, an ethnic group is a minority in a larger society whose members share certain characteristics. Here, biological characteristics or race is applied in eliminating people into categories. Yet, this is not enough for a thorough explanation of ethnicity owing to the fact that "[i]n biological sciences, most scholars have long recognised that the classifications that are popularly referred to as 'races' are rendered almost meaningless in the light of genetic discoveries relating to human DNA" (Prentiss 6). When ethnicity is solely associated with race, it takes on a negative connotation, thus leading to different ideologies such as fascism.

The term "ethnicity", in fact, was first used in a 1941 sociological study by W. Llyod Warner and Paul S. Lunt. They rendered "ethnicity" as an alternative to racial grouping based on biologically inherited traits. Hence, the definition of ethnicity given above should be redefined as it is "a social grouping or form of peoplehood that is marked by traits that are perceived to be culturally inherited" (Prentiss 7). As a matter of fact, the definition of the ethnic group made by Warner and Lunt for the ethnic communities in America also throws light upon the controversy whether the Irish tinkers should be defined as an ethnic minority or not. Accordingly,

> [e]thnicity may be evaluated almost entirely upon a biological basis or upon purely social characteristics. Negroes tend to be at the first extreme, since they are most physically variant of all groups in the community, and the Irish at the other extreme since they are most like the native white stock. (Warner and Lunt 73)

As can be seen, ethnic identities distinguishing members of one group from the rest of society are generally based on biological differences such as skin colour or origin. "Occasionally, however, distinct ethnic groups emerge from within culturally homogenous populations" (Gmelch and Gmelch 225). This is the case with the Irish tinkers in the nineteenth century. The tinkers are "indigenous to their country of residence and identical to its people in terms of colour, language and religion" (Gmelch and Gmelch 225). As mentioned previously in the beginning of this chapter, they existed on Irish soil from time immemorial. They did not arrive from abroad. "That they are of indigenous origin is [also] supported by the fact that all families possess Irish surnames, many still residing in areas occupied by their eponymous ancestors" (Kearns, "Irish Tinkers" 539). In other words, the Irish tinkers share similar characteristics with the sedentary population of Ireland. In this regard, it can be proposed that the tinkers are native to Ireland, yet they constitute a distinct ethnic minority within the majority of society.

In order to overcome the difficulty in accepting the term ethnicity when applied to the tinkers in Ireland, the situation of these people should be analysed from the standpoint of the criteria of ethnicity. There are certain characteristics that allow the tinkers to be identified within the generally accepted criteria by which an ethnic minority group is classified and distinguished from the settled community. According to the anthropologist Fredrik Barth,

> [t]he term ethnic group is generally understood in anthropological literature to designate a population which is self-perpetuating, shares fundamental cultural values realised in overt unity of cultural form, makes up a field of communication and interaction, and has a population which defines itself, and is defined by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order. (10-11)

The ethnicity of the tinkers was partly a consequence of the fact that these people married within their own groups. This meets Barth's first criterion of ethnicity that claims that the tinkers were self-perpetuating. In order to examine this, a "Tinker Questionnaire" devised by the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) in 1952 could be used as evidence. This questionnaire, though it was carried out after the production of *The Tinker's Wedding*, provides the necessary information about the marriage customs of

the tinkers that were still in usage when the play was written. A respondent from County Mayo in this survey states that "[i]n their society, among the people, the tinkers are a very exclusive set. They have never merged into the fabric of the general population through marriage or affinity" (qtd. in Hayes 150). This is absolutely true of the tinkers, for marriages were primarily arranged between partners of the same lineage as it is also portrayed through the marriage of Sarah Casey and Michael Byrne in *The Tinker's Wedding*. Insofar as there was a huge distinction among the tinkers and the settled community, a member of one community would not consider being a member of the other community through marriage. Such a marriage would be an undesirable kind of union for both sides. Sinéead Ni Shuinéar argues that the tinkers' marriage within their communities could also be regarded as a reason that makes the tinkers physically different from the settled population of Ireland. According to Ni Shuinéar, "[p]hysical distinctiveness in the broadest sense is not synonymous with identity, but intra-marriage tends to keep the two pretty closely linked" (55). Likewise, Kearns has a similar approach to the marriage of the tinkers within their communities as he claims that in this way the tinkers' common identity "was gradually reinforced by endogamy and physical isolation from settled Irish" ("Irish Tinkers" 539).

The tinkers also meet the second criterion of ethnic group identity — shared fundamental cultural values or behavioural patterns that are different from those of the homogenous society. As a distinct group, the tinkers have a unique culture. Their practices are not carried out by the settled population, thus distinguishing the tinkers from the settled Irish. Ni Shuinéar claims that the cultural difference is the concomitant of these shared cultural values (55). The values of the tinkers are

> self-employment, occupational flexibility, priority of social obligations based on kinship over everything else, nomadism as a functional corollary of the above and as a value in itself, strict segregation of pure and impure, versatility, adaptability, and skill in the delicate art of living among and supplying the market demands of the non-Traveller majority, without losing their Traveller identity. (Ni Shuinéar 55)

Moreover, as an etnhic group the tinkers have their own field of communication and interaction which is also among the criteria of Barth's definition of an ethnic group.

"The fact that they live on the periphery of population centers, physically segregated, means communication with the house-dwelling population is restricted" (Gmelch and Gmelch 226). The customs and habits of the tinkers vary considerably from those of the settled communities. According to this,

> [the tinkers] were seen to actively reject many of the cultural norms of the non-traveller or "mainstream" community. Their danger to the social order was made manifest in their perceived tendency toward exclusivity and separateness — in the use of separate forms of social organisation, coeval customs pertaining to marriage, a "private" language, and the use of ritualised fighting. (Hayes 145)

Except for some purposeful dealings such as selling or mending certain goods, most of the Irish shun interaction with the tinkers in nearly all areas of social life since they are viewed with fear and suspicion. Thus, this limited interaction between the tinkers and the settled people has automatically contributed to the tinkers' sense of separateness and isolation.

Also, the language barriers between the tinkers and the settled population create the social isolation of the tinkers in society. The communication between the tinkers and the settled people were mostly carried in Gammon, sometimes called Cant, which is "a distinct argot […] unintelligible to the settled Irish population" (Crawford and Gmelch 322). From this explanation, it is clear that using a particular language produced a sense of isolation among the Irish. Likewise, Gammon is also resembled to "a kind of schoolboys' backslang deliberately made up out of bits of scrambled Irish in order to conceal skulduggery from decent settled folk" (Ni Shuinéar 58). Thus, a tinker's identity is best revealed when he or she speaks in his own language, namely Gammon.

Finally, the tinkers also meet the last criterion of Barth's definition of ethnicity insofar as they were identified as a separate distinct ethnic group in Ireland. Ni Shuinéar argues that the tinkers "have a name for themselves as a group, and they know exactly who does and does not belong to it, and why" (59). Likewise, the settled population had also special terms for the tinkers in order to define them as distinct from their own community.

A new nation and a novel identity were being created and there was no place for the tinkers in this "nation-building Ireland" (Mac Laughlin, "Irish Tinkers" 29). Yet, there were a few Irish writers who sympathised with the vagrants and thought that the portrayal of the poor itinerants was also essential in constructing a new nation and an identity. Undoubtedly, Synge was one of them. Moreover, he was probably the most influential proponent of the tinker figure in nineteenth-century Irish literature. "He paid the greatest respect to tinkers and vagrants, and paid homage to the lowest rungs of that society, to people whom many considered dispensable in the new Ireland" (Mac Laughlin, "Irish Tinkers" 33). In this respect, he objected to the trend of deeming the tinkers as inferior people and defended them. He unearthed them for the construction of a new Irish national identity. He set out to explore the role of the tinker in nineteenth-century Ireland. It could be suggested that the situation of the tinkers is not peripheral to the play *The Tinker's Wedding* but central to its analysis of the itinerant people in nineteenth-century Ireland. In her Introduction Mary Burke states that

> […] Synge was at the heart of the Revival's valorisation of the tinker as an embodiment of exotic indigeneity: he depicted various peoples of the road again and again in his drama and prose, and his construct is a lodestone of literature on the nomadic theme. (10)

Despite the fact that *The Tinker's Wedding* has usually been considered to be one of Synge's later plays, it was actually one of the first plays the writer ever conceived in his life since the play was written concurrently with his one-act plays *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen.* Moreover, the two-act comedy *The Tinker's Wedding* was originally written in one-act, in a similar fashion to these early two plays. However, Synge subsequently revised the play and expanded the draft from one act to two. He wrote in his note to the Preface of the play: "'*The Tinker's Wedding'* was first written a few years ago, about the time I was working at '*Riders to the Sea'*, and 'In *The Shadow of the Glen'*. I have re-written it since" (28). In fact, this revision in the play can be considered as a general characteristic of Synge as he "was a fastidious writer and a severe critic of his own work" (Price, *Synge* 127).

*The Tinker's Wedding* has always been considered as a neglected play of Synge's. Many critics discuss the quality of the play. According to Alan Price, for instance, it is "the

poorest of Synge's plays" (*Synge* 127). Similarly, David H. Greene claims that the play is "generally labelled an ugly duckling" (*Synge* 824). As it can be seen, the play received more negative criticism and little attention when compared with Synge's other plays. Especially after the great success of *Riders to the Sea*, such a play did not please the audiences and the critics. Therefore, it could be put forward that "[t]he play is undeniably Synge's weakest, yet there is value in considering it in relation to Synge's other early plays, for imperfect though it may be, it demonstrates distinct progress both in Synge's search and in his stagecraft" (Oliver 140). *The Tinker's Wedding* is of high importance as it could be regarded as a link between the one-act plays of his early career and the three-act play of his maturity. As for its content, once again, it allows Synge to reflect another aspect of the rural Irish population.

Synge tried to contruct the Irish identity through his plays. Again, in *The Tinker's Wedding*, he focused on depicting the Irish identity, but this time he chose a different aspect of it and focused on the vagrant tinkers who live on the roadsides in Ireland. The tinkers were regarded as the other in an increasingly nationalist society since they rejected the norms of that society. Therefore, there was some criticism against the portrayals of these people on stage because the Irish could not bear such images while striving to form a common identity for the nation. Spehn's argument could be regarded as a reply to such criticism:

> It is true that tramps and tinkers are held in ill-repute by the ordinary peasant and that they are not representative of the usual lives of the rural Irishman, but Synge was not presenting a social document to the world, and as an artist he should be allowed the freedom accorded other writers. Synge was not interested so much in the Irish peasant as he existed in Synge's time, so it was quite natural that he turned to tinkers and tramps who, in their primitively simple lives, had kept the spirit of the Gael of ancient days. Thus his characters may lack some of the traits of the modern Irish, but on the whole they are expressive of the Celtic nature. (73)

The tinkers' way of living helped Synge find the fabric of Irish rural life for *The Tinker's Wedding*. However, he was not sure whether his portrayal of the tinkers was appropriate for the Abbey Stage or not. In a letter to Molly Allgood on 28 November 1907, Synge reveals his doubts about staging his play: "The play is good, I think, but it looks mighty shocking in print" (*Collected Letters* 89). Moreover, in another letter

which Synge wrote in I906 to his friend Max Meyerfeld, he said: "We have never played it here as they say it is too immoral for Dublin" (*Collected Letters* 148). These letters support the belief that even Synge was well aware of the fact that his play might shock the Dublin audience with its the portrayal of the tinkers.

Since Synge realised the possibilities of offense to the clergy in his play, he already apologised to the Irish clergy when he began to write a preface for the play. In the first draft of the Preface to the play, Synge "makes the point that anti-clerical humour does not betoken atheism or apostasy" (Kiberd, *Synge* 145). Hence, he offers his apologies to the priesthood in his Preface which was highly defensive in its tone:

> "I do not think these country clergy, who have so much humour, and so much heroism when they face typhus or dangerous seas for the comfort of their people on the coasts of the west, will mind being laughed at for half an hour without malice, as the clergy in every Roman Catholic country were laughed at through ages that had real religion." (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 194)

This version of the Preface written by Synge to *The Tinker's Wedding* was never published because "[…] apparently feeling that the apology really only begged the question, [Synge] crossed it out" (Greene and Stephens 194). As a result of his decision, Synge wrote another Preface in order to prevent the trouble that his play could cause and the reactions that would be directed at him. In this new version of the Preface to the play, Synge does not mention the clergy anymore. Instead, he states that the tinkers will not mind to be staged:

> In the greater part of Ireland, however, the whole people, from the tinkers to the clergy, have still a life, and view of life, that are rich and genial and humorous. I do not think that these country people, who have so much humour themselves, will mind being laughed at without malice, as the people in every country have been laughed at in their own comedies. (28)

Synge was right in his anticipation that the tinkers would not mind to be the subjects of a play that reflected their vigorous way of living. Yet, it was too optimistic to expect the Church to be tolerant on the delicate issue of many anti-Catholic elements and assaults on priesthood the play included. In fact, the Dublin audience had already showed its

hostility towards Synge due to his earlier plays. The peasant figure in his rural setting became an important figure for the nationalists since the growth of nationalist ideals. "Representing the nation by means of a single character implies speaking for the nation" (Vandevelde 111). Considered in this way, Synge's characters became much more important as they carried the responsibility of representing the true Irish identity. The nationalists argued that Ireland deserved a more decent representation with its land and its people because there was the widespread belief that "the new Ireland was to be built not only by, but also for the stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves of rural Ireland" (Mac Laughlin 30). Since the nationalists could not see such portrayals befitting the new identity of the Irish on the stage, they regarded both Synge and his plays as un-Irish.

In *The Tinker's Wedding*, on the other hand, "cultural nationalists […] were not troubled by the slur upon Irish identity suggested by traveller characters, despite the similarities in their renderings" (Hynes 153). In spite of the fact that the characters in the play challenge the conventions of the society like some of the characters in Synge's other plays, these negative representations were not stressed too much, and only the portrayal of the Priest was seen as a cause of enragement by the audience. Hynes states that Synge's "use of Irish travellers also illustrates his concerns about the reification of a narrow, nationalist version of idealised Irishness: the lack of reaction to the stereotypes of Traveller characters in *The Tinker's Wedding* reflects the assumption that Travellers were not 'Irish'" (145). For instance, Synge's female characters, Nora Burke and Pegeen Mike, in *The Shadow of Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World*, respectively, generated extensive protests due to their willingness to run off with a man whom they did not know. These portrayals were regarded as decadent by the audience as they seemingly associated these women with adultery. *The Tinker's Wedding*, too, has a controversial female character called Sarah Casey who wants to legitimise her relationship to Michael Byrne. If she cannot achieve her aim through marriage to this man, she plans to go off with another man called Jaunting Jim. She admits this intention in the play explicitly. The old tinker woman Mary Byrne also states that Sarah is "making whisper-talk with one man or another man along by the road" (*TW* I. 287). However, Sarah's case is not treated in the same manner while the portrayals of Nora and Pegeen were seen as a libel on Irish womanhood. Since Sarah Casey was regarded

as a tinker woman, "[h]er loose sexual morality [was regarded as] a characteristic frequently attributed to the traveller woman" (Hynes 159).

Although the representation of women in *The Tinker's Wedding* was not regarded as a libel on Irish women as in other plays, the play could not escape harsh criticism. As a result of the play's representation of Synge's typical non-religious attitude and the censorship of the Abbey directorate, *The Tinker's Wedding* was not performed in the Abbey Theatre in Synge's lifetime. Owing to the fact that the audience of the Abbey Theatre was largely Catholic, it was feared that the representation of the priest could provoke outrage among them. Irish audiences were not ready to see a play that was in contrast to their traditional way of living. William Butler Yeats admits that the Abbey Theatre censored the play due to the hostile reactions that it might arouse in the public: "There is a play of Mr Synge's which we refused to produce at the Abbey, because we considered it might give offense to the religious feeling in Ireland" (qtd. in Dean 76). Similarly, in her book called *Our Irish Theatre,* Lady Augusta Gregory reveals how the play was judged as unsuitable for the national stage by religious and social forces. She says: "[…] we have refused plays that we thought would hurt Catholic religious feeling. We refused, for instance, to produce Synge's *Tinker's Wedding*, much as we uphold his work, because a drunken priest made ridiculous appears in it" (91).

In fact, the censor on *The Tinker's Wedding* which was made explicit by the two eminent figures of the Abbey Theatre was interesting because the avarice of the clerics was previously mentioned by Douglas Hyde in his *Religious Songs of Connacht* (1906), which is a collection of Gaelic poems and stories as well as other charms related with Irish folklore. It is very likely that Synge was echoing the poem "The Lout and his Mother." The image of the priest tied up in a bag is clear in both works:

> Sure if you were dead to-morrow morning
> And I were to bring you a priest tied up in a bag,
> He would not read a Mass for you without hand-money.
> (qtd. in Kiberd, *Synge* 143)

Hence, the decision of the notables of the Abbey Theatre seems extremely contradictory. The quotation below questions Lady Gregory and Yeats' rejection of the production of the play and reveals the underlying reasons of such a decision:

> It is ironic that the very scene which Yeats feared might outrage the Gaelic Leaguers was itself based on an incident taken from a Gaelic poem, published by Douglas Hyde, the President of the League. The folk could tolerate the idea of violence to a priest as long as it was kept on a verbal level; but to have this violence enacted physically on stage was quite another matter, so Yeats's caution was justified. (Kiberd, *Synge* 144)

In line with Kiberd's view, Karen Vandevelde also argues why T*he Tinker's Wedding* was turned down by the Abbey Theatre as unsuitable for Dublin audiences. And this argument also seems reasonable since plays produced on the national stage are "perceived differently than plays staged in the commercial theaters, or books read in the privacy of one's home. National drama fulfilled a prestigious, exemplary role in Ireland; there was a consensus that "authentic" peasant drama offered the best reflection of national life" (120). Hence, *The Tinker's Wedding* was regarded as undermining the associated ideals of Irish identity and religion in Synge's time. In addition, even the later generations continued to reject the production of the play on the national stage in Ireland. This proves that Yeats's caution was so right that even the future spectators attending the national theatre demanded idealised representations of Irish rural life like their ancestors.

*The Tinker's Wedding* was first produced on November 11, 1909 by the Afternoon Theatre Company at His Majesty's Theatre in London. And, "[t]he play took sixty-four years to get to the Abbey stage, only reaching it on 26 April 1971, when it was well received by audiences" (Burke 11). It is also interesting that the debut of the play on the Irish stage coincides with the centenary of Synge's birth.

It could be beneficial to analyse the source of the play that was harshly criticised by the Irish in order to prove that Synge was actually like a mirror reflecting the origins of Irish people in a way hitherto unattempted. Synge produced two prose works during his lifetime and they are both valuable works as they provide sources for most of his plays

and poems. In addition to his first book *The Aran Islands,* Synge wrote *In Wicklow and West Kerry* (1912), which, like the former book, constitutes a source for his plays and poems. While drawing *The Aran Islands* in *Riders to the Sea*, he made use of *In Wicklow and West Kerry* in *The Tinker's Wedding*. Synge was a foreigner among the islanders on the Aran, but he knew the Wicklow countryside all his life. His interest in the folklore of County Wicklow was aided by his sojourns to the region with his family when he was a child. According to Grene, what Synge did for the Aran Islands, he also wanted to do something similar for County Wicklow ("Synge" 701). It was the place where he spent most of his youth and became acquainted with the vagrants.

*In Wicklow and West Kerry* is a finely organised book telling about Synge's observations and experiences in Wicklow. Synge comes from a well-known County Wicklow family, and, in fact, he was at odds with his family in terms of politics and religion throughout his life. But he had also close relations with the family members. As a result, the Synges would always spend their summers in County Wicklow.[26] As a result, Synge acquired his deep understanding of the Wicklow peasants and tinkers through his first-hand experience in County Wicklow. "In his summers in Wicklow Synge lived a double life, the social life of the family in which he played a full part and the life of the imagination slowly transmuted into writing" (Grene, "Synge" 698). The family members were all together most of the time. During his visits to Wicklow, he came into close contact with the Wicklow peasantry, and particularly with the itinerant people on the roads. In his excursions to the countryside Synge was either in company of his family or friends. "Yet he looked at Wicklow as they would never have done" (Grene, "Synge" 698). These summer visits and journeys enabled him to collect material about the Wicklow life of his own time and this was to be the essence of his plays that reflected the local colour of this County. Through preoccupation with the odd rather than the ordinary people of the society, Synge produced four plays about County Wicklow. His first autobiographical piece *When the Moon Has Set* (1900), *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), *The Tinker's Wedding* (1909) and *The Well of the Saints* (1905) could be categorised as Synge's plays that concentrate on a particular district of County Wicklow. In all of these plays, Synge uses familiar local people of the region as his models. While illustrating the lives of these people, Synge shows his ability as a dramatist because "[o]ne of the intriguing features of Synge's Wicklow plays is their

combination of specificity and universality, of the locally realised and the purely imagined" (Grene, "Synge" 709).

*In Wicklow and West Kerry*, Synge's accounts of life in Wicklow include many incidences and observations about the peasants of the region. Yet, Synge's special interest in those who are different from those accepted by the social norms is explicit. Spehn argues that

> Synge's imagination and longing for the primitive were stirred by the tramp and tinkers he met in his travels. These types were abundant in Wicklow and it is likely that in his home county, as a boy, he became acquainted with these colourful people who, in turn, roused the sardonic caustic humour of Sarah Casey and Michael Byrne […]. (71)

From the quotation above, Synge's profound enthusiasm for the derelict people can be understood. Similarly, Grene suggests that "[a]gain and again in the Wicklow essays Synge's admiring attention is given to those whom the community disregard or dislike" ("Synge" 705). This close interest is best seen in Synge's first essay of *In Wicklow and West Kerry*. It is called "The Vagrants of Wicklow" in which he claims that Wicklow is a favourite district of the vagrants of Ireland. Here, the nature of Synge's admiration of the difference of these people from the ordinary peasants is made clear:

> Their abundance has often been regretted; yet in one sense it is an interesting sign, for wherever the labourer of a country has preserved his vitality, and begets an occasional temperament of distinction, a certain number of vagrants are to be looked for. In the middle classes the gifted son of a family is always the poorest — usually a writer or artist with no sense for speculation — and in a family of peasants, where the average comfort is just over penury, the gifted son sinks also, and is soon a tramp on the roadside. (1)

As can be understood from the quotation above, Synge associates himself with the vagrants of the roads who are seen as outcasts among the settled community of Ireland. Grene suggests that Synge is probably thinking about himself when he speaks about "the gifted son of a family" in his essay ("Synge" 705). Synge's associating himself with the tinkers is evident in the correspondence with his fiancé where he used to sign himself as a tramp. "He commonly signed," as Murray points out, "his love letters to Molly Allgood, 'Ever your Tramp', or 'Your old Tramp', a code related to Molly's

having played Nora [in *The Shadow of the Glen*] at the Abbey early in 1906" (76). Like the tramps in his plays, Synge contrived to have a life free from the restrictions of the community he lived in. He was at odds with the ideals of the society and nation, which finds a correlation in his prose works and plays. Thus, all his essays in *In Wicklow and West Kerry* reveal that "Synge in Wicklow was preoccupied with the old, the odd and the mad"[27] (Grene, "Synge" 707).

In his analysing the odd and the derelict as well as their lifestyles, the tinkers that Synge calls 'vagrants' come into prominence. Like all of Synge's plays, the basic plot of *The Tinker's Wedding* derives from folk stories of Irish culture. In fact, the play represents a dramatisation of folk stories told *In Wicklow and West Kerry*. In the first essay of this prose work "The Vagrants of Wicklow", a man "on the side of a mountain to the east of Aughavanna, in Wicklow" tells his observations about the tinkers he saw (Synge 4). He mentions the vigorous lifestyle and the marriage customs of the roaming tinkers and tramps. He says that one time he saw fifty of them on the road and "[t]hey are gallous lads for walking through the world" and one of these lads "would swap the woman he had with one from another man, with as much talk as if you'd be selling a cow" (Synge, *In Wicklow* 5). The second source Synge would use in his play is the tale of tinkers bargaining with a priest to marry them for money and a tin can. The story Synge heard from a herder when he was at a Wicklow fair is recounted in "At a Wicklow Fair". Synge tells the story that stirred his imagination:

> One time he and his woman went up to a priest in the hills and asked him would he wed them for half a sovereign, I think it was. The priest said it was a poor price, but he'd wed them surely if they'd make him a tin can along with it. "I will, faith," said the tinker, "and I'll come back when it's done." They went off then, and in three weeks they came back, and they asked the priest a second time would he wed them. "Have you the tin can?" said the priest. "We have not," said the tinker; "we had it made at the fall of night, but the ass gave it a kick this morning the way it isn't fit for you at all." "Go on now," says the priest. "It's a pair of rogues and schemers you are, and I won't wed you at all." They went off then, and they were never married to this day. (*In Wicklow* 44)

It is explicit that Synge modelled his play on these anecdotes "whose simple situations left the author's free spirit free to create at will within the basic outlines" (Kiberd, *Synge*

28). Nevertheless, he significantly altered some details of the original folktale because he was aware that such a story was not enough for a two-act play that would be presented on the stage. For instance, the reason why the tinkers want to get married is not stressed in the original tale. However, Synge focuses on this point through the argument between the Priest and Sarah Casey since

> while the original story emphasised the roguery of the tinkers and only incidentally, if at all, the avarice of the priest, his purpose was to demonstrate the superiority of the tinkers' way of life and their 'natural' religion to that of the priest and the Church which he represents. (Benson, *Synge* 83)

As can be deduced from the excerpt taken from the original text above, it is clear that Synge displayed his skill as a writer in altering the original source into a play suitable for the stage. He added, for instance, certain characters like Mary Byrne and deepened the characteristics of the Priest while retaining the basic outline of the folk tale. He also changed certain incidents in the play; for instance the excuse for the lack of the can is an ass in the original tale. However, it is Mary Byrne who takes it to buy alcohol in the play. In fact, this small detail is worth noticing. The old tinker woman steals the aforesaid can in order to swap it for a drink. This incidence validates the established prejudices about the tinkers. Accordingly, a tinker is a thief or an alcoholic; namely he commits all the things related with moral corruption in society. And Synge is able to illustrate this negative bias towards the tinkers through attributing meaning to a simple can. In this respect, the brilliantly drawn portraits of these characters have turned out to be vehicles through whom Synge conveyed his view about life and society to the audience.

Like Synge's other plays, *The Tinker's Wedding* also depicts the Irish peasantry. However, this time Synge does not represent the settled common people of his country. Instead, he represents a peripatetic community rather than a settled community in Ireland. Thus, the characters change from the fishermen of the Aran Islands to the tinkers of the County Wicklow. Deborah Fleming asserts that "[i]n all of J. M. Synge's plays except *Riders to the Sea*, the heroes reject the 'respectable' life offered them by society and community" (139). The characterisation of *The Tinker's Wedding* is a good example for this. In *Riders to the Sea*, the characters are isolated from civilisation due to

their living conditions on a remote and isolated island. In *The Tinker's Wedding*, on the other hand, the geographical conditions are not the reason for the characters' isolation and alienation.[28]

*The Tinker's Wedding* is set in County Wicklow. The character list consists of a tinker called Michael Byrne, his old mother named Mary Byrne, Michael's girlfriend Sarah Casey and a priest whose name is not listed in the list. Sarah capriciously wants to legitimise her relationship with Michael although he is not as willing as Sarah for this union. When the Priest comes walking along the road, they request that he marry them. After some discussion, the Priest says that they should pay one pound for the wedding ceremony. However, Michael and Sarah do not have a pound and Sarah says: "Where would the like of us get a pound, your reverence?" (*TW* I. 141) Thus, they bargain with him. Finally, the unnamed priest accepts to marry them providing that he is paid ten shillings and gifted a gallon can: "Let you get a crown along with the ten shillings and the gallon can, Saran Casey, and I will wed you so" (*TW* I. 171-2). But, the Priest stipulates that this tin can should be hand-made by the prospective groom. The agreement between the tinker couple and the Priest is hereby made. However, it is nullified when the groom's mother, Mary Byrne, secretly sells the tins in exchange for alcohol. She puts the empty bottles into the bundle which contains the cans. The next day, Sarah gives the bundle to the priest. Upon discovering the empty bottles, the priest gets very angry and throws the ten shillings down on the ground. He refuses to wed Sarah and Michael as he thinks that they have tried to deceive him. They exchange insulting words. Sarah and Michael get very disappointed and angry. As a consequence, they bind and gag the priest. Michael threatens him with the ass's reins. They even think of killing him in order to prevent his going to the police because "[t]o the tinkers the police represent social brutality; and the menace of the priest is uttered behind the shield of such social authority, while the tinkers are defenceless, apart from their reliance on the violence of their fellow tinkers" (Wakamatsu 72). Thus, they release him when he shouts for the police. They make him promise not to inform the police. The priest accepts their offer, but begins to utter a Latin malediction at the three tinkers while they are escaping. At the end of the play, the stage directions state that "[t]hey rush out, leaving the Priest master of the situation" (*TW* II. 362). "Those directions imply that even though Sarah has escaped, the priest and all that he represents — middle class

propriety and hypocrisy, the restriction of women's freedoms — have ultimately won" (Hynes 161). Having realised the futility of the desire to legitimise their status in society through marriage, the tinkers are restored to their heathen and natural world.

The "obscure existential uncertainty" (Wakamatsu 65) of the young tinker woman Sarah Casey, who is one of the most unconventional heroines of Synge, is the cause of the events in *The Tinker's Wedding.* Her desire to marry Michael with whom she has been living for years precipitates the action. Robin Skelton defines Sarah as one of Synge's "rebellious heroines whose passionate imaginations will not allow them to rest" (46). Sarah is a tinker who does not have a social status of her own in society. She tries to convince the reluctant Michael to marry her by threatening him to be with Jaunting Jim. If Michael does not want to marry her, she says she would "have a right to be going off to the rich tinkers do be travelling from Tibradden to the Tara Hill; for it'd be a fine life to be driving with young Jaunting Jim" (*TW* I. 30-3). In fact, Sarah's sudden desire to get married is not usual for a woman of her kind and she states different reasons for her wish. In Act I, she admits that such a desire to get married is related with the arrival of spring time that affects her emotions enormously. As she admits: "[…] but the spring-time is a queer time, and it's queer thoughts maybe I do think at whiles" (*TW* I. 24-5). Here she reveals the fact that it is a beautiful spring day that awakens her feelings and leads her to dream of a new life. Yet, this life would surely be a more respectable and decent life. As Price suggests, "Sarah's haste to get married over before anyone knows of it shows that she is aware that she is doing something that people of her kind would consider strange and unnatural" (*Synge* 128). However, Wakamatsu approaches Sarah's wish of marriage from a different perspective and does not regard it as an absurd decision by claiming that the tinkers' "easy-going life-style conceals their subconscious envy and resentment of the social system that degrades them" (66).

The second act of the play seems to confirm the latter opinion about Sarah's wish for marriage. According to this, the real reason for her wish to get married is revealed in Act II when she admits that she wants to acquire the respectability that belongs to the women of the settled communities. It becomes clear that she longs for gaining a proper place among the society, and marriage is a means which will bestow her this respectability. She says: "I'll be married now in short a while; and from this day there will be no one have a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans in Wicklow or

Wexford or the city of Dublin itself" (*TW* II. 109-10). This speech suggests that Sarah regards her occupation of selling tin cans as humiliating, and she wants to have a decent life in society by marrying Michael Byrne. However, he does not want to marry her: "[…] [I]sn't it a mad thing I'm saying again that you'd be asking marriage of me" (*TW* I. 45). Likewise, Michael's mother does not approve of such a marriage and she says: "[…] I never knew till this day it was a black born fool I had for a son" (*TW* II. 116). Despite the scorn of his mother, Michael eventually decides to marry Sarah because she earns a great deal of money. "He wants to keep possession of her sexual favors and her earning ability" (Sternlicht 74). To his mother he says: "If I didn't marry her, she'd be walking off to Jaunting Jim maybe at the end of the fall of night; and it's well yourself knows there isn't the like of her getting money and selling songs to the men" (*TW* II. 122-4). Thus, it can be claimed that "[…] marriage becomes a business proposition — most definitely to the priest, but also to the Tinker Michael, who consents to the marriage not because of love or human commitment, but because he sees it as a way of securing Sarah as his property" (Oliver 141). In this regard, Synge does not make a distinction and reveals how people care for materialistic values regardless of their status.

Sarah Casey is the character that creates the dramatic tension in the play as she rejects a custom that belongs to her kind, and instead prefers to have a way of life that is unfamiliar to her circle. In the above-mentioned example, Mary Byrne opposes the marriage of his son as a mother. But it is also Mary who opposes the whimsical wish of Sarah. As a tinker woman, Mary "has developed a view of life that contrasts sharply with official Christianity" (Wakamatsu 63). Here, her life is not only in contrast to the religious way of living but also challenges the imposed norms of society. In order to take on the customs and beliefs of a decent life, Sarah disregards those of her own life. Thus, Mary Byrne adamantly tries to show the futility of marriage. She says:

> MARY. [*soothingly*] It's as good a right you have surely, Sarah Casey, but what good will it do? Is it putting that ring on your finger will keep you from getting an aged woman and losing the fine face you have, or be easing your pains, when it's the grand ladies do be married in silk dresses, with rings of gold, that do pass any woman with their share of torment in the hour of birth […]. (*TW* II. 130-6)

As a representative of the tinkers, Sarah has the freedom that Synge admired in tinkers. She is not in need of any social institution like marriage, but she prefers to be a married woman. She is not aware of the fact that her freedom will be destroyed by convention and custom if she marries Michael. David Greene suggests that "[a] social innuendo is evident in the tinker's ambition to ally himself with respectable society" (825). Only when Sarah begins to know the Church through the Priest does she understand the value of her freedom. She becomes happier when her natural life is restored as she no longer feels desire to be part of the civilised world. Thus, it could be suggested that the message of the play is conveyed through the young woman Sarah Casey. "By means of her [Synge] shows what happens when travelling people with their own pagan traditions come up against the superficial attractions of conventional property-owning society" (Skelton 48).

Synge added some characters to the original story upon which he based his play. The Priest is one of these characters who could be regarded as Synge's own invention to reveal the tension between pagan and conventional Christian beliefs that dominate *The Tinker's Wedding*. In fact, as Nicholas Grene asserts, "Synge, in the Wicklow plays as in his other work, ignores rather than mocks or denigrates the Catholic belief of the people" ("Synge" 717). This could be best understood when the role of the priest in *Riders to the Sea* is remembered. In this play, too, the priest cannot fulfil his duty as a representative of Christianity on a remote place and remains a foreigner among the islanders. Like the unnamed priest in *Riders to the Sea*, the Priest in *The Tinker's Wedding* also depicted as an intruder among the peasantry of Wicklow, and particularly the tinkers. These unsympathetic priest figures have no appreciation for the lives of the people among whom they live. What Synge tries to show is this aloofness between the clergy and the peasantry through the characterisation of priests.

The assumption that Synge's plays are not anti-Catholic could be best understood when the character of the Priest is analysed thoroughly. The Priest begins to complain to Mary about the hardships of a cleric's office and life in Ireland. In spite of his satiric description in the very beginning of the play, his situation here makes the audience think about the living conditions of the clergy:

> PRIEST. If it's starving you are itself, I'm thinking it's well for the like of you that do be drinking when there's drouth on you, and lying down to

> sleep when your legs are stiff. [*He sighs gloomily*] What would you do if it was the like of myself you were, saying Mass with your mouth dry, and running east and west for a sick call maybe, and hearing the rural people and they saying their sins? (*TW* I. 220-30)

This dialogue between Mary and the Priest explicitly demonstrates that Synge did not aim at focusing his play on anti-clericalism. He just tried to show the contradiction between the rural people and the Priest symbolising the Church, and in Wakamatsu's words, the play reveals the fact that "Synge's antipathy is towards the narrow Christianity that tends to shame and abash the poor [people] rather than pity them" (72).

This "narrow Christianity" is revealed through the Priest's attitudes towards the tinkers in the play. The Priest explicitly reveals his apathy towards these itinerant people. In fact, this could be interpreted as the aloofness of the Church, namely Christianity, towards the lives of Irish peasantry, particularly towards the tinkers. For instance, upon encountering Sarah Casey and Michael Byrne for the first time in the play, the Priest does not treat them properly:

> SARAH. [*in a very plausible voice*] Good evening, your reverence. It's a grand fine night, by the grace of God.
>
> PRIEST. The Lord have mercy on us! What kind of a living woman is it that you are at all?
>
> SARAH. It's Sarah Casey I am, your reverence, the Beauty of Ballinacree, and it's Michael Byrne is below in the ditch.
>
> PRIEST. A holy pair, surely! Let you get of my way. [*He tries to pass by*] (*TW* I. 117-124)

Inasmuch as the Priest is the representative of a holy institution, his behaviour is highly questionable. His treatment of the tinker woman, Sarah, makes it clear that he does not approve them. The Priest does not treat them as humans or individuals and despises them. When Sarah asks how they can find so much money, he replies: "Wouldn't you easy get it with your selling asses, and making cans, and your stealing east and west in Wicklow and Wexford and the county Meath? Let you leave the road, and not be plaguing me more" (*TW* I.143-5). It is true that the tinkers are associated with many negative aspects such as stealing. Yet, it becomes extremely important when it is a

priest, namely the agent of Christianity, who labels the tinkers as thieves on their first encounter.

Even the Priest's malediction towards the three tinkers at the end of the play reveals how ignorant he is of the lives of these people. "The fact that the oath is in Latin reinforces our sense of sharpness of the collision between the rituals of the Church, and the tinkers' life style" (Jones 55). The Priest says by lifting up his hand: "I've sworn not to call the hand of man upon your crimes today; but I haven't sworn I wouldn't call the fire of heaven from the hand of the Almighty God" (*TW* II. 358-60). Previously in Act I, the Priest was thinking about his own material benefits and did not seem to remember that he should fulfil his duties for the sake of God. But in Act II, he tries to seek refuge in God to punish those whom he had treated as heathens, sinners and thieves. This conflict in his behaviours is important as it "is perhaps the lowest moral station to which the Priest descends during the play; his action hardly constitutes an example of Christian charity and is, in its effect, a betrayal of his oath" (Orr 109). In fact, the Priest is torn between the Church and the rural community in which he serves. As a representative of the Church, he cannot fulfil his duty properly and remains an intruder among the Irish peasants. As Price claims

> [t]he Priest is unlikeable, not because he is a priest, but because he is not a true priest. He has officially renounced his Pagan instincts but he has not acquired the Christian virtues. He still has the old Pagan craving for the enjoyments of the flesh, but when he tries to satisfy this his pleasure is spoiled by the sense that he is sinning. (*Synge* 130)

Not only does the characterisation of the Priest reveals the fact that he is alienated from the lives of peasants, but also this becomes a tool in showing the materialistic aspect of the Church. Rather than in spiritual concerns, he is interested in money and other worldly pleasures. How the Church benefits from its services in the countryside is revealed through the Priest bargaining to get money for the marriage ceremony of Sarah and Michael. The Priest who is characterised as a deceitful and greedy person demands money and a tin can from the poor tinkers: "[…] I've no silver at all for the like of you; and if you want to be married, let you pay your pound. I'd do it for a pound only […]" (*TW* I. 50-1). He forgets his own duty as a priest and gets angry when the couple cannot pay him the required fee. Upon finding the empty bottles, he refuses to marry them.

Hynes also suggests, "Synge uses the priest's anger at being duped out of his tin can — Michael and Sarah's one possession besides Sarah's wedding ring — to highlight the materialism of the Church" (160). Synge tries to show that the Priest and his services in the name of the Church are not inherent in the lives of these people. They are imposed upon the rural people, particularly for the tinkers whose life is filled with freedom and imagination. Therefore, Synge just reveals the failure of Christianity in rural Ireland through the role of the Priest and does not impose a view on people that they should relinquish their beliefs in God.

Like the disagreeable cleric, the character of Mary Byrne in *The Tinker's Wedding* is Synge's own invention to the true story he heard about the tinkers. She stands in vivid contrast to the Priest and is a rather sympathetic character through whom Synge reveals his views on the outcasts of the society. Synge's sympathy towards the vagrants is explicit as he wrote about them earlier:

> There is something grandiose in a man who has forced all the kingdoms of the earth to yield the tribute of his bread, and who, at a hundred, begs on the wayside with the pride of an emperor. The slave and the beggar are wiser than the man who works for recompense, for all our moments are divine and above all price, though their sacrifice is paid with a measure of fine gold. Every industrious worker has sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. (qtd. in Skelton, *Celtic* 40)

Synge's admiration for the vagrants results in the creation of Mary Byrne who is represented as wiser than the common folk just like the slave and the beggar in the above-mentioned quotation. Mary Byrne appears as a woman of insight insofar as she has a broad knowledge of the world around her. In other words, she has her own view of life rather than accepting the seemingly decent life of the majority. "It is Mary's function in the play to act as a foil to the Priest and to articulate for the audience the moral or 'message' of the action" (Benson, *Synge* 84). Since Synge sympathises with the tinkers, Mary could be regarded as the spokeswoman of Synge in the play. Just like the writer himself, according to Nicholas Grene, she "is some sort of independent individuality of vision at odds with the social consensus that surrounds [her]" ("Synge" 718). Likewise, Wakamatsu proposes that the old tinker woman "maintains her pride

and self-reliance with an ironical eye on established society" (63). In fact, Mary Byrne' role in the play can be stated as follows:

> Having led a life which is one long sneer in the face of society — she steals for a living, deceives her family in order to drink, never marries her partner — she nonetheless retains a poignant sensitivity to life's beauty and a capacity to accept humorously whatever comes her way. (Orr 109)

It is Mary who represents the tinkers' way of life and its superiority over the conventional and restrictive lifestyle that is represented by the Priest. Thus, it could be claimed that Synge adds different aspects to the old tinker woman of the original story and creates a marginal character like Mary Byrne in order to reveal the contrast between nature and Christianity. Similarly, Wakamatsu puts forward that throughout the play "[t]wo kinds of law are contrasted — natural law and Christian law" (63). As a result of this comparison, it could be suggested that the tinkers, namely the peasantry in the Irish countryside, had found the principle of life that Synge had been searching for throughout his own life. And, it is the vigour of natural life that is above everything.

Mary Byrne's despise of the norms of decent society is noticeable from the beginning to the end of the play. Synge reveals the rich imagination of the vagrants in their expression of the rejection of the civilised world. As Fleming claims, "[t]he tinkers prevail in the battle of wits" (142). Considered as such, Mary's first appearance on the stage could be regarded as an example of her wisdom and imagination. When she first enters in Act I, she sings a song in slang called "The Night Before Larry Was Stretched" that "debunks the pretensions of the clergy" (Benson, *Synge* 84):

> And when we asked him what way he'd die,
> And he hanging unrepented,
> 'Begob,' says Larry, 'that's all in my eyei
> By the clergy first-invented.' (*TW* I. 179-182)

Even this song reveals that Mary Byrne is in opposition to the Priest in the play. Rather than expressing her objection to the civilised world and religion in an explicit way, she prefers singing a song that reflects the heathen beliefs of the vagrants. According to Alan Price, Larry "seems to be some kind of hero to the tinkers, he has the qualities they

admire" and this ballad becomes of high significance as "there is much of Larry in Marry" (*Synge* 132).

The characterisation of Mary allows Synge to give many viewpoints through one character.[29] After Mary has sung her song, she persuasively says to the Priest: "Let you not be shy of us, your reverence. Aren't we all sinners, God help us! Drink a sup now, I'm telling you; and we won't led on a word about it till the Judgement Day" (*TW* I. 198-200). Then she gives some porter to him and the Priest drinks it with resignation. At this point, Mary underlines an important point about the equality of mankind. She says:

> MARY. That's right now, your reverence, and the blessing of God be on you. Isn't it a grand thing to see you sitting down, with no pride in you, and drinking a sup with the like of us, and we poorest, wretched, starving creatures you'd see any place on the earth? (*TW* I. 221-4)

Mary emphasises the fact that all people are sinners. For instance, the mercenary priest who only thinks about his own material benefits is no less a sinner than the tinkers who steal in order to survive. In other words, all people are equal and there is no superiority of a person to another. "Synge's maturity as an artist is felt most conspicuously here where the spirit of the play is put into the mouth of an unblushing bacchanalian, who invariably spends her every last penny on alcohol" (Wakamatsu 68).

From this point of view, even the Priest is not superior to these tinkers and he should not despise them for their way of living. The wise and old tinker woman, Mary Byrne accuses the Priest of interfering with their lives:

> MARY. […] but what did you want meddling with the like of us, when it's a long time we are going our own ways—father and son, and his son after him, or mother and daughter, and her own daughter again— and it's little need we ever had of going up into a church and swearing — I'm told there's swearing with it—a word no man would believe, or with drawing rings on our fingers, would be cutting our skins maybe when we'd be taking the ass from the shafts, and pulling the straps the time they'd be slippy with going around beneath the heavens in rains falling.
> (*TW* II. 313-322)

Through Mary's speech, Synge demonstrates that imposing an alien culture onto the world of the tinkers results negatively.

As *The Tinker's Wedding* depicts two social groups living side by side in County Wicklow, it could be regarded as "an embodiment of a tension between two ways of life, between a cautious, respectable, more settled way of life and an unrestrained materially insecure way allowing scope for passion and imagination" (Price, *Synge* 127). Yet, the tinkers are criticised since their life is filled with not only passion and imagination but also violence and wildness. "Among the tinkers themselves, violence is always near the surface and often spills over" (Rhodes 110). Except the Priest, all the characters in the play are prone to violence. Even the beginning of the relationship of Sarah and Michael was violent. Michael remembers that day and says:

> MICHAEL. […] I'm thinking on the day I got you above at Rathvanna, and the way you began crying out and we coming down off the hill, crying out and saying, 'I'll go back to my ma,' and I'm thinking on the way I came behind you that time, and hit you a great clout in the lug, and how quiet and easy it was you came along with me from that hour to this present day. (*TW I.* 60-5)

Sarah is threatened by Michael, yet she also threatens Mary Byrne. When the elderly woman rebukes her son due to his decision to marry Sarah, she says: "Didn't you hear me telling you she's flighty a while back since the change of the moon?" (*TW* I. 285). Upon hearing such words from his mother, Michael warns his mother to be quiet: "Whist now, or she'll knock the head of you the time she comes back" (*TW* I. 289). Sarah who is exposed to the cruelty of Michael is, in her turn, cruel toward his mother. Similarly, Hynes states that "Michael, who has no means to achieve status in Irish society, proves his strength by threatening Sarah; Sarah, in turn, threatens the elderly Mary" (160). The tinkers' treatment of the Priest also reveals their inclinations towards violence. For instance, Sarah who has many romantic fantasies in the first act changes into an abusive woman when she yells at the Priest trying to stop her from attacking Mary: "I've bet a power of strong lads east and west through the world, and are you thinking I'd turn back from a priest? Leave the road now, or maybe I would strike yourself" (*TW* II. 252-4). Furthermore, when the Priest threatens her to tell the police about the theft of the black ass belonging to Philly Cullen, she becomes very angry and shouts at him:

> SARAH. If you do, you'll be getting all the tinkers from Wicklow and Wexford, and the County Mayo, to put up block tin in the place of glass to shield your windows where you do be looking out and blinking at the girls. It's hard set you'll be that time, I'm telling you, to fill the depth of your belly the long days of Lent, for we wouldn't leave a laying pullet in your yard at all. (*TW* II. 272-7)

Through the tinkers' way of life, Synge criticises the settled society to which he himself belonged. Yet, these incidents of violence and dispute are of high importance as the characters could not be encouraged as an alternative to the decent way of living of the settled communities. However, Fleming approaches these incidents from a different angle and argues that "[t]he tinkers' constant arguing and unkindness is not due to bad nature but rather liveliness, wit, and desire for entertainment" (145). In other words, the tinkers do not supress their energies that give rise to both passion and violence simultaneously. "The comic characters have the rich and vital vigour to live, and through their abundant worldly folly they serve to lay some bare of the hidden laws of society — materialism, vanity, hypocrisy" (Wakamatsu 67). As a result of this, Synge eulogises the life of the tinkers and aligns himself with these vagrants. Their rejection of conventional social and moral values in favour of a more natural life is clearly in contrast to the accepted, but obviously hypocritical, codes of society. Here Synge's bestows a highly aristocratic quality to the vagrant people and rural peasantry insofar as he thinks that

> the wanderer is freer than the property owner because he can go where he likes, untroubled by laws, politics, or material possessions; the beggar can be proud because he makes his own decisions and is, moreover, able to force the kingdoms of the earth to provide for him; the provincial is more cultured than the city-dweller, for culture has nothing to do with education, company, or manners, but with vigorousness of mind and depth of emotion. […] The countryman or wanderer is more likely to be able to contemplate spiritual matters because he is not materialistic or interested in achieving status. (Fleming 148)

The tinkers of Wicklow in Synge's play do all of these things, thus creating a new life which is more vivid and vigorous than the life of the priest and the rest of the society. Nicholas Grene states that "[t]he very specificity of the local underwrote the universal, and what Synge could imagine against the background of the desolate Wicklow

mountains, inspired by the people he saw living among them, constituted its own form of compelling truth" ("Synge" 718).

In conclusion, *The Tinker's Wedding* is analysed in order to present how the tinkers were treated as outcasts in nineteenth-century nationalist Ireland and how they were excluded from contemporary Irish society. In this play, Synge adopts a different attitude from that of the nationalists of his own time while inviting them to look at these people from a different angle, and believes in the participation of the vagrants in the creation of a new Irish identity. Hence, the play should not be regarded as a play only portraying the avarice of the clergy and the immorality of the tinkers as it says a great deal about the different social groups living together on an island. Robin Skelton argues that Synge "was continuing his personal exploration of themes that were of deep personal importance to him, and yet again asking how the materialist and conventional society of his time could be made to understand the wildnesses and simplicities of the human heart" (*Synge* 50). As a result of his personal exploration, Synge finds a new source through which he could convey his own views. In this play, Synge portrays "[t]he peasant who abandons the life of the community and strikes out on his own expresses his individuality as the artist does" (Fleming 154). In the light of the examples given so far from *The Tinker's Wedding*, it could be suggested that Synge expresses his ideas on an independent way of living through the depiction of the tinkers which is in great contrast to the restricted life depicted by the Priest.

*The Tinker's Wedding* has never been as popular as Synge's other famous plays. It has always been regarded as the least distinguished play he ever produced. Yet, the play's contribution to Synge's writing career cannot be ignored. After the one-act tragedy, he tried his hand at a two-act comedy. Much as it does not please the literary critics and audience of his time, Synge achieved his aim in illustrating the lives of the tinkers. The Abbey Theatre declined the production of the *The Tinker's Wedding* due to the so-called libel on priesthood. Yet, Synge was to provide the Abbey with a more scandalous and troublesome comedy in the following years. In an effort to better appraise Synge's changing dramatic technique from a two-act comedy to a three-act comedy and his illustration of a different segment in rural Irish society, *The Playboy of the Western World* will be examined in the next chapter of the thesis.

# CHAPTER III

## *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD* AND THE PEASANTS OF COUNTY MAYO

'They do be putting quare plays on in Dublin nowadays! … Very quare plays. They do be putting on plays where a boy from the county kills his da!'

'That seems wrong.'

'Yes. And they make us out to be nothing but cutthroats, and murderers, and dijinerates.'

'What on earth do they mean by doing that?'

'They calls it—ART.'

(qtd. in Cunliffe 236 )

After the great performance of *Riders to the Sea*, Synge went through a transitional process while his plays such as *The Tinker's Wedding* or *The Well of the Saints* were produced. In fact, the two Wicklow plays were not popular on the stage. Despite the fact that the latter one is particularly a successful comedy dealing with a theme of great interest, *The Tinker's Wedding* "seems very *unsatisfactory* by comparison with" it (Grene, *Synge* 103). However, Synge was gradually improving his art of writing with these plays. After these transitional plays, Synge ultimately completed his great play, *The Playboy of the Western World* which is probably the most controversial play in Irish social and theatre history.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge uses similar motifs of Irish culture and traditions as in his former plays, yet he depicts them in a new turn. "In this play for the first time Synge presents a plot that moves progressively, each scene proceeding from the previous one in harmonious blending" (Spehn 59). Hence, Synge's perception of drama becomes more concrete with this masterpiece. There are controversial views regarding the play. But to begin with the views that are more positive could be a good starting point in order to understand the importance of the play in the world drama. According to Una-Ellis Fermor, for instance, "it is probably *The Playboy* that shows

[Synge's] dramatic power at its ripest (175). Likewise, Eugene Benson regards the play as "Synge's masterpiece, the play which brought him international fame" *(Synge* 112). "His greatest play was," writes Sanford Sternlicht, "his first full-length poetic comedy, *The Playboy of the Western World*, in which Synge introduced the peasant play, the future staple of Irish theatre" (9). Christopher Murray also positively comments on the play and states that it "encompasses the full gamut of [Synge's] extraordinary powers" (80). Therefore, he magniloquently claims that *The Playboy* is "the *Hamlet* of the Irish dramatic tradition" (80). As can be seen, the play is generally regarded as a masterpiece of drama while "at the same time it is criticised for being an anticlimactic and gratuitously brutal masterpiece" (Gerstenberger, "Hard" 39). Maurice Bourgeois asks the right question in order to fully comprehend *The Playboy*: "What is the 'comedy' about?" (194)

On 26 January 1907, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin debuted with the performance of J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World.* "It is necessary to remember that the relationship between the playwright and his audience is mediated by the actors who developed their own interpretive strategies for embodying and presenting a text" (Hirsch, "Gallous" 115). In the first stage performance, William Fay, one of the best known actors of the Abbey Theatre, performed the role of Christy Mahon while his brother Frank Fay was in the role of Shawn Keogh. The most known actresses of the Abbey also performed in this first production of *The Playboy*. Sara Allgood, for instance, appeared on the stage as Widow Quinn while Pegeen Mike was performed by Molly Allgood whose stage name was Maire O'Neill[30] (Spehn 68). The most famous actors and actresses staged *The Playboy*; and no matter how great theis performances were, they would have been more appreciated if they had not performed such "gross sentiments" on a national stage.

Considered by many as the greatest play of modern comedy in both Irish and English drama in the twentieth century, *The Playboy* sparked controversies and riots among the audience as soon as the play was staged. In fact, violent reaction to the play was not unexpected by the writers, directors, actors and actresses of the Abbey Theatre due to the fact that the performance of Synge's previous plays' had also caused great

controversy among the nationalist audiences in Dublin. The riots and criticisms towards *The Playboy* quickly followed the same pattern as those lodged against his earlier plays.

*The Playboy* riots, however, were more severe and tumultuous in comparison to those that the earlier plays aroused. It was because *The Playboy* "examines the dynamics of an entire village, not an isolated cottage, and as a result the criticism launched by *Playboy* strikes far more powerfully at the audience's perception of rural Ireland as a whole, with all the political implications that criticism generates" (Cusack 15). In this whole picture the portrayal of Irish women such as Pegeen or the Widow Queen may have also been considered as an insult as the portrayal of Nora Burke in *The Shadow of the Glen*. Or, the depiction of the religious agents in the countryside may have fuelled the tension as in the case of *The Tinker's Wedding*. No matter what the main reason was, the nationalists protested the play because they thought that it was an attack on them.

In fact, Synge predicted the harsh reaction his play would provoke among the audiences. William Fay claims that while deciding to write his play, *The Playboy*, Synge sought revenge upon an audience who have regarded his previous plays, especially *The Well of the Saints* as offensive. This means that Synge deliberately wanted to provoke the nationalistic audiences. Fay states: "[Synge] would not forgive the crass ignorance, the fatuity, the malevolence with which *The Well of Saints* has been received. […] 'Very well, then,' he [Synge] said to me bitterly one night, "'the next play I write I will make sure will annoy them.' And he did" (211). Synge really succeeded in his goal in writing a play that would annoy the audience of his time. When William Fay read the script of the play, he thought that it should be changed drastically. He tried hard in order to dissuade Synge from the production of the play since he was aware of the fact that it was intentionally written as retaliation. He even insisted on not to perform the play, and suggested that Synge should rather write this story to be published in a newspaper because "[…] there is all the difference between a printed story that one reads to oneself and the same story told as a play to a mixed audience of varying degrees of intelligence" (Fay 212). The reactions of a theatre audience and the reading public would not be similar to each other. Yet, Synge was determined to write and stage his play at the Abbey. Upon realising the possible trouble that the play might

arouse in the audience, William Fay together with his brother Frank Fay, spoke to Synge about certain changes in the play. These changes were thought necessary, especially in terms of characterisation. Here it should be underlined that Synge's characters, particularly women, were always the subject of controversy as they were ahead of their ages. Moreover, "[t]he extent to which Synge's women characters cross the conventional gender boundaries of the day suggests that his encounter with feminism through his friendships […] left more than a merely superficial impression" (Finney, *Women* 116). Whether Synge depicts women trapped in a loveless marriage or portrays vagrant and beggar women isolated from society, his women characters are not passive. The delineation of women in contrast to traditionally feminine traits such as submission or tenderness is daring. In this respect, "Pegeen Mike, as well as the Widow Quin and the chorus of other female characters in the play, continued Synge's challenge to the embourgeoisement of Irish identity, and Irish women" (Hynes 157). Fay states how they suggested that Synge should change his characters as follows: "Frank and I begged him to make Pegeen a decent likeable county girl, which she might easily have been without injury to the play, and to take out the torture scene in the last act where the peasants burn Christy with the lit turf" (212). Such warnings, however, were of no significance for Synge. Like the Fay brothers, Lady Gregory also proposed that some cuts should be made in the play. She states that

> [t]here were too many violent oaths, and the play itself was marred by this. I did not think it was fit to be put on the stage without cutting. It was agreed that it should be cut in rehearsal. A fortnight before its production, Mr. Yeats, thinking I had seen a rehearsal, wrote: 'I would like to know how you thought *The Playboy* acted. . . . Have they cleared many of the objectionable sentences out of it?' I did not, however, see a rehearsal and did not hear the play again until the night of its production, and then I told Synge that the cuts were not enough, that many more should be made. He gave me leave to do this, and, in consultation with the players, I took out many phrases which, though in the printed book, have never since that first production been spoken on our stage. I am sorry they were not taken out before it had been played at all, but that is just what happened. (133-4)

As far as it can be understood from the recollections of Lady Gregory, there were some cuts in the play, yet their number was rather small. Synge was uncompromising and insisted on the performance of his play without changing any part of it dramatically.

The Fay brothers' predictions for the play's performance proved right. The play ignited the audience's temper on the very opening night. Joseph Holloway, who attended the first night's performance of *The Playboy*, gives a very distinct picture of the riots in the Abbey on that particular night and "his report of what happened is more revealing than any newspaper accounts because he knew all the principles on both sides of the footlights" (Greene and Stephens 260). Holloway describes the incident as follows:

> The Abbey was thronged in the evening to witness the first performance of Synge's three act comedy *The Playboy of the Western World*, which ended in fiasco owing to the coarseness of the dialogue. The audience bore with it for two and a half acts and even laughed with the dramatist at times, but an unusually brutally coarse remark put into the mouth of 'Christopher Mahon,' the playboy of the title, set the house off into hooting and hissing amid counter applause, and the din was kept up till the curtain closed in.
> On coming out, Lady Gregory asked me, 'What was the cause of disturbance?'
> And my monosyllabic answer was, 'Blackguardism!'
> To which she queried, 'On which side?'
> 'The stage!' came from me pat, and then I passed on, and the incident was closed… (81)

The question 'what was this blackguardism on the stage?' can be asked. In fact, it was the coarseness of the dialogue in the play. A possible answer comes from William Fay having performed the role of Christy Mahon. "Yet the queer thing," he points out upon the possible causes of the riot, "was that what turned the audience into a veritable mob of howling devils was not this vulgar expletive, but as irreproachable a word as there is in the English dictionary — the decent old fashioned 'shift' for the traditional under-garment of a woman" (214). As a matter of fact, the first and second acts of the first performance of the play were greeted quietly by the audience. On the very same night of the first performance of *The Playboy*, Lady Gregory sent telegrams to W. B. Yeats who was lecturing in Scotland. These telegrams showed the temper of the audience. The first telegram was sent after the first act and informed Yeats about the performance of the play: "Play great success" (Gregory 112). However, another telegram was sent immediately after the third act: "Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift" (Gregory 112). Lady Gregory was right. The third act met with disapproval due to the fact that the members of the audience were triggered by the use of this word "shift". Such a word was misinterpreted by the audience as humiliating the Irish people,

particularly the Irish womanhood for whose portrayal Synge was criticised severely earlier as well. Hence, the use of this word disturbed the audiences' sensibilities considerably as male playgoers "agreed that it was fortunate they had left their wives at home" (Ferriter 11). The supposedly immoral portrayal of the Irish and Irish womanhood caused the play to gain notoriety on its first performance.

During the riots on the first night's performance, the play and the actors were punctuated by catcalls and shouts in the third act. The audience began to hiss and boot. Many objects were thrown onto the stage and fights broke out. Audiences who could not tolerate a representation of the negative peculiarities of the Irish character protested to this supposedly immoral portrayal during theatre performance. When all these fights and riots were occurring, the role of Yeats was highly questionable since his attitude towards the riots caused a public debate in Ireland. As the founder of the Abbey Theatre, Yeats did not try to placate the audience, rather he shouted at them due to their intolerance and narrow-mindedness towards the slightest criticism of the Irish peasantry on stage. As Reynolds remarks, "Yeats reproached these politicised spectators for being interlopers in the sacred domain of experimental native art" (79). In the following lines, Yeats points out the importance of the freedom of expression:

> We have put this play before you to be heard and to be judged, as every play should be heard and judged. Every man has a right to hear it and condemn it if he pleases, but no man has a right to interfere with another man hearing a play and judging for himself. The country that condescends either to bully or to permit itself to be bullied soon ceases to have any fine qualities, and I promise you that if there is any small section in this theatre that wish to deny the right of others to hear what they themselves don't want to hear we will play on, and our patience shall last longer than their patience. (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 261-2)

In spite of Yeats's admonitions, the audience began to protest the play and cause disturbance. Yeats's wrong and disputable decision of trying to handle the detractors by calling the constables who were the symbol of English colonialism fuelled the hostility of the audiences more. In this regard, it caused a social disturbance. "Police representing an English government arresting Irishmen in the national theatre raised the furor of many nationalist protestors" (Trotter 125). Then the police began to arrest the rioters that Yeats pointed out. Here, Holloway's recollections of the event exemplify the image

of Yeats in the eyes of the audience: "Yeats also was busy just now as a spy aiding the police in picking out the persons disapproving of the glorification of murder on the stage" (84). The strategic mistakes of the directors did not halt. "To add insult to injury, Yeats and Lady Gregory rounded up a claque of students from Trinity College — bastion of pro-English Protestant culture and privilege — who baited the opposition by singing the English national anthem" (Benson, *Synge* 135). Holloway comments on this specific incident as follows: "At the end chaos seemed to have entered the Abbey and the college youths clambered on the seats began the English national anthem while those in the body of the hall sang something else of home growth" (84).

*The Playboy* also sparked controversies in the national press in Ireland. The use of the police force in order to repress the uprising was collectively satirised in the newspapers. Thuente defines the Irish newspapers as "the most important vehicle of nationalist propaganda in the nineteenth century" (43). Due to their vital role in this struggle for nationalism, the newspapers were not temperate in their criticism of the play which allegedly attacked the ideals of a nation. Hence, the play was violently attacked by the nationalist press in Ireland. In one of the Irish newspapers called the *Freeman's Journal*, the suppression of the riots through English constables was criticised and regarded as an unfortunate moment in the history of Ireland. According to the newspaper, the call for the police force resulted in

> a better tragi-comedy than anything that could be conceived in the grotesquest fancies of the clever comic writers of foredoomed theatre. […] What a spectacle for gods and men, the champion of a free Irish theatre calling in the police… What an instance of National tops-turveydom in the picture of this Irish dramatist, this authority on the ways and speech of the Western peasant standing sick, silent, and ashamed when addressed in Irish. (qtd. in Castle, "Staging" 283)

Moreover, the aforesaid newspaper ran a piece called "The People and the Parricide" in which the portrayal of the Irish peasantry in the play was compared with the stage Irishman: "The stage Irishman is a gentleman in comparison with the vile wretch whom Mr. Synge presented to an astonished Irish audience as the most popular type of the Irish peasant" (qtd. in Hirsch, "Gallous" 106). The newspaper also issued a review for the opening-night performance of the play. In this review, the play was called an

> unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and, worse still upon Irish peasant girlhood. The blood boils with indignation as one recalls the incidents, expressions, ideas of this squalid, offensive production, incongruously styled a comedy in three acts […] No adequate idea can be given of the barbarous jargon, the elaborate and incessant cursing of these repulsive creatures. (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 257)

The other papers were not restrained, either. *The Evening Mail*, for instance, regarded *The Playboy* as an allegory. The paper wrote that "[i]f a man is stupid enough to suggest that the Irish people are cannibals or gorillas, my hand will not fumble for the sword-hilt" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 258). One of the most important figures in the development of modern Irish nationalism, Arthur Griffith's paper, *Sinn Fein*, also wrote about the performance of the play. As an official organ of a political party, its comments were similar to those of the above-mentioned papers. Griffith described the play as a "vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 264). These comments were certainly made in order to mould the public mind not to watch such an insult to Irishness on the stage.

The riots continued about a week. The fact that the reaction of the audience began to lessen in time does not mean that opinions about the play changed. The strain of the audience was the same, yet the presence of the police prevented further tumultuous riots at the Abbey. In other words, the police forced the frustrated audience to watch the play docilely in compliance with the above-mentioned warning of Yeats. But the riots and controversies over *The Playboy* were not to cease. "Despite the limited scale of the action," as McCormack puts it, "the Playboy riots have a place in the growing violence of the city. Within a few years, the Lock-out of 1913 and, of course, the Easter Rising of 1916 would turn the streets into a political theatre" (307).

In fact, *The Playboy* has triggered riots not only at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin but wherever it has been produced. Yeats and Lady Gregory brought the play to America in 1911–1912. The fact that the reactions of the audiences in America were similar to those of the nationalists in Dublin shows that the agitation over Synge's plays

continued. The play caused many tumultuous disturbances in many American cities where it was staged. Kopper argues that

> [i]n Philadelphia, the players were arrested on the charge of immorality. In Chicago, playgoers waited outside a theater with a noose to hang Synge, who had been dead for over two years. Lady Gregory was threatened with death should she produce 'The 'Cowboy' of the Western World.' In Boston, nationalists railed against Synge's portrayal of a 'parasite'. (401)

The American press interested in the tour repertoire of the Abbey Theatre, also regarded the production of *The Playboy* in America as an insult to the Irish. Their claim was that

> Performing the *Playboy* in America was a […] serious matter. National Ireland was looking to the Irish in America for help in the struggle for independence. The Irish-American was trying hard to become 'respectable,' to live down the idea that he was an uneducated, drunken, irresponsible person, fit only to be a servant. (Kavanagh qtd. in Greene 162)

*The Playboy* was also staged in England. It was first staged in New Theatre in Oxford on 5 June 1907. The play was subsequently performed in various cities including London, Manchester and Leeds.[3] Much as there is not much concrete evidence related with the performances of *The Playboy* on the English stage, it could be inferred that the reaction to the play was not probably like the frustration and rage the play aroused in American cities. The Catholic Irish citizens who immigrated to the USA during the post-Famine period were the potential audiences of the play. Like their compatriots, they may have regarded the play as a slur upon Irish identity and womanhood. Yet, in England, the situation was a bit more complex. Considering the fact that the Irish were stereotyped by the English as immoral, lazy, drunken, backward, boasting, belligerent and violent — the opposite qualities to the English— it can be suggested that the English might have concluded that their notions of the Irish were right. In this respect, it can be claimed that it "the production of the *Playboy* in England did no essential damage to Irish prestige there; it only confirmed the English in their belief that the Irish native was a half savage who would be expected to kill his father and be praised for his heroism" (Kavanagh qtd. in Greene 162).

[3] The dates of the performances of *The Playboy of the Western World* in England are taken from the archieve of the Abbey Theatre. <http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/>.

One point is worth noticing here. In his essay entitled "Approaches to *The Playboy*", Grene remarks that "[i]t has been generally assumed that the puritanical Dubliners objected instantly to this vision of a nation-wide harem […]" (87). But the usage of a taboo word such as "shift" could not be considered as the only reason behind all these riots, attacks and criticisms. It is a frequently voiced view that Synge's being a member of the Ascendancy was another reason for these riots. The Synge family was thoroughly rooted in the Protestant landowner class. They were among the most distinguished members of Anglo-Irish families. They shared, as in Kopper's words, "without question the assumed monolithic structure of values that this conqueror class imposed upon a conquered people" (398). This conflict between the Protestants and Catholics also triggered the controversies about Synge's career as a playwright. In the height of Irish nationalism, a Protestant's criticising a Catholic Irish peasant who would be the symbol of the new nation could not be accepted by the majority of people. In the play, the pious character, Shawn Keogh, is mocked for his belief in God while another one, Christy Mahon, who claims to kill his father is adulated. Thus, the reversal of the accepted values of society certainly caused animosity among people in this particular age of Irish history. As David Greene, in his essay "Synge and the Irish", says "[t]he simple fact was that he did not foresee that the Ascendancy writer — the Irishman of English ancestry — would fall a casual but inevitable victim of the new nationalism with which Ireland was aflame" (159).

In fact, the problem of belonging to a Protestant family was also valid for the other writers of the Abbey. Actually, the fact that nearly all the writers of the Irish dramatic tradition are Protestant is one of the paradoxes in The Irish Literary Movement. They are Protestants, yet they depict the Catholic Irish people, to a Catholic Irish audience. Therefore, the Irishness of Synge and the other writers of the Abbey was also of great concern for the critics and audiences of the day "because their privileged positions as members of an intelligentsia set them apart from the native Catholic Irish of which they wrote" (Castle, *Modernism* 136). They were always thought as ignorant of Ireland and its native culture. As a result, there were some controversies about their depiction of Ireland and the Irish. Thus, with the writings of Synge the concept of a national drama was begun to be discussed. Cusack argues that

> […] Synge was accused of presenting foreign characters and ideas on the Irish national stage and thereby defaming Irish morality and particularly Irish femininity. Once again, the definition of national theatre became the central issue in this conflict. Synge's critics believed that, to be national, an institution must reflect the popular sympathies of the nation, while the directors insisted that the nation's identity could only be forged by artists working independently. (261)

Among these controversies related with its status, the Abbey experienced a gradual alienation from the mainstream nationalist movement in Ireland. Hence, *The Playboy* "seemed especially offensive since it was presented in a nationalist theatre that had been founded to counter the traditional stereotypes of the Stage Irishman" (Hirsch, "Gallous" 104). In this sense, as a national institution the Abbey Theatre's status was regarded as a bertrayal, thus contributing to the emergence of the Playboy riots. The Playboy riots allow tracing the way in which the separation between the ideal audience that was envisioned by the founders and real theatre audience that attended the plays could be best understood. Firstly, the Abbey Theatre could not be regarded as a national theatre of Ireland inasmuch as its property belonged to an English woman called Miss Annie Horniman. She was struggling to keep her theatre away from staging plays for the political purposes of the age. As Adrian Frazier has also demonstrated, "Horniman's policy was definitely stated — no politics" (219). The theatre's founders set out to achieve this policy. "Initially, [they] assumed that elite and mainstream audiences, composed both of readers and theatergoers, constituted one audience of 'all Irish people' — an ideal soon exposed as illusory" (Reynolds 81). Expecting such an audience profile to attend the theatre when nationalistic issues reached their peak in the country was somehow impossible. Being the personal property of an Englishwoman "who was antipathetic to Irish nationalism and merely wanted to further the artistic career of Yeats" (Greene and Stephens 269), the Abbey, thus, could not provide the audience with what they expected to see on the stage. Regardless of the separation of religious sects as mentioned above, the writers of the Abbey still tried to revive the country's rich past as a part of the nationalism. Yet, their aim in reviving the past of the country was not propagandistic. The opposition to this institution results from this fact. Therefore, the role of the Abbey towards the Playboy riots was different than the earlier conflicts that the theatre's founders had encountered. As in Cusack's words,

> [h]aving distanced themselves so thoroughly from the nationalist community, the directors could no longer claim to represent an integral part of the nationalist movement beleaguered by a few extremists. Instead, they accepted their alienation from the nationalist Irish community as complete and final and fell back to defending the play on purely artistic grounds. In so doing, the directors redefined the role of the National Theatre within Irish society, making it antithesis of Irish nationalism rather than a part of it. (262)

It is true that both the Abbey and *The Playboy* received many harsh criticisms leading to the emergence of the riots, yet there were also those who regarded the play in a more positive way. Pilkington points out that "Yeats, the *Irish Times* and the prominent Catholic unionist and judge, Sir John Ross, all regarded Synge's play as taking a stand for the freedom of the individual and intellectual independence" (60). *The Irish Independent* also declared that "it was a tribute to the good taste and common sense of the audience that hissing and booing mingled with the cheers which greeted the final development of the character" (qtd. in Hogan and Kilroy, 125).

Not only had Yeats encouraged Synge to go to the Aran Islands in order to find the material for his drama, but he also stood by him when *The Playboy* caused riots among the audiences in the Abbey. "Yeats said of *The Playboy* that the inability of the original audiences to understand it represented the only serious failure of the Abbey Theatre movement" (Spacks 7).[31] While regarding the play as the failure of the Abbey, Yeats further claimed that "the real centre of resistance had not come from the general public — since the opening-night audience could scarcely be called a cross section of the Dublin public — but from his old friends in the Nationalist movement" (Greene and Stephens 259). Hence, he did not think that these criticisms represented the public opinion. Moreover, he made an unfortunate statement to a reporter from *The Freeman's Journal*. In this interview, Yeats was of the opinion that the opposition to the play was primarily formed by the people who had no books in their homes. As a result, it was the failure of the audience not to understand the play. He further accused these opponents of being "moulded not by leaders of ability but by societies, clubs and leagues" (Greene and Stephens 260). In the interview, Yeats stated that these institutions were headed by "commonplace and ignorant people who try to take on an appearance of strength by imposing some crude shibboleth on their own and others' necks. They do not persuade,

for that is difficult; they do not expound, for that needs knowledge" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 260). These were Yeats's claims in explaining the real causes of the Playboy riots. Yet, his claims may not be true as many opponents of the play like

> Arthur Griffith, Maud Gonne, Padraic Colum and Padraic Pearse were neither puritanical nor ill-read. They represented the Catholic intelligentsia of Ireland, and intelligentsia that was extremely sensitive to the racial stereotyping so long associated with the stage Irishman and the racist stereotyping that was common in the cartoons of English journals like Punch. In reaction, they idealised Ireland and all things Irish […]. But *The Playboy* with its glorification of parricide and its portrayal of degeneracy and violence and betrayal seemed — and was — an assault on Nationalist idealism. (Benson, *Synge* 134)

Though being regarded as an assault on the nationalism developing in the country, *The Playboy* was decided to be played by the Abbey in the following weeks. The more the play was staged, the more the opposition continued. With regard to the riots that the play evoked, the nationalists accused Synge of humiliating the Irish identity. They condemned him as a dramatist deeply subverting and vilifying his native traditions. "Nothing like that could happen in Ireland was their cry" (Spehn 56). Similarly, Kiberd notes that "[t]he situation was, of course, rich in ironies, the most obvious being that protestors shouted 'We Irish are not a violent people' and then sprang at the actors to prove their point — confirming Synge's conviction that some were" (*Inventing Ireland* 168). It could be claimed that it was this irony that made Synge write a play like *The Playboy*.

In response to the riots that his play aroused, Synge gave an interview to *The Evening Mail* after the performance of the play. David Greene and Edward Stephens argue that the dramatist was regretful for this interview as he had been totally kept aloof from the controversies that his plays had caused thus far. In this interview, Synge stated that his aim in writing *The Playboy* was not "to represent Irish life as it is lived … I wrote the play because it pleased me, and it just happens that I know Irish life best, so I made my methods Irish" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 258). While denying his original sources, Synge also made an unfortunate statement about not being bothered by the reactions and criticisms of the audience. Upon being questioned about these reactions, he simply said:

"I don't care a rap how the people take it" (qtd. in Murray 80). In this interview, Synge further stated that

> *The Playboy of the Western World* is not a play with 'a purpose' in the modern sense of the world, but although parts of it are, or are meant to be extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it, and a great deal more that is behind it, is perfectly serious, when looked at in a certain light. That is often the case, I think, with comedy, and no one is quite sure today whether 'Shylock' and 'Alcaste' should be played seriously or not. There are, it may be hinted, several sides to 'The Playboy'. (qtd. in Murray 80)

This was a regrettable comment insofar as Synge misstated his purpose in writing the play and its source. *The Playboy* is not an extravaganza. On the contrary, it deals with a serious issue. Synge had heard a similar story to that dealt within the play on one of his journeys to the rural Ireland. Hence, "[t]his is not a world that Synge has invented out of nothing" (Welch 214).

Synge derives all his material for his plays from Irish folklore. In *The Playboy*, "Synge drew upon his knowledge of traditional Irish narrative and storytelling to portray social and human capabilities and failings in a way that reflected his views not only of Irish society but of the human condition in general" (Henigan 92). George Bernard Shaw's comment on *The Playboy* brilliantly explains how Synge reaches universality by depicting the local materials:

> Well, John Synge wrote a wonderful play called *The Playboy of the Western World*, which is now a classic. This play was not about an Irish peculiarity, but about a universal weakness of mankind: the habit of admiring bold scoundrels. Most of the heroes of history are bold scoundrels, you will notice. […] Well, […] this silly Dublin Clan-na-Gael, or whatever it called itself, suddenly struck out the brilliant idea that to satirise the follies of humanity is to insult the Irish nation, because the Irish nation is, in fact, the human race and has no follies, and stands there pure and beautiful and saintly to be eternally oppressed by England and collected for by the Clan. (qtd. in Gregory 300)

Seemingly, Shaw must have understood what Synge was trying to do through his drama. Yet, the nationalistic audience of Dublin did not appreciate *The Playboy*. While trying to depict the local material, Synge's means of representation of the Irish

peasantry inhabiting the west of the country caused certain problems with regard to construction of national identity because the "Irish audiences were not ready for such self-reflection at the time" (Vandevelde 120) *The Playboy* was produced. As a consequence, "the audience accused Synge of calumny, objecting to what they saw as the play's misrepresentation of Irish life" (Markey 42).

The historical context of the play is of crucial importance in order to understand *The Playboy* and the audience's volatile reaction to Synge's subverting the Irish peasantry. Hence, the riots that accompanied the play in its early years of stage life should be analysed together with political and religious causes lying beneath. Despite the fact that Synge was not in line with any political views of his age, he wrote his plays during a time of transition in Ireland. The spirit of nationalism dominated the country in the nineteenth century. Therefore, no matter how apolitical a person was, in the context of the nineteenth century "to dramatise the peasantry in any way was itself a 'political' act, endowed with ideological significance" (Hirsch, "Gallous" 103). Thus, the representation of the Irish countryman was simultaneously associated with the concept of a new nationalistic and independent Ireland. It is argued that "[n]ational drama fulfilled a prestigious, exemplary role in Ireland; there was a consensus that "authentic" peasant drama offered the best reflection of national life" (Vandevelde 120).

In matters of national identity in Ireland, as Macanna asserts, "[p]atriotic sentiment on the Dublin stage was automatically greeted with rounds of applause" (93). In order to achieve this patriotic sentiment, the nationalistic audience preferred dramatised myths and legends. They further demanded an accurate but a praised representation of the Irish peasants on the stage rather than the English negative portrayal. "Every society and official tradition," as Said claims, "defends itself against interferences with its sanctioned narratives; over time these acquire an almost theological status, with founding heroes, cherished ideas and values, national allegories having an inestimable effect in cultural and political life" (380). Irish history was full of these. There should have been, for instance, adequate examples of manhood that represents the victory against the English. These archetypes of manhood were deep rooted in myths and history. What nationalists sought was that the courage of the heroic models of the past should be imitated in the present. As Mary Helen Thuente highlights, "[t]he

reinterpretation of Irish history was central to the nationalist's attempt to reawaken Ireland, to inspire the people to manly action" (56).

While the nationalists called for manhood, Synge provided them with the exact opposite of their ideal. He opposed to this extreme characterisation of the Irish in constituting a new nation. Thus, his nationalism deviates in a radical manner from that of other writers of the movement. As Castle articulates, "[i]t is important to stress here that Synge seeks to revise not only colonialist and anthropological attitudes and stereotypes of the Irish, but also those attitudes and stereotypes developed in the Revival's own projects of ethnographic redemption" (*Modernism* 141). In other words, Synge did not accept the politics of identity as given. In his essay "Sharp Critique of Excess", Kiberd narrates how Synge was not involved in the creation of a noble character in direct opposition to the Stage Irishman. According to him, while rejecting the braggadocio and feckless characterisation of the Stage Irishman of the past, Synge did not want to participate in the creation of the anti-Stage Irishman in his day either (184). Thus, Kiberd provides information about Synge's views on producing a prototype for the national drama. According to Kiberd's essay, Synge states that

> […] [i]t should never be forgotten that half the troubles of England and Ireland have arisen from ignorance of the Irish character, ignorance founded on the biased views of British and Irish historians and on the absurd caricatures which infest the majority of plays and novels dealing with Irish folk and affairs. Lever, Lover, Boucicault and *Punch* have each achieved much in the way of making the Irish character a sealed book to Englishmen. (184)

This shows that Synge is not in line with the views of some of the Irish writers who are determined to eliminate the Stage Irishman. "In a sense, Synge grants himself the right to represent precisely by refusing to conform to existing (mis)representation" (Castle, *Modernism* 135). However, his avoidance of creating a noble peasant or a daring hero on stage in accordance with the demands of the nationalistic circles received harsh criticism from those striving determinedly to found an independent culture. It was regarded as an estrangement from the nationalist community. As Kopper points out

> *The Playboy* seemed to revive the image of the apelike Irishman caricatured in British tabloids of the late nineteenth century. Worse still, the play attacked the supposed purity of the western Ireland peasant at a time when the Irish looked for renewal to a pastoral west that never really existed. Additionally, *The Playboy* seemed to dismiss concepts of hospitality and decency that average Irishmen in 1907, just nine years before the Easter Rising of 1916, needed to believe were their chief capital in the struggle against crude England. (403)

In fact, the demand of the nationalists for the creation of a national character was quite explicit. "[T]hey were quite literal in demanding that if Irish writers could not be eulogistic of what was called the national character, they should at least not be critical" (Greene and Stephens 269). In this regard, the play challenged the idealistic notions of national identity. However, Synge was content with his play. In a letter to Marie O'Neill dated 27 January 1907, the morning after the first performance, Synge praises her performance in the role of Pegeen Mike and wrote about the pleasure he feels upon the nationalistic audiences' response to the play:

> You played wonderfully I thought last night, and everyone was delighted with you… […] It is better any day to have row we had last night, than to have your play fizzling out in half-hearted applause. Now we'll be talked about. We're an event in the history of the Irish stage. (*Collected Letters* 88)

The Preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* is important as Synge explains his concept of drama there. This could be regarded as a defence of the credibility of his play. In his short yet concise preface to the play, Synge reveals certain facts about the language of his plays as language is one of the most important means in order to transfer a play from the stage to the audience. He defends his language in the play:

> In writing *The Playboy of the Western World*, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin; and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk imagination of these fine people. (96)

It is also this preface in which Synge makes his famous comment on the drama existing on the continent in his time. "Art is a collaboration" he asserts and adds that "there is

little doubt in the happy ages of literature striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the story-teller's or the playwright's hand as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time" (96). In the light of this view, Synge acted, in Gertenberger's words, "as a collaborator" ("A Hard Birth" 42), and collaborated with his people in especially rural regions of Ireland in order to reflect his time and country. By looking into Irish folklore, he acquired a rich imagination and a living language. According to Synge, modern drama had failed as the writers of his age did not represent life in an interesting way. In his Preface, he claims that the works of Ibsen and Zola are both "joyless" and "pallid" because they could not present the reality with "rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality" (96). He asserts that reality of life should be presented with joy and gaiety. Donna Gerstenberger suggests that "[b]y *joy* Synge means life-espousing vitality, the assertion of the creative self, and the expressive pleasure in speech and gesture to give form to the other two" ("Hard" 42). Synge searches for this joy in nature, especially in the west of Ireland. Thus, in his Preface, Synge introduces a kind of drama where the vitality of local life is of primary importance.

It could be understood that "[t]he relationship between imagination and real life is a constant preoccupation for Synge" (Parker 66). This is best presented in *The Playboy* because Synge fulfils what he has stated in his Preface in his play. In order to reflect local life, he made many journeys to the rural countryside. The West of Ireland particularly influenced him. He was first appalled by the poverty experienced by the inhabitants of the region. In his book called *Celtic Contraries*, Robin Skelton remarks that what Synge wrote in his notebook in 1904 after a journey in County Mayo: "In Mayo one cannot forget that in spite of the beauty of the scenery the people in it are debased and nearly demoralised by bad housing and lodging and the endless misery of the rain" (57). Later, in one of his letters to his friend Stephen MacKenna, Synge wrote about his visit to County Mayo:

> There are sides of all that western life, the groggy — patriot — publican — general-shop-man who is married to the priest's half sister and is second cousin once- removed of the dispensary doctor, that are horrible and awful. This is the type that is running the present United Irish League anti-grazer campaign, while they're swindling the people themselves in a dozen ways and then buying out their holdings and packing off whole families to America. (*Collected Letters* 116)

As can be seen, County Mayo has all aspects of western life. In his Introduction, Bloom states that Synge's "image of west Ireland is joyous in its representation, but what it reflects is barbaric squalor, credulity, brutal cupidity — a world of drunken louts and their hopelessly desperate women" (2). This image of the west of the country that was to become the source of *The Playboy* is first told in his travel book *The Aran Islands*. The account of this incident should be examined in order to understand how Synge utilised from the original folk source. Here he tells about the parricide he heard about. Synge conveys these actual occurrences to his reader:

> He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related. They hid him in a hole — which the old man has shown me — and kept him safe for weeks, though the police came and searched for him and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America. (70)

The parricide is, of course, not the only reason that pushed Synge to write a play from such an anecdote. What is more important than the deed of 'killing' a father is the attitudes of the Irish peasantry towards such a deed. Their psychology affected the dramatist more than the central incidence of 'killing' a father. Bigley remarks that "[t]he credibility of the villagers' acceptance of parricide as an admirable act, […] has been the main critical crux of the play" (91). Thus, the criticism in the play is not directed so much at Christy Mahon but at the villagers who respect him. An individual's imagination cannot make up all this illusion that Christy creates; the community also contributes to it. Likewise, Cusack argues that the tramp in the play does not have heroic qualities in the beginning of the play,

> […] instead, the community creates a heroic persona for him to fill a void in their own identities, investing him with the eloquence and virility necessary to embody his role. Thus, *The Playboy* examines not only the power of the individual to enact social change through language but also the social forces necessary to create such an individual. (262)

The shortcomings of the Mayo people are thus illustrated in an ironic way and they are ridiculed. Therefore, the play turns out to be a social critique of the Irish peasant

community. The fact that Synge was surprised at the behaviours of the society towards such criminals is expressed in the following paragraph:

> This impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. If a man has killed his father, and is already sick and broken with remorse, they can see no reason why he should be dragged away and killed by the law. Such a man, they say, will be quiet all the rest of his life, and if you suggest that punishment is needed as an example, they ask, 'Would anyone kill his father if he was able to help it?' (70)

Out of his sympathy for this "primitive feeling" and for the contradictions of these people, Synge took this record of a real event and worked upon it. As can be observed, there is only the story of killing a father in the anecdotes. In his essay "Demythologising Cathleen Ni Houlihan: Synge and His Sources", Benson argues that "[t]here the islanders are innocent and idealised, as is proved by their loyalty in not informing on the parricide" (11). However, Synge, though mostly remaining loyal to his original source, altered it by adding different details. The depiction of the Mayoites, for instance, is very different from those inhabiting the island. In *The Playboy*, the community folk are contrasted with the idealised picture of the islanders since they are regarded as degenerate people. In order to see how Synge modified the source of the play, his sketches should be examined. Before the production of the play, Synge had written many sketches on Aran. In one of his sketches, *The Murderer*, [32] Synge narrates the same story of *The Playboy* in three acts. Modifying the story, he removed many parts such as the election of Christy as the county councillor. Then, he added different characters and events to the play. For instance, the relationship between Pegeen and Christy and the characterisation of Shawn Keogh were added to develop the story further. To add to all these, the idea of an incestuous marriage in the relationship between Christy Mahon and his wet-nurse Widow Casey is also present in Synge's play whereas there is no such reference to this kind of marriage either in the original story or in Synge's sketches. Morever, incestuous marriage is also hinted through the intended marriage of Pegeen and Shawn who are cousins. In fact, Synge "was not generalising from a single case; from his life with the people he knew his plot was possible in certain

circumstances" (Spehn 57). Synge was able to see these "certain circumstances" and added certain changes to make them happen. This enabled him to write a strikingly original play from a real story.

What Synge produced from this story has always been a matter of controversy. Any attempt to categorise *The Playboy* has usually been difficult. As Crawford rightly points out "[t]he play famously defies categorisation [since it] clearly has affinities with the traditions of tragedy, comedy, romance, and even folk tales, and just as clearly belongs to none of these genres" (485). Also Edward Hirsch argues that "[…] the play creates a variety of different mythologies and anti-mythologies; thus Christy has been considered a mock Cuchulain, a mock Oedipus, a Christ figure, a mock Christ figure, a self-actualising romantic poet, and a parody of a romantic poet" ("Gallous" 114). In fact, the Oedipal conflict is one of the basic points on which the play was based. Oedipus kills his father and this crime brings many catastrophes onto his city. This proves the fact that patricide is one of the biggest sins for the Greeks. Yet, the deed of killing the father in *The Playboy* is not treated as abhorrently as in *Oedipus*. On the contrary, it is regarded as a noble deed since this point is the basis for Christy's emergence as a hero. Moreover, the fact that such a murder never takes place in actuality may enable the audience to sympathise with Christy. John Ditsky comments on Synge's treatment of a dreadful theme such as parricide with joyfulness and states: "What the Greeks would have turned into tragedy — some did — becomes tragi-comedy at the hands of John Millington Synge" (46). In other words, Synge depicts the comic aspects of the Oedipal theme.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, Synge was a more severe critic of himself than anyone in his life. Thus, he rewrote *The Playboy* many times and altered many points. In one of his letters dated 12 August 1906, to Lady Gregory, he wrote:

> I shall be very glad, thanks, to go down and read you my play *(The Playboy),* if it is finished in time, but there is still a great deal to do. I have had a very steady week's work since last Sunday and have made good way, but my head is getting very tired. Working in hot weather takes a lot of time of me. (qtd. in Gregory 130)

In doing so, Synge also revealed that he respected the opinions of the other members of the Revival. In one of his letters to Lady Gregory he says: "May I read *The Playboy* to you and Yeats and Fay, […] A little verbal correction is still necessary, and one or two structural points may need I fancy do need revision, but I would like to have your opinions on it before I go any further" (qtd. in Gregory 133). *The Playboy* could be thought as the result of this deliberate and considerable workmanship of Synge.

In the creation of *The Playboy*, not only the opinions and criticisms of the members of the Abbey but also the technical details of the production for the stage were important. The Abbey Theatre was of small size and it could not meet some of the requirements of the writers. The story told in *The Aran Islands* or in the sketch *The Murderer*, for instance, was supposed to take place in an open and ploughed field. As Synge always wanted to reflect his material in a natural way, the quarrel between Christy and his father should have taken place in a field. However, the Abbey Theatre stage could not provide Synge with a plowed field on the stage. As Lady Gregory states, "[…] when [Synge] thought of the actual stage, he could not see any possible side wings for that 'wide, windy corner of high distant hills'" (132). Thus, Synge "was faced with the necessity for shifting the scene of his play indoors, a move which underwrote the most important change in the final version of the play" (Gerstenberger, "Hard" 41). Therefore, the audience view the killing of his father on a plowed field through Christy's narration, and all events in the play take place in Michael James's shebeen. This is, in fact, a clever touch because Christy's arriving to an unknown place and telling about his murder to his audience are the most meaningful parts of the action of *The Playboy.*

The setting Synge chooses for his play is important because he "starts by creating the kind of situation in which such a transformation would be most likely to take place; he presents a soil and climate most up to welcome vigour and imagination and to make them blossom" (Price, *Synge* 162). The district that is suggested in the title of the play, "Western World", is County Mayo in the northwest of Ireland. In fact, "Synge appeared to conform to the Literary Revival's preference for an idealised west-of-Ireland location, whose distance from the anglicised east had preserved Irish authenticity (Richards 28). Yet, the geography of Mayo is of high importance to the play. County

Mayo is Ireland's third largest county. Donald E. Jordan points out the geographical characteristics of this particular region:

> In part as a consequence of its remote location and inhospitable terrain, Mayo has been rarely at the center stage of Irish history. Political, religious, and cultural changes have tended to come slowly to the west of Ireland and have rarely originated there. The rugged individuals who populated the region tended to resist fiercely external control, be it from Tara, Armagh, Dublin or London, although generally they were compelled to succumb in the end. Life in the west has been harder and starker than elsewhere in the country, but has proven to be a preservative for an indomitable spirit that has been assured the survival, if not the prosperity of its people. (14-5)

The geographical situation of County Mayo is thus revealed.[33] The social structure of the rural Irish society is also important for the play. In the Preface to the play, both reality and joy are promised to the reader and the audience. However, Synge starts to depict this reality from the very beginning of the play without any joy. As Antony Abbot's reading of the play points out " 'reality' may be defined as life as it is usually lived in Ireland — with all of its physical hardships, the threat of death, the shadow of poverty, the loneliness, the starkness, the terror of night, the tyranny of the British" (60). These were common problems for any rural area. They were all related with the former colonial status of the country as well as the Great Famine and emigration. Hence, by choosing County Mayo, Synge skilfully prepares his audience to the glamorous entrance of Christy Mahon. Townsend highlights that "Christy Mahon becomes a figure for nationalist liberation against the backdrop of an Irish west devastated, at the turn of the twentieth century, by ongoing agricultural reform and the lingering effects of the Irish Famine over half a decade earlier" (54). The devastated situation of the country at the turn of the twentieth century contributed to the depressed setting of the play. The combination of this reality and joy results in many discontinuities in the play. Deane summarises these discontinuities:

> Their background is Nature, open, wild and romantic; their foreground is Society, closed, decayed and utilitarian. The rituals of a community are invoked but the loneliness of individual heroism parallels. Mythical figures are remembered, historical detail is blurred. Love is an enchantment, marriage a travesty; lies become truths, dreams become realities; vagrancy is a virtue, settlement a vice; the heart's a wonder but there are no

> psychological problems; authority is pervasive but anarchy also prevails. (*Celtic* 57)

The setting in which all discontinuities are experienced is a sheeben near an Irish village[34] in County Mayo. The lonesomeness of the region where the shebeen is located is first conveyed at the very beginning of the Act I through Shawn words: "[…] I could hear the cows breathing, and sighing in the stillness of the air, and not a step moving any place from this gate to the bridge" (*PWW* I. 17-9). Throughout the play, one of the characters, Michael James, also uses the definition "the lonesome west" (*PWW* I. 149) in order to depict County Mayo. The emptiness is felt by all the inhabitants. "Through this suggestion that the village population has become so thin […], Synge locates the play in an Ireland suffering from the effects of the 'dwindling population' that he alludes to in his Preface to the play and the cultural breakdown that he predicted would accompany it" (Cusack 268). Most probably, this "dwindling population" is the result of emigration which is one of the realities of Irish rural life at the end of the nineteenth and in the beginning of the twentieth centuries. In the post-Famine Irish society, many people emigrated to other countries particularly to Britain and the United States in search of a better life. The emigrating people were mainly men, thus contributing to the diminishing of the rate of men in the Irish population. According to Sternlicht, what Synge focuses on in his play is

> […] the stagnation of provincial life caused by inertia resulting from the crushing alliance of the Church and the British government, the remoteness of the West, the lack of education, and the loss of the 'brightest and the best' of the young people through emigration. Young Irish women who remained behind on the insufficient and worn-out land were especially hurt by the fact that far more young men than women emigrated, and those who remained behind could afford to marry late or not at all. (16)

The play is labelled as a comedy, yet the harsh realities of the post-Famine rural countryside are made explicit by the characters as their

> language is already beginning to create, in the comic world, the same kind of supernatural presences which inhabited the bleak landscape of *Riders to the Sea*, but since death is not an immediate reality in [*The Playboy*'s characters'] lives, their imagination is channelled into a riotous exploration of its most sensational forms. (Jones 82)

In *The Playboy*, the impoverished condition of the rural west of Ireland and how people live there are illustrated. "With the exception of Shawn and, presumably, Father Reilly, everyone living in the small, remote Mayo village is stifled by the drabness of existence and longs for action and excitement" (Price, *Synge* 162). Pegeen, for instance, "yearns for a time when exciting things happened: she emphasizes two things, violent acts and storytelling" (Abbot 64). The conversation between Shawn and Pegeen illustrates their opposing views about life in County Mayo:

> PEGEEN. [*looking at him teasingly, washing up at dresser*] It's a wonder, Shaneen, the Holy Father'd be taking notice of the likes of you, for if I was him, I wouldn't bother with this place where you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and the Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits. We're queer lot these times to go troubling Holy Father on his sacred seat.
>
> SHAWN. [*scandalised*] If we are, we're as good this place as another, maybe, and as good these times as we were for ever.
>
> PEGEEN. [*with scorn*] As good, is it? Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding tears about their feet. Where will you find the like of them, I'm saying?
> (*PWW* I. 38-52)

As mentioned above, Pegeen first depicts her environment. From this depiction, it could be understood that Pegeen "dwells in a sort of wasteland in which […] the brave and imaginative men are gone, and all that remain are the squinting, the lame, the mad — and her cousin Shawn" (Oliver 164). In such a barren world inhabited only by physically impotent men, Pegeen yearns for the glamour of the past and its heroes and patriots. This could be regarded as a yearning for nostalgia. In fact, she could be regarded as the spokesperson of the folk community of Mayo who desire a strong masculine figure that is both strong and capable of telling his stories. Such heroes do not exist in the present time of the Mayoites. Therefore, "[i]t is a little difficult to see why a dirty ignorant lad becomes their idol, unless one remembers how a curiosity would appeal to folk bored with the monotony of a peasant's life, how the Irish admire the spirited and the brave" (Spehn 87).

Moreover, Pegeen's statement about the peculiarities of ancient heroes is important as it shows how a real hero should be. The ancient local heroes whom Pegeen recalls are mainly outlaws. For instance, she speaks about Daneen Sullivan who attacked a policeman, namely the agent of English law. In this regard, Cusack may be right in claiming that

> […] heroism is synonymous in her mind with law breaking. This connection between criminality and heroism provides a more concrete explanation for why no such heroes remain in the village, as the very acts that would allow them to emerge also cause them to be imprisoned, executed, or forced to emigrate. The barrenness of the village, then, is not simply the result of historical deprivation but of colonial oppression as well. (273)

In the case of Marcus Quinn, the colonial authority is also felt. He is associated with the narrative ability of ancient heroism to next generations. "Heroes, storytelling, and criminality are all aspects of the same identity, which colonial authority has robbed the village of its ability to sustain" (Cusack 273). These aspects of Irish national identity are an indispensable part of the joy Synge speaks of in his preface. Yet, they are also important as they prove how colonialism penetrated into the Mayo community. The society Synge depicts in his play is a colony. The effects of colonialism are thus shown to the audience although most of them are mere backdrops.

Synge "took the violence of the colonisers [but] his deeper interest was in how the colonised cope with the violence in themselves, their situation and their daily life" (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 166). In other words, he depicted the reality of County Mayo, but he also added the "joy" that he mentioned in his Preface. "The joy," according to Abbot, "is a quality imposed on reality by one's inner vision, by one's poetic imagination, by one's capacity to dream, by one's capacity to create illusion." (60). It is Christy Mahon who will bring joy to the harsh realities of the Mayo community. He will create the action and excitement that the Mayoites crave for. He enters this established community from an outside world. No one like him has ever arrived at this remote town before. "Synge uses the stock dramatic device 'the arrival of the stranger' to create the mix of forces out of which a set of new rules will emerge" (Ditsky 48). His arrival is first heard through Shawn:

> PEGEEN. [*turning on him sharply*] What's that? Is it a man you seen?
>
> SHAWN. [*retreating*] I couldn't see him at all, but I heard him groaning out and breaking his heart. It should have been a young man from his words speaking. (*PWW* I. 68-71)

Later in the play Michael James also refers to the presence of a foreigner in the ditch when he tries to convince Shawn to stay with his daughter: "[…] You'll do that surely, for I've heard tell there's a queer fellow above going mad or getting his death, maybe, in the gripe of the ditch, so she'd be safer this night with a person" (*PWW* I. 121-4). Seemingly, Michael James and particularly Shawn Keogh are both "good" Christians. Yet, "neither of these presumed Christians has responded to the sound of a fellow-human in need" writes John Ditsky and further states that they both have "failed this Good-Samaritan test" (48).

The story begins with the arrival of Christy to a shebeen which is the social centre of the region. The shebeen of Michael James is, in fact, a cottage kitchen

> that had been converted to a shebeen: the trappings of the typical cottage kitchen, however, are still present — the open hearth and the two doors. Set decoration is most always sparse: a table, stools and/or benches, various kitchen and/or farming implements — a kettle on the fire, a knife, buckets, rakes, harnesses or a harness rack, etc. (Richmond 259)

The villagers except Pegeen Mike are expected to attend a wake in a nearby village. The wake to which the men in the shebeen will attend is also important as it shows the "all-night debauchery of a local wake" (Pilkington 56). It is one of the ways by which people come together. Except for such drinking meetings, County Mayo does not offer much to do for its people.

Pegeen is supposed to stay in the sheeben in this lonely and desolate place. In fact, Synge seems to make a comparison between the inside and outside spaces:

> Both spaces accrue positive and negative associations. The interior space suggests security, warmth, companionship, and a sense of belonging, but it is also linked with convention, confinement, repression, and lack of imagination. The roads connote freedom, lack of social constraints, adventure, and excitement, but they are also associated in the plays with

> danger, hardship, pain, loneliness, and in some cases deformity and death. (Parker 69)

The loneliness felt by the characters in an isolated atmosphere is first conveyed through Pegeen's speeches. When Pegeen and Shawn are alone in the shebeen in the beginning of Act I, there is not a love talk between the couple that is supposed to marry soon. Rather, she complains about her father's thoughtlessness in going to a wake: "He is surely, and leaving me lonesome on the scruff of the hill. Isn't it long the nights are now, Shawn Keogh, to be leaving a poor girl with her own self counting the hours to the dawn of the day" (*PWW* I. 25-9). Since she is seized with fear, she craves for company. The reason for this fear is understood when she asks: "Isn't there the harvest boys with their tongues red for drink, and the ten tinkers is camped in the east glen, and the thousand militia — bad cess to them — walking idle through the land? There's lots surely to hurt me […]" (*PWW* I. 108-111). Thus, the threatening presence of the tinkers who were represented in *The Tinker's Wedding* is also introduced here, though in the background. The events begin on a dark night when the idea that many bandits, madmen, tinkers and the like may be hanging around on the outside is thus made clear from the very beginning. In his essay "The Dramatic Imagination: *The Playboy*", Price says that "upon this inert community certain disorderly groups impinge […]" (20). The existence of tinkers or other vagrants is regarded as dangerous because of the fact that they are all associated with savagery. "In fact, in *The Playboy of the Western World*, travellers are an 'absent presence' that allows Synge to differentiate between his protagonists, who are wanderers, and the 'tinkers' who exist offstage" (Hynes 164). Besides, keeping these outcasts offstage could be interpreted from a different angle. These people may seize the inhabitants with fear, yet the main source of this fear is the natural environment the characters live in.

Nature is of high importance for Synge. In *Riders to the Sea*, for instance, nature is the antagonist of the play dramatically affecting the lives of the islanders. In *The Playboy*, on the other hand, nature does not have much influence on the characters since it is in the background. It is no longer regarded as a character taking part in the play. "Indeed," as Fermor also points out, "in such a play as this, a wild comedy, set, not in a lonely mountain-hut, but in a public house which is the social centre of its district, there would

seem no place for the presence of nature" (170). Yet, as mentioned above, the main reason for Pegeen's extreme fear of staying alone in the shebeen could not only be attributed to the existence of vagrants. Cusack argues that "it is not so much the presence of predators that frightens her as the absence of humanity" (267). The characters live in an isolated countryside. Because of this, Pegeen demands her father to stay with her. Michael James has to make a decision whether to stay with his daughter or attend the wake. As a father, he is expected to stay with his daughter. As a member of the community, he has to attend the wake with the other men. When her father talks about her queerness in a good-humoured way, she says angrily: "If I am a queer daughter, it's a queer father'd be leaving me lonesome these twelve hours of dark, and I piling the turf with the dogs barking, and the calves mooing, and my own teeth rattling with fear" (*PWW* I. 103-5). This incidence shows that the emptiness of the landscape has a profound influence on the lives of the characters.

The incidence between a daughter scolding his father and a father's indecision upon his daughter's protests is also important as it shows the topsy-turvy situation of the gender roles. Cusack remarks:

> The specific combination of strength and vulnerability in Pegeen Mike, who is afraid to be alone at night but contentious enough to reprimand her father for leaving her, points to a larger breakdown in the social structure of the village: gender roles, according to traditional patriarchal definitions, are reversed. (268)

In the play, while the Mayoite women are masculinised, the men are depicted as feminised. Therefore, the women seem stronger whereas the men are portrayed weaker. Women's superiority over men is also felt in decision-making processes. For instance, Pegeen is more active throughout the play. In Sternlicht's words, "Pegeen has a touch of the masculine in her" (15). She rebukes her father. She has a rather commanding role over her fiancé, too. It is also Pegeen who insists in employing Christy as a potboy in the shebeen despite the resistance of her prospective partner who is "the only other young bachelor in the play and Synge's stand-in for the emasculation of the national body" (Townsend 55).

It is remarked that "[b]etween Pegeen's irresponsible father and her cousin's whimpering cowardice, the male characters are uniformly unappealing, either unwilling or unable to protect the bored females" (Hirsch, "Gallous" 112). The lack of strong male figures in the village is best illustrated in the character of craven Shawn Keogh. In his work entitled *Strange Country*, Seamus Deane identifies Keogh as "the conventional servile figure in Irish writing, frightened of the state and of the church, an apology of a man in the most comprehensive sense, forever enslaved" (*Strange Country* 143). When Pegeen wants a companion in order not to stay alone in the shebeen, the audience may think Shawn who is expected to marry her soon will stay with her. Yet, he stubbornly refuses to stay lest Father Reilly disapproves and rebukes him. Here, Synge draws attention to the relationship between Pegeen and Shawn from two different aspects. First, he tries to depict the relationship of a young couple. As Bourgeois states "[w]e already know from *In the Shadow of the Glen* that marriage among the Irish villagers is less a question of individual liking than a business transaction" (195). The same statement could be valid for the situation of Pegeen and Shawn. No matter how reversed the gender roles in the society, patriarchial values still dominate the society. This fact is best understood with Pegeen's intended marriage to Shawn. This marriage could be regarded as a symbol of all marriages that took place in rural areas during the nineteenth century. Gough's remark that "[t]he Famine haunts Synge's play as it haunted western Ireland and the political struggle between Ireland and Great Britain," could be a good point to understand these kinds of marriages. After the Great Famine that caused the death of millions, there began a rampant emigration in the nineteenth century. As a result of this process, men of County Mayo also left the region while the women stayed. In their world dominated by poverty and depletion, emigration was the only way to survive. This was the picture in many rural parts of Ireland. As a result of these natural phenomena, Shawn Keogh is one of the few bachelors available in Mayo since he has not left the county. In a review of *The Playboy* in *Irish Times*, Patrick Kenny draws attention to the outcomes of the emigration that shaped the Irish social structure dramatically. According to Kenny,

> the fit [men] have fled . . . [and] the 'Shaneens' remain to reproduce themselves in the social scheme. We see in him how the Irish race die[s] out in Ireland, filling the lunatic asylums more full from a declining population,

> and selecting for continuance in the future the human specimens most calculated to bring the race lower and lower. (qtd. in Townsend 56)

The fact that Shawn has not immigrated proves that he is already in a better condition than those leaving the county in search of earning more money. In other words, "[…] in Shawn's case financial power appears to be the corollary of righteousness and the 'weapon' on which he relies in first acquiring and then retaining Pegeen as his intended" (Richards 32). In fact, such a marriage is not uncommon for the Irish rural countryside. In this example, however, the idea of an incestuous marriage makes the situation worse. Pegeen and Shawn are cousins, yet they are going to marry. Thus, "[t]he poverty and the limited incestuous nature of the society is hinted" (Deane, *Celtic* 59). This hint offers a bleak future both for the couple and the audience. Michael James talks about the potential children of this union between his daughter and Shawn: "[…] I'd liefer face the grave untimaly and I seeing a score of grandsons growing up little gallant swearers by the name of God, than go peopling my bedside with punny weeds the like of what you'd breed, I'm thinking, out of Shaneen Keogh" (*PWW* III. 420-4). There are certain reasons behind Michael's marital blessing. As Townsend asserts

> [u]sing Christy Mahon's genetic fodder, Michael will choose his racial destiny instead of accepting what the vicissitudes of colonial history have left him: Shawn Keogh's substandard loins. This gesture marks no small triumph over the desolate post-Famine landscape, and it promises to reverse the societal malaise of the period. (56)

However, this so-called ideal marital life between the well-to-do man and the country girl is to fail at the end of the play. "Christy [seems as] the catalyst in bringing the relationship to an end, but the cause lies in the nature of the society which Synge was at pains to diagnose" (Richards 34).

Secondly, the role of religion in the play is questioned through Shawn's relationship with Pegeen. As a God-fearing man, Shawn has a rather passive role in the play as no one in the play respects him. It might be claimed that the characterisation of Shawn Keogh serves two different purposes. First, according to Maurice Bourgeois, Shawn "represents the average *shoneen*, a striking example of the hopeless condition to which rural Ireland is being gradually reduced by emigration which, draining all the good

elements away to foreign parts, acts as an inverted form of natural selection resulting in the survival of the unfittest" (195). Shawn is the only man available for Pegeen. Unlike Christy, he cannot assert his individuality. Secondly, he is under the influence of Father Reilly. In the scene between Shawn and Widow Quinn in Act II, Shawn says: "[…] Oh, it's a hard case to be an orphan and not to have your father that you're used to, and you'd easy kill and make yourself a hero in the sight of all […]" (*PWW* II. 3679). Much as he complains of his orphaned status, "Shawn has a father — Father Reilly — who represents that institutionalised religion which Synge believed restricted human liberty and creativity" (Benson, *Synge* 126). Shawn is always referring to the authority of the priest and his fear of the disapproval of the Church upon his stay with a girl proves the strict morality of Christianity. "Keogh's priest-fearing ineptitude makes him terrified of any action that might be construed as improper" (Pilkington 55). For example, upon the insistence of Pegeen's father, Michael James, who tries to persuade him to stay with her for protection, he says "[*in a horrified confusion*] I would and welcome, Michael James; but I'm afeard of Father Reilly, and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard I did the like of that?" (*PWW* I. 116-9) When Michael James insists on his staying with Pegeen, he again says "[*with plaintive despair*] I'm afeard of Father Reilly, I am saying. Let you not be tempting me and we near married itself" (*PWW* I. 125-7). He even begs to the saints to help him from staying with a girl alone all night and on his persistence to stay with his daughter accuses Michael of paganism:

> SHAWN. [ ] "Oh, Father Reilly and the saints of God, where will I hide myself today? Oh, St. Joseph and St. Patrick and St. Brigid and St. James, have mercy on me now! [*He turns round, sees door clear and makes a rush for it*]
>
> MICHAEL. [*catching him by the coat-tail*] You'd be going, is it?
>
> SHAWN. [*screaming*] Leave me go, Michael James, leave me go, you old Pagan, leave me go or I'll get the curse of the priests on you, and of the scarlet-coated bishops of the courts of Rome. [*With a sudden movement he pulls himself out of his coat and disappears out of the door, leaving his coat in Michael's hands*] (*PWW* I. 137-146)

The foregoing scene provides an especially impressive illustration of how Shawn has an extreme fear of the consequences that may result from his sexual communion with a

girl. Further, he also opposes Michael James when he offers Christy to stay with his daughter. This reaction is not related with the jealousy of a lover. In Pilkington's words, "[t]he only protest against this precipitous and unorthodox chaperon arrangement comes from Pegeen's fiancé and is based exclusively on his fear of Fr. Reilly (56). These religious references point at the repressiveness of Christianity upon the lives of ordinary peasants. "Uttered through the mouth of Shawn, this ambiguous two-way satire renders the space much more problematic by creating tensions between fear and desire, between the command to stay and the wish to depart, and between the coercion of the community and the freedom of the individual" (Wang 126). Furthermore, the coat that stays in the hands of Michael James when frightened Shawn leaves the shebeen is to become important as Michael apparently scorns Catholicism as he holds up this coat and saying: "Well, there's the coat of a Christian man" (*PWW* I. 147).

Through frequent references to religion, Synge subtly demonstrates the nature of the Catholic Church and its practices in the West of Ireland. As in his earlier plays *Riders to the Sea* and *The Tinker's Wedding*, in this play, too, Synge avoids presenting any agent of the Church on stage. Kiberd puts it that the priest "is so peripheral a figure to these fundamentally pagan people that Synge does not allow him to appear on stage at all: only Shawn Keogh speaks of the priest without irony" (*Inventing Ireland* 166). The alienation of the priest among the local community is common in Synge's plays. Unlike these two previous plays, however, the name of the priest is revealed this time: Father Reilly. Yet as in these two plays, the priest has a major influence in what occurs in some of the characters' lives. In this regard, it could be claimed that although the priests are kept off stage, their "opinions are enormously important in influencing the actions of the onstage characters" (Ditsky 47).

Arriving at an unknown place, Christy attains heroic reputation, thus enabling his participation into the community. At the beginning of the play, however, the young lad seems quite incapable of integrating with the community. He is nothing more than a shy and frightened fugitive. He describes himself as a "poor orphaned traveller [who] has a prison behind him, and hanging before, and hell's gap gaping below" (*PWW* I. 247-9). He is even associated with the vagrants as Pegeen asks: "You're one of the tinkers, young fellow, is beyond camped in the glen?" (*PWW* I. 171) However, Christy admits

that he is not a tinker or a vagrant. Then, the villagers understand that Christy is afraid of the police and begin to imagine the possible crimes he has committed. In this guessing game among the villagers, Christy begins to exaggerate his story:

> MICHAEL. […] It should be larceny, I'm thinking?
>
> CHRISTY. [*dolefully*] I had it in my mind it was a different word and a bigger.
>
> […]
>
> MICHAEL. [*impressed*] If it's not stealing, it's maybe something big.
>
> CHRISTY. [*flattered*] Aye; it's maybe something big.
>
> JIMMY. He's a wicked-looking young fellow. Maybe he followed after a young woman on a lonesome night.
>
> […]
>
> CHRISTY. [*peevishly*] Ah, not at all, I'm saying. You'd see the like of them stories on any little paper of a Munster town. But I'm not calling in mind any person, gentle, simple, judge or jury, did the like of me.
>
> [*They all draw nearer with delighted curiosity*]
>
> PHILLY. Well that lad's puzzle-the-world. (*PWW* I. 194-226)

The villagers' curiosity increases. They further estimate that Christy may have committed forgery, bigamy or other violent acts. While they try to solve Christy's puzzle, they are all puzzled. It is Pegeen who gradually obtains the information from Christy's mouth. Thus, she solves the mystery surrounding the newcomer:

> PEGEEN. […] [*To Christy*] If you didn't commit murder or a bad nasty thing, or false coining, or robbery, or butchery or the like of them, there isn't anything would be worth your troubling for to run from now. You did nothing at all.
>
> […]
>
> PEGEEN. […] You're only saying it. You did nothing at all. A soft lad the like of you wouldn't slit the windpipe of a screeching sow.
>
> CHRISTY. [*offended*] You're not speaking the truth.
>
> PEGEEN. [*in mock rage*] Not speaking the truth, is it? Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of the broom?

> CHRISTY. [*twisting round on her with a sharp cry of horror*] Don't strike me … I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that. (*PWW* I. 242-257)

In presenting his deed to the Mayoites, Christy seems realistic at first as his account is rather unadorned. The murder of his father is presented, as in Henigan's words, "in its embryonic form, and in the relatively matter-of-fact terms of an unvarnished personal experience narrative" (95). He continues to tell how he killed him tersely: "I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all" (*PWW* I. 281-3). This is the basis of his story. Actually, "[t]he matter-of-fact tone of this, and the gentleness of Christy's demeanour — he protests that he is 'a law-fearing man' and not 'a slaughter boy' — impress the villagers more than a deal of boasting would have done" (Price, *Synge* 163). The image of such a timid and humble boy sitting peacefully with his drink, but claiming that he has killed his father makes the villagers admire him. "Instead of branding him an outlaw or wholeheartedly ostracizing him as a madman, the people of the village and the surrounding areas are taken with the stranger's charm and charisma" (Mawyer 9).

Thus, the adulation of Christy Mahon who is mistaken for 'killing' his father is the focus of the play. Apparently, he has a tendency to lie and exaggerate what he says. Still, he has an important role as a storyteller. But he retells his story again and again since he has realised the fact that not the deed of 'killing' his father but the telling of it turned him into a full-blooded hero and a legendary figure in the eyes of the villagers. Christy's imagination gains impetus when he witnesses the admiration of the Mayoites for his tale. "As the legend expands at the hands of his audience he accepts the additions, assimilating them so rapidly that they soon become part of his own memory of die event" (Fermor 177). Having understood that the Mayoites obviously esteem him as a hero, Christy enhances his story by adding different details. The touches he adds in order to embellish his story proves Christy's power as a storyteller. When he tells about the match his father arranged for him with Widow Casey, he embellishes his story with unrealistic descriptions:

> WIDOW QUIN. And what kind was she?
>
> CHRISTY. [*with horror*] A walking terror from beyond the hills, and she two score and five years, and two hundredweights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye, and she a woman of noted misbehaviour with the old and young. (*PWW* II. 115-121)

One of the men in the shebeen, Philly, summarises how the men of Mayo regard Christy's behaviour which is in great contrast to his future role. In their conversation, the men question Christy about his escape from the crime scene:

> MICHAEL. […] And what way you weren't hanged, mister? Did you bury him then?
>
> CHRISTY. [*considering*] Aye. I buried him then. Wasn't I digging spuds in the field?
>
> MICHAEL. And the peelers never followed after you the eleven days that you're out?
>
> CHRISTY. [*shaking his head*] Never a one of them and I walking forward facing hog, dog, or divil on the highway of the road.
>
> PHILLY. [*nodding wisely*] It's only with a common week-day kind of a murderer them lads would be trusting their carcase, and that man should be a great terror when his temper's roused. (*PWW* I. 284-292)

The above-mentioned details about his escape may be interpreted as a sign of cowardice by a common man. However, the men in the shebeen consider this incidence as a sign of strength. Christy's "temper" is the main reason why the men insist on Michael's employing him as a pot-boy. According to Cusack, Philly's statement "equates Christy's resistance to patriarchal authority with the ability to disrupt colonial authority" (276). Thus, the owner of the shebeen employs him to protect the shop against the English police. Philly assures Michael: "The peelers is fearing him, and if you'd that lad in the house there isn't one of them would come smelling around if the dogs itself were lapping poteen from the dung-pit of the yard" (*PWW* I. 301-3). In other words, Christy is employed in the sheeben to ward off the agents of English law from the shebeen. His presence will protect the Mayoites from colonial rule. "The characters' interpellation of Christy as a prospective bodyguard and local hero is in keeping with a tradition of

plebeian nationalism […]" (Townsend 21). In this way, Christy soon obtains the approval of the people in the sheeben.

By virtue of a tale of patricide, Christy becomes a hero for both the women and the men of the community. For the women of County Mayo, Christy is in great contrast with those like Shawn who is, in Pegeens words, "a middling kind of a scarecrow, with no savagery or fine words in him at all" (*PWW* III 355). In the beginning of Act II, the girls of the region and Widow Quinn walk four miles in order to satisfy their curiosity about the newcomer since, for the women, he is much more than an outlaw having killed his father. Spehn's comments on Pegeen's admiration can be considered true for the rest of the women of Mayo as well: "Pegeen, disgusted with the weak, spineless lads of Mayo, welcomes the Playboy, not because he has killed his father, but because in his poetic flights of fancy he embodies her ideal of a daring adventuresome spirit" (75). Abbot remarks that "[t]he artist-the man who tells the story, not the man who committed the crime-is the man who excites Pegeen and the girls" (65). For the men of Mayo, on the other hand, the deed of killing someone is more important. For them, Christy is the embodiment of an ancient hero in present times. The main reason for this admiration lies, of course, in the fact that Christy has turned their mundane life into something extravagantly colourful. Moreover, he has the courage that is absent in Shawn Keogh and the rest. The deed of 'killing' his father is told to the Mayo people from the mouth of Christy. There may be some suspicions about it, yet Christy achieves to dispel all these suspicions. He becomes popular, for, as Jimmy Farrell says, "[b]ravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, […] would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell" (*PWW* I. 304-6).

In fact, every character in the play attributes different aspects to Christy's characterisation and he accepts all of them. In other words, "[i]n the course of the play Christy becomes all the shapes which each character sees in him" (Jones 94). Throughout his maturation process, he is regarded differently. "Is [Christy Mahon]," asks Bigley, "a hero, a buffoon, a fraud, a Christ figure, a mock Christ, a Promethean figure, a demonic figure, an Oedipal figure, the last hero of the decadent West?" (89). For Pegeen and the other women in the play, for instance, Christy is the epitome of a real man as he has all the manly characteristics that Shawn lacks. It is also Pegeen who

resembles Christy to poets. Bewildered by his passion, she says: "[…] I've heard all times it's the poets are your like, fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused" (*PWW* I. 397-9). While watching him with delight, Pegeen says: "You should have had great people in your family, I'm thinking, with the little small feet you have, and you with a kind of quality name, the like of what you'd find on the great powers and potentates of France and Spain" (*PWW* I. 365-9). Here Pegeen's praise of the "quality name" of Christy is important. John Ditsky asks: "What can she possibly mean, if some impossibly erudite and distinctly Irish association is not meant to be conveyed? For what could be commoner, on the face of things, than 'Christy Mahon', Christian Man, the Irish Everyman?" (49). It may arguably seem that Christy's name suggests he is Christ. Since Christy appears as the harbinger of the salvation that the Mayoites yearn for, he is thought to be symbolising Christ. According to Bretherton, "[…] his entry into a community, apotheoses, and rejection by that community followed by his own leave-taking, an ascendancy of sorts, echoes the progress of Christ on earth" (323). However, this turns out to be a parody. Christy Mahon happens to be a mock Christ.

As can be seen, it is not clear which role Christy welcomes throughout the play. Besides, the young lad's background arouses the interest among the Mayoites. In the following dialogue, Pegeen tries to figure out what kind of a lifestyle Christy had before 'killing' his father:

> PEGEEN. […] And I thinking you should have been living the like of a king of Norway or the Eastern World.
>
> CHRISTY. [*laughing piteously*] The like of a king, is it! And I after toiling, moiling, digging, dodging from the dawn till dusk with never a sight of joy or sport saving only when I'd be abroad in the dark night poaching rabbits on hills, for I was a divil to poach, God forgive me [*very naively*] and I near got six months for going with a dung-fork and stabbing a fish. (*PWW* I. 426-434)

In the above-mentioned speech, Christy reveals the fact that he is an ordinary Irish peasant no matter how diverse figures the characters in the play attribute to him. Since Christy's life "[…] is a life of constant and unfulfilling work, interspersed with exceedingly rare moments of enjoyment", such a life "reflects exactly the kind of dull, miserable existence common to the Irish face" (Mawyer 10). The emptiness of Christy's

life is thus revealed. A man leading such an ordinary life cannot be expected to commit a serious crime.

Maybe as a result of such an assumption about the way of living in the rural countryside, in the original story the islanders' response to a criminal is justified as they would usually ask: "Would anyone kill his father if he was able to help it?" (*The Aran Islands*, 70) In this respect, there are some differences between the play and its source in terms of rendering the theme of parricide. "In the Aran account the parricide is excused [while] in *The Playboy* it is glorified" (Benson, *Synge* 116). However, in *The Playboy* a similar view of this legitimate reason behind murder can be found in the following conversation between the characters:

> PEGEEN. [*with blank amazement*] Is it killed your father?
>
> CHRISTY. [*subsiding*] With the help of God I did surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother may intercede for his soul.
>
> PHILLY [*retreating with Jimmy*] There's a daring fellow.
>
> JIMMY. Oh, glory be to God!
>
> MICHAEL. [*with great respect*] That was a hanging crime, mister honey. You should have good reasons for doing the like of that.
> (*PWW* I. 256-265)

In this regard, the characterisation of Old Mahon also seems to justify Christy's "murder" and leads to the glorification of Christy as a hero. Old Mahon is a patriarchal father. As Martin puts it, "[t]he presence of Old Mahon in Christy's life had in itself been ferocious and formidable" (36). Likewise, Gerstenberger puts forward that "[i]n a very real sense, old Mahon 'deserves' to die because he has sought, in his treatment of his son, to thwart the natural process, the cycle of growth and supersession of the father by the son" ("Hard" 48). This conflict between the young and the old is also evident in Synge's previous plays, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Tinker's Wedding*. Yet, the attitude of the elderly, especially in the former play, may be justified as the young generations are not familiar with the living conditions of the harsh environment of rural Ireland. However, in this play, the conflict between the father and the son is the cause of everything. The old man is very tyrannical towards his son. He intends to wed Christy

with a widow in order to obtain her goods. “He relegates his son to the level of a sexual surrogate; he intends to appropriate the use and fruits of Christy’s manhood, and the initial rebellion in the boy is one which is both natural and right, one which seeks to restore the proper order of nature” (Gerstenberger, “Hard” 49). Christy has a restricted life due to the oppression of his father. This leads the introverted child to nature that is, in Kilroy’s words, “the proper school for a poet” (440). In other words, he finds solace in nature. In terms of the traditional conflict between the generations, Seamus Deane argues that such a conflict in the play “gives the social victory to age, the existential victory to youth” (*Celtic* 53). In fact, Deane may be right in his claim of the youth’s existential victory owing to the fact that Christy attains a new identity as a result of this conflict.

In Act II, the simple description of the murder completely changes when Christy tells about his deed in a delighted manner. How his poetic skill has evolved so far is best illustrated in the following scene:

> CHRISTY. [*impressively*] With that the sun came out between the cloud and the hill, and it shining green in my face. ‘God have mercy on your soul,’ says he, lifting a scythe; ‘on your own,’ says I, raising the loy.
>
> SUSAN. That’s a grand story.
>
> HONOR. He tells it lovely.
>
> CHRISTY. [*flattered and confident, waving bone*] He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet. (*PWW* II. 144-154)

Susan and Honor comment on Christy’s new role as a great poet. Indeed it is a grand story, yet it is Christy that entrances his listeners. Henigan remarks on Christy’s power as a poet and the contributions of his audience. He claims that

> while he often takes his cues from the members of his Mayo audience, his ability to articulate his story and his emotions is his alone: he displays verbal and narrative skill early enough in the play for his subsequent eloquence to be entirely credible, and this eloquence grows not through dependence on the words of others but in direct relation to the

> encouragement of his audience and to his consequently increasing confidence level. (99)

As can be understood from the quotation above, the plausibility of the "murder" story contributes to Christy's self-assurance lying dormant within his character. Likewise, Crawford acknowledges that Christy "[…] becomes more and more confident and poetical through the rehearsal of his da-killing story" (483).

This confidence is first seen in the beginning of Act II when Christy's view of himself becomes similar to that of the Mayoites. Here, Christy is seen doing some chores such as cleaning a girl's boots and counting jugs on dresser. He is still a peasant and has to work in this shebeen, yet he imagines a different life. He tells his future fantasies although there are some differences between real life and his future ideals. Cleaning the boots, he takes a looking-glass from the wall, places it on the back of the chair and watches his face while washing his face. Upon examining his face in the mirror, he realises his physical characteristics:

> CHRISTY. Didn't I know rightly I was handsome, though it was the divil's [sic] own mirror we had beyond, would twist a squint across an angel's bow, and I'll be growing fine from this day, the way I'll have a soft lovely skin on me and won't be the like of the clumsy young fellows do be ploughing all times in the earth and dung. (*PWW* II. 15-19)

In fact, this could be regarded as a crucial point in terms of Christy's transformation both physically and psychologically. Until this moment in the play, he has not realised his own potential. But now he understands that he can change both his social status in life and his physical appearance. "What facilitates this moment of change is of course the magic mirror that allows him to destroy a false image of himself in the past and to create a new for the days to come" (Wang 136). This act of examining his own image in the mirror makes Christy perceive his own power of changing his identity. He transforms from a coward to a hero. It is a kind of metamorphosis. Hence, Christy's 'killing' of his father and arrival at County Mayo should not only be regarded as a salvation for its inhabitants but a salvation for Christy, as well, he breaks away from his supressed past. In this respect, it can be claimed that this is a reciprocal process changing the lives of the Mayoites and Christy at the same time.

Furthermore, through this metamorphosis, Christy becomes aware of his sexual attractiveness. In Townsend's words, "[t]he tale also marks the Playboy as a source of sexual promise" (55). In order to understand this sexual promise, Christy's past should be analysed thoroughly. It is Old Mahon who provides the necessary information about Christy's past. In the past, Christy was considerably different. Old Mahon says: "If he seen a red petticoat coming swinging over the hill, he'd be off to hide in the sticks, and you'd see him shooting out his sheep's eyes between the little twigs and leaves, and his two ears rising like a hare looking out through a gap" (*PWW* II. 460-4). Mahon continues to reveal the facts about his son and states: "[…] wasn't he the laughing joke of every female woman where four baronies meet, the way the girls would stop their weeding if they seen him coming the road to let a roar at him, and call him the looney of Mahon's" (*PWW* II. 473-6). According to Ditsky, Christy's "new sexual appeal is the result of his desperado's reputation" (50). From his recognising himself by means of a mirror glass comes the courage to speak with the girls. "Because of his imagination, because of his imaginative ability as a poet, his reality is changing. He goes off to the games, and he does in actuality become the playboy of the Western world" (Abbot 66).

As a result of this self-recognition, Christy even gains the courage to participate in the local games. In fact, the games that take place in the beginning of Act II are important as they prove the fact that the gap between Christy's real and imagined identity does not exist anymore. According to Gerstenberger, Christy "finds that the self created in imgaination can triumph in actual contest […]" ("Hard" 46). She further states that "Christy Mahon, who has projected himself as a father-killer of epic proportions, participates in games which parody, perhaps, the epic games of traditional heroes" ("A Hard Birth" 46). After this point in the play no one can defeat Christy as he is now aware of his manhood. This assurance enables him to win victories in the games. Even though his father appears in Act II, he is sure of himself, and feels relaxed. Knowing the awards awaiting his deed of 'killing' his father, he bitterly regrets that he did not kill him before and says to himself that he is a complete fool: "Well it's a clean bed and soft with it, and it's great luck and company I've won in the end of time — two fine women fighting for the likes of me —, till I'm thinking this night wasn't I foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by" (*PWW* II. 594-7). Not having killed his father years ago is the only regret of Christy; but, it is not too late to benefit from this dirty deed. It

is true that a lie about 'killing' his father lay bare the potential strengths and characteristics of Christy. Yet, interestingly, Christy does not seem artificial or insincere when he adopts a new identity. Abbot asserts that

> […] the paradox of a man building his whole character on a lie; and yet, because the lie is accepted, and because he is such a good liar, and because the people aren't really interested in the truth, Christy begins to become less and less of a liar as the play progresses. In other words, he begins to become the man he has pretended to be. (65)

Christy's new relationship with the girls is also one of the awards promised to him once he achieves to be the man he imagined himself to be. Till now, Christy was "[…] lonesome all times and born lonesome, […], as the moon of dawn" (*PWW* II. 274). He even describes his sense of loneliness in a poetic way to Pegeen in the following words:

> CHRISTY. […] It's well you know it's a lonesome thing to be passing small towns with the lights shining sideways when the night is down, or going in strange places with a dog noising before you and a dog nosing behind, or drawn to the cities where you'd hear a voice kissing and talking deep love in every shadow of the ditch, and you passing on with an empty hungry stomach failing from your heart. (*PWW* II. 249-255)

The reason for this loneliness is revealed by Old Mahon who describes his own son to Widow Quinn as follows: "An ugly young steeler with a murderous gob on him and a little switch in his hand" (*PWW* II. 419-20). However, it is more important to note that Christy's life has changed completely not because he is a murderer but he has the virility that the men of the county lack. As a consequence, "Pegeen presumes Christy's sexual vigor from his violence, and the town's ladies follow suit: the local girls flirt and compete for his affections" (Townsend 55). In Act II, he proposes to Pegeen and she accepts it. Cusack argues that

> [t]he specific promise of Pegeen and Christy's marriage completes his transformation into the apotheosis of the villagers' desire: not only does he possess the eloquence and the ability to transgress the law formerly embodied in the like of Daneen Sullivan and Marcus Quinn, but he will also use those qualities to cement a marriage in the village, and thus re-start the catalog of time measured by fertility and reproduction. (278)

But this ideal of generative capacity fails. And Synge reveals the results of this failure. The new poetic language of Christy and his triumphs at the local games have been regarded as important aspects of Christy's transformation process. Eugene Benson, on the other hand, looks at Christy's poetic and athletic skills from a different angle and states that "[…] they symbolise his progressively dangerous identification with the corrupt world of the villagers" (*Synge* 122). Christy tries to penetrate into the world of the Mayoites through his newly gained abilities, yet he acts according to their demands. In other words, he accepts the mould shaped by the villagers for him. However, "Christy," as Benson further states, "[…], must be rejected by the debased society he embraces so enthusiastically in order that he may seek the lonely and difficult freedom of men […]" (*Synge* 122). What Synge tries to highlight through Christy and the Mayoites is how liberty can be obtained. Thus, it is seen that liberty could only be attained when one rejects all conventional authority rather than resigning to it. This authority could be a tyrannical parent as in the case of Christy's father. Moreover, it could be materialistic values, religion or blind nationalism that Synge believed restricted liberty dramatically. Murray claims that "celebration of freedom is the key to Synge's drama" (71).

In Act III, Christy confronts a very grim reality insofar as he begins to lose his standing in the village. When his father appears, Christy is afraid of his wrath. A hero such as this adopts his submissive role once again and says in shy terror: "What is it drives you to torment me here, when I'd ask the thunders of the night of God to blast me if I ever did hurt to any saving only that one single blow" (*PWW* III. 460-2). The return of the shy lad makes the Mayonites reject him completely. It is Pegeen who expresses this rejection: "And it's lies you told, letting on you had him slitted, and you nothing at all" (*PWW* III. 435-6). The achievements of Christy at the local games will not be enough to save him from this complex situation. "You've seen my doings this day, and let you save me from the old man; for why would you be in such a scorch of haste to spur me to destruction now," asks Christy when he tries to calm down the Mayonites. Here, Pegeen's answer highlights only one aspect of this sudden violence against Christy. She says: "It's there your treachery is spurring me [….]" (*PWW* III. 452). The Mayo countrymen begin to seek revenge on Christy because of his duping them. Moreover, Christy "can no more create a heroic persona from his actions in the village than the

Mayonites can form their own, because the villager's basic understanding of themselves demands that no person or action which originates in their village can be heroic" (Cusack 281). Thus, the ideal hero image collapses. The Mayo community have desired a hero and this hero did not commit his act before their eyes. They, however, are ready to believe in and glorify the hero as long as he proves this fact with his words. "If Christy will not embody the mythical hero they require, they are prepared for him to personify the 'divil,' that amorphous presence in their environment, so that they may bait and hang the scapegoat of their fears" (Jones 93). However, when Old Mahon appears, "[t]he crowd sets Mahon against Mahon" (Ditsky 56). Now Christy has to perform the deed on which his reputation has been founded. The crowd is hungry for this confrontation, yet in the end the father and the son defy their tormentors together. Christy wants to win Pegeen back:

> CHRISTY. It's Pegeen I'm seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself maybe, from this place to the Eastern World.
>
> SARA. [*runs in pulling off one of her petticoats*] They're going to hang him. [*Holding out petticoat and shawl*] Fit these upon him and let him run off to the east. (*PWW* III. 531-6)

At this point, Christy's love for Pegeen becomes evident. Yet, what is more important than the revelation of this love affair is that Christy refuses to hide behind a woman's petticoat. This point is worth highlighting. Upon confronting his father in the very beginning of his transformation process, Christy desperately asks for Widow Quinn's help: "Will you come between us and protect me now?" (*PWW* III. 470). However, it is suggested that Christy's transformation has been completed. Now he consciously refuses a disguise for escape. This may help him to escape from his father, yet it also means that he will leave Pegeen. When he thinks all these things, he suddenly starts up, and says to Widow Quin: "You'll be taking me from her? You're jealous, is it, of her wedding me? Go on from this" (*PWW* III. 545). Moreover, the fact that Christy now has the courage to stand against everything that he may have formerly escaped is also revealed. This is especially clear when he sees his father and says: "Are you going to be killed a third time?" (*PWW* III. 621-2)

Although Christy confesses how important Pegeen is for him, she is horrified by his violent deed and she joins the crowd to capture and hang her lover. Her statement at the end of the play could be taken as the moral of the play that even forces Christy to realise about the 'killing' of his father: "I'll say a strange man is a marvel with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (*PWW* III. 570-4). In fact, one of the most interesting points related with the play could be its presentation of violence. Synge emphasises the reaction of the Mayo villagers towards the violent deed of Christy. According to Spacks, in *The Playboy* "extreme violence is in a sense unreal" because "[b]oth 'murders' take place off stage" (8). Moreover, Christy narrates the 'murder' to the girls around him by demonstrating a chicken bone he was eating. Actually, this is the only scene where violence takes place. When he raises the chicken bone to his Adam's apple, this scene creates humour. Christy Mahon, who had the heart of a chicken until his arrival at Mayo, now brandishes a chicken bone to illustrate how he killed his father. Under these circumstances, it can be said that the act of killing is ridiculed.

In fact, Christy does not kill his father, thus these alleged 'murders' cannot be regarded as real 'murder'. Gerstenberger remarks that

> [t]he Mayo countrymen can understand a reasoned blow against an abstract oppression like that represented by the peelers; they can even accept second-hand a blow against the father in a distant field, but a murder under their very eyes becomes another matter, and they bring all their righteousness to bear on what formerly they had praised. ("Hard" 50)

How the reactions of the Mayoites have dramatically changed after learning the truth is illustrated in the quotation above. Also typical of this approach is Antony Abbot's contention that

> a violent crime committed far away in another part of the country is a piece of romance, and romance can bring some joy, some excitement into the drab life of this miserable village. They accept Christy as an exotic figure from a storybook. They also accept Christy because he is a storyteller, and a good one. (64)

The villagers in that Mayo shebeen applauded Christy for his act of emancipation, however "[t]here was no audience for heroism when it became flesh" (Deane, *Celtic* 54). The very society that admired the young lad begins to work for the expulsion of Christy from their community. Christy turns out to be the scapegoat of the Mayoites and such a scapegoat should be expelled from the society. This expulsion in Act III enables the association of Christy with Christ since it has many parallels with Christ's crucifixion. When Old Mahon sees his son among the yelling crowd, he asks: "What's that? They are raising him up?" (*PWW* III. 153) According to Benson, "[t]he triumphant procession from the strand to the shebeen is a comic allusion to Christ's triumphant entry into Jeruselam on an ass" (*Synge* 131).

Pegeen adores Christy for his courage, and Christy admires Pegeen for her intelligence. In order to gain the support of Pegeen, he is ready to do everything. When she is on side of the crowd in Act III, he becomes aware of his isolation among the crowd and asks: "[…] But what did I want crawling forward scorch my understanding at her flaming brow?" (*PWW* III. 482-3). "She is his Eve, but also his Tree of Knowledge" (Ditsky 56). With the help of Pegeen, Christy has become aware of his own merits. As Herceg claims, Christy's "development is due almost entirely to his meeting with Pegeen" (4). "Under [her] tutelage Christy becomes poet, lover, and man of action" (Edwards 11). However, Pegeen rejects him completely by taking a stand with the crowd. This could be a turning point which triggers Christy's fall, yet "[…] the knowledge that the realised self is of inestimable and intrinsic value gives to Christy a strange exultation, which pervades his every speech in the conclusion of the play" (Gerstenberger, "Hard" 45).

At the end of his transformation, Christy becomes a newly born son. This newly born son and his father are reconciled. The relationship between the father and the son is reversed since Christy has turned out to be a real man in accordance with his father's ideal. Christy leaves the village with his father Old Mahon. "If the play ended here," Abbot highlights, "we would feel the joy of the now mature Christy ready to face reality with his newfound power of imagination, but Synge wants us to feel the sense of loss generated by Christy's departure" (68). The audience may expect to see a conventional happy ending such as a wedding between Christy and Pegeen or a reconciliation between Christy and the Mayoites. However, the conclusion of the play does not offer

such scenes owing to the fact that "[…] it became clear to [Synge] that his material demanded Christy refuse membership of the settled community and also that Christy's discovery of his own nature involved the discovery and recognition of his real father" (Martin 34). Synge tried to depict the rise and failure of heroism in a communtiy. The final scene has some similarities with the first scene of the play. After the departure of father and son, the stage is left to the characters that appeared in Act I. As Fermor underlines

> [i]t is Synge's supreme skill in mixing the elements of comedy and tragic irony that leaves us at the end understanding not only how the hero-myth has been created but why. It is not Christy only, but the whole population of the small community he lights upon that has gone romancing through a romping life-time, at least for the space of two days. The starved imaginations have made themselves drunk on fantasy as an alternative (or accompaniment) to the flows of drink at Kate Cassidy's wake, and when the curtain falls on the dreary public bar and the dishevelled, half-drunk men, we see what Pegeen and they have lost in the man ' who'd capsize the stars '. The life, aspirations and frustration of a whole country-side is in the play. (179)

Pegeen, Michael James and Shawn remain. They are again in their real world that lacks gaiety. "Pegeen Mike, who belongs to the limited and materialistic world of the shebeen, cannot follow Christy in all the implications of his blow against oppression" (Gerstenberger, "Hard" 47). As a result, Pegeen and the Mayoites are more deeply stricken in their restricted world than before as they have once experienced the power of imagination. This has enabled them to realise that there is another world outside the shebeen, and it offers what their common and dull world lacks. As Ditsky remarks, "[i]n Act III, Christy's new personality develops further, distancing him rapidly from the other characters who, unlike himself, learn nothing during the course of the play" (53). In this respect, a transformation is only observed in the character of Christy. He arrives from outside to this community. Before leaving it, he has experienced all the necessary transformations. However, none of the characters experience such a transformation process. They are still in their bleak world, once again facing the harsh realities own lives. "Christy Mahon takes with him the 'joy' of which Synge speaks in his preface. His is a joy based on a capacity for feeling, for joining word and deed" (Gerstenberger, "Hard" 52). Christy cannot stay amid the harsh reality of this community having experienced this joy. Hence, he leaves this conventional society no matter how safe it

seems. Therefore, "[a]t the end of each Synge's comedies, although the solid citizens are left in the command of the stage, our hearts go with the outcasts" (Mercier 239). Similarly, Abbot argues that

> [n]early all of Synge's plays end with the protagonists leaving society: There is always Father Reilly or the law or some other representation of the stifling power of authority such as Dan Burke or the priest in *The Tinker's Wedding* or Conchubor in *Deirdre of the Sorrows.* Within this kind of world there is no room to dream, to develop the self fully. Christy realises this, and he also realises that there can be no joy or freedom if he remains under the thumb of a tyrannical father. (67)

In other words, Pegeen faces the harsh reality of her decision when she returns to her initial situation presented in Act I. She is alone with her father and prospective husband while Christy fades into a legend. She has no choice but to stay. Therefore, she cries in desolation at the end of the play. Her wail of loss is very obvious in the following conversation:

> SHAWN. [*going up to her*] It's a miracle Father Reilly can wed us in the end of all, and we'll have non to trouble us when his vicious bite is healed.
>
> PEGEEN. [*hitting him a box on the ear*] Quit my sight. [*Putting her shawl over her head and breaking out into wild lamentations*.] Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the western world. (*PWW* III. 651-4)

This cry could be regarded as the sign of one's losing hope forever. The reality of the Mayoites has overcome the joy heralded by Christy. Here, it should be underlined that this cry is not only a country girl's cry for losing the man whom she loves, but rather this man could be associated with

> […] the popular imagination of which Synge speaks; Pegeen's loss is Ireland's loss, and all of Synge's drama is an appeal to the Irish people to cultivate the imagination which is such a rich part of their heritage and not let it be destroyed either by the encroachment of priest or the coming of modern urban life. (Abbott 68)

Likewise, Cusack argues that "Synge brought onstage the Irish peasantry, the symbolic core of the Irish nation, but he did it in such a way as to undermine its revolutionary potential" (287). From this perspective, it is not very difficult to understand why the audience objected to the play. Synge depicted the reality of the Irish peasantry to them from the stage. If the peasantry is the core of Irish nationalism, then it means that the ideals of nationalism are to fail no matter how the nationalists defend it. Hence, Christy's "trajectory from impoverished servitude to autonomy constitutes a dramatic exercise in anticolonial and cosmopolitan liberation" (Townsend 53).

The comic pattern in the play cannot be achieved because it is tragedy that develops out of comic actions. As Una Ellis-Fermor rightly states that the play is akin to tragicomedy (179). Donna Gerstenberger comments that

> [a]s the gap between the realised and the ideal begins to close, however, the play ceases to be recognisable comedy; and by the end of the play, the result is the kind of recognition usually reserved for tragedy, but one without the fatal consequences attendant upon the tragic genre. ("Hard" 46)

In this sense, the play does not lead to catastrophic results for Christy. He does not experience a tragedy because of the fact that

> [i]t is about his escape to freedom […]. It is about his collusion with the settled society and his victorious rejection of it in favour of a new triumphalist attitude to the world. If the collusion with the society had resulted in his destruction the play would have been a tragedy. As it celebrates the victory of the aggressive individual will over the immoveable forces of society it must be deemed a Dionysiac comedy — the only great one of its kind […]. (Martin 35)

It is Pegeen who experiences the tragedy because the prospect of a glorious future with Christy has collapsed. The grieving Pegeen is left alone. "Inside the shebeen [she] is once again Michael James' dutiful daughter / domestic servant and Shawn's shrewish mistress" (Vaz 454).

Synge creates Christy Mahon in resemblance to the heroes of the ancient past. Yet, there are many contradictions included in the characterisation of the main character. "The coexistence of courage and cowardice, the sublime and the ridiculous, and the nobility

and the common in Christy Mahon therefore serves to deglamor the heroism associated with the idealised peasantry by some of Synge's contemporary nationalistic writers" (Wang 142). Thus, the new character created by transposing the heroic qualities of the ancient past onto a peasant in present times is neither in opposition to the colonisers' image of savage Irish peasantry nor in accordance with the nationalists' image of noble Irish peasantry.

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, a "playboy" is "a rich man who spends his time enjoying himself, especially one who behaves irresponsibly or is sexually promiscuous" (966). In fact, in nineteenth-century Ireland, "playboy" does not probably have the same denotation or connotations that the word has today. It is Widow Quin who calls Christy Mahon "the playboy of the western world":

> MAHON. [*putting his hands to his ears*] What in the name of God do they want roaring below?
>
> WIDOW QUIN. [*with the shade of smile*] They're cheering a young lad, the champion playboy of the western world. (*PWW* III. 108-110)

The fact that Christy carries off all the prizes in the games can be regarded as the reason why Widow Quin calls Christ "playboy". However, she uses this definition when she learns the story of Christy from Old Mahon. At the beginning of the play, the word "playboy" is "employed to stress the disparity between Christy's pose and the actuality" (Spacks 13). Yet, throughout the play he proves that he has won the right to hold such a title. Christy is also aware of his new identity. To the people around him, he had hitherto seemed a foolish and dull person. As he confidentially says to Pegeen: "Up to the day I killed my father, there wasn't a person in Ireland knew the kind I was, and I there drinking, waking, eating, sleeping, a quiet, simple poor fellow with no man giving me heed" (*PWW* I. 416-9). According to Price, "this is part of Synge's method of establishing Christy, at first, as a downtrodden, inoffensive creature, in order that his eventual transformation may be the more marked and glorious" ("Dramatic" 21). The frightened boy coming on the stage in Act I leaves the stage in Act III with these words: "Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the

dawning of the judgement day" (*PWW* III. 642-5). Due to the murder story and the Mayoites, the transformation has been accomplished by Christy.

To conclude, The Playboy of the Western World is analysed as it is a representation of peasants in the rural West. Synge makes a social critique of the Irish rural society in his age by presenting local materials which have universal meanings. Throughout the play, he gives references to the wrong policies of the Irish nationalists and points out that if the noble and sturdy heroes of the past are to be created in present times, the outcome may not be so much different than the Stage Irishman that has been resented by the Irish so far. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy Mahon's attaining manhood is portrayed. This process involves the 'killing' of his father, yet there is ultimately reconciliation between the two. In the beginning of the play, Christy's status was based on a lie, yet his triumph in the end is real. In Akin's words, "in this version of the oedipal situation, [Christy] undergoes symbolically in the twenty-four hours of the play what would normally take years of human development" (55). Thus, it should be understood that "Synge is not writing out the failure of heroism. He is registering its failure in regard to society or, conversely, society's failure in regard to it" (Deane, *Celtic* 53). David Greene underlines the status of Synge at the Abbey and suggests that "he was alternately hailed as a genius and a slanderer of Ireland" (1). Such a statement simply illustrates why Synge and his story of a poor county lad's 'killing' his father still attract many in the audience while disturbing others. Throughout the play, Synge's criticism of the nationalists, who defended an exaggerated portrayal of the Irish on stage, is noteworthy. The fact that he does not have sympathy for Irish nationalism becomes explicit. Further, Synge draws attention to the people who are virtually bereft of imagination and joy, thus becoming trapped in their own world. The refusal of the imagination results in the acceptance of the reality which is harsh. However, one must live by both reality and imagination in life; Synge reminds his audience this fact throughout his play.

# CONCLUSION

In this thesis, Irish peasantry and the local colour of the Irish rural countryside have been examined as represented in John Millington Synge's plays *Riders to the Sea* (1904), *The Tinker's Wedding* (1909), and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). In these three plays, Synge is concerned with the assertion of Irishness along with the unique Irish folklore. He represents the Irish peasantry who were thought as the very core of national identity in the nineteenth century. In this context, it is claimed that Ireland's folkloric elements as well as the traditional way of living of the Irish peasants are revitalised in Synge's plays. The illustrations of local colour and folkloric elements are of major significance since they are not merely ornamental but also functional in constructing a true Irish identity. The main aim of this study, then, has been to demonstrate how Synge depicted the rural Irish peasantry by making use of the folkloric, traditional, social, political and religious elements in his plays.

The plays need to be put into the historical and literary context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Ireland. During this time, Ireland was predominantly a rural society. Although the proportion of people living in urban areas increased towards the end of the nineteenth century, Ireland did not undergo unprecedented process of urbanisation and industrialisation. Moreover, Ireland was in a chaotic state. The Great Famine of 1845-1848 had already resulted in the rapid transformation of the Irish social structure in that age as this catastrophic incident caused many people to die of starvation while forcing the surviving to leave Ireland in search of a better life in other countries, particularly in England and the USA. Out of the desolation of the Famine, the seeds of nationalism were sown in Ireland. The socio-political climate of Ireland during the nineteenth century also encouraged nationalistic ideals to flourish. Further, in this age, Ireland was in a transition process from colonialism to independence. In fact, the country had been the subject of British colonialism since the twelfth century. From then on, the British colonisers attempted to annex the lands of Ireland to their country. "At the outset, they had no justification other than superior force and cohesive organisation," writes Declan Kiberd to point out how the British started their incursion towards Ireland (*Inventing Ireland* 9). This was the beginning of continuous oppression

and struggle of the Irish under British rule that was to last over seven hundred years. Given that British imperialism is, in Edward Said's words, also "an educational movement, it set out quite consciously to modernise, develop, instruct, and civilise" the Irish (223). As a result, from the twelfth century onwards, due to this alien power on the Irish soil, the Irish gradually lost all their native features including traditions, folklore, and even their native language, namely all the elements that make a nation.

In particular, Ireland's national identity suffered from this colonisation process enormously. As Kiberd puts it, "an identity was proposed for the natives, which cast them as foils to the occupiers, thereby creating the impression that those who composed it had always been sure of their own national character" (*Inventing Ireland* 9). This identity was, of course, inferior in contrast to the prestigious and superior image of the British. Douglas Hyde's address on the "Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland," illustrates the condition of Ireland and the Irishman of the nineteenth century. He points to the fact that British

> unremittingly stamped out every spark of national feeling, making Ireland a land of wealth and factories, whilst they extinguished every thought and every idea that was Irish, and left us, at last, after a hundred years of good government, fat, wealthy, and populous, but with all our characteristics gone, with every external that at present differentiates us from the English lost or dropped; […]; our history no longer remembered or taught; […]; our battlefields and traditions forgotten; the fact that we were not of Saxon origin dropped out of sight and memory. (qtd. in Dworkin 72)

This was the result of prolonged colonialism and imperialism through which Ireland lost its collective and independent identity as a nation. As a result, the Irish began to search ways for emancipation from the British. "If colonialism is a system, so also is resistance," writes Kiberd, thereby describing the nineteenth-century Ireland in which the nationalist sentiment was operating so powerfully (*Inventing Ireland* 13). There was a mounting resistance against the British in the country owing to the growth of national consciousness. According to Said, "all the resistance to imperialism was conducted in the broad context of nationalism," a term which for him "identif[ies] the mobilising force that coalesced into resistance against an alien and occupying empire on the part of peoples possessing a common history, religion, and language" (223). There were many military campaigns and violent reactions against the colonial power. Moreover, the Irish

nationalistic movement resulted in a profound political, social and cultural upheaval. In this respect, this pursuit of independence from colonial persecution could not be regarded only as an armed rebellion against the British since it was also an attempt to re-establish the national values of Ireland which were quite different than those of the colonial power's. Accordingly, throughout the nineteenth century there was struggle for a reawakening of the Irish culture in many segments of society, thus contributing to the development of new ideals in political, national, social and literary patterns.

The role of literature, particularly drama, within this revival process is of utmost significance. In attempting to de-Anglicise Ireland, many social, cultural and political groups with conflicting views on the role of the Gaelic tradition for the recreation of the country and a new national identity, emerged during the nineteenth century. As a consequence of the growth of national consciousness in the country, the Irish intelligentsia actively joined in the independence struggle and set out to create a distinctive identity, too. The main dilemma was whether Irish literature would be a means to propagandise nationalism or not. One of the results of the wide intellectual awakening in Irish society was the Irish Literary Revival. The writers of this particular movement were of the opinion that the ancient heroic and glorious past of Ireland which had almost sunk into oblivion was of high significance in moulding the new Irish identity. As a result, Gaelic and historic themes became a key inspiration for the dramatic productions on the stage. However, the writers of the Revival "rejected a role subordinate to the purposes of nationalism. [Instead], [t]hey demanded freedom to interpret Ireland in an honest, creative way" (McCaffrey 15). They somehow acquired their wish. Due to the Irish Literary Revival and the subsequent formation of the Abbey Theatre which soon turned out to be the national stage of the country, modern Irish drama reached its glory through exploring Ireland's resources of myth, folklore, language, social customs, and identity. "Authors', Yeats said to the audience at the theatre's debut, 'must be free to choose their own way; but in their pilgrimage towards beauty and truth they require companions by the way" (qtd. in Trotter 87).

J. M. Synge was probably one of the most known companions to whom Yeats alluded to in this venture by the Irish intellectuals. Being a member of the Irish Literary Revival, Synge did not engage in any debates related with the Empire and Irish nationalism. The main reason for his distancing himself from any active political struggle is that

nationalism, according to Synge, was illusory and did not offer any proper models for modern Irish identity as certain ideological desires of the nationalists were projected onto the peasantry rather than the realities of rural life. Assuming the desire to create a new identity in compliance with the demands of the nationalistic circles would be similar to the creation of the Stage Irishman by the English; Synge, therefore, refused the reified images of the new Irish identity. Thus, his drama could be regarded as a unique challenge to the ideology and myth of Irishness in his age. The fact that Synge's perspective was not in line with the perspectives of the emerging nationalistic circles resulted in the author's being regarded as a foe working against the nationalists' commonplace ideals. Hence, his plays were attacked for not serving well enough the nationalistic ideal, and each production of his plays saw many controversies and riots.

In addition, particularly in relation to the emergence of violent riots after the production of his plays, Synge's being a member of the Ascendancy should be noted. Synge's family were "typical of the Ascendancy, the powerful English Protestant minority in Ireland which called itself Anglo-Irish" (Tracy 136). His Protestant background inextricably resulted in some prejudices against him, thus contributing to the emergence of doubts about validity of his works. In spite of the fact that Synge dealt with the struggles of poor Catholic Irish peasants, he belonged to the wealthy Ascendancy class. Thus, he encountered the wrath of the nationalists who condemned the plays for not representing their notion of Ireland. What the Catholic nationalists saw in Synge's writings was probably a Protestant gaze constructing the rural Irish peasantry without endowing them with mythically heroic qualities. Synge's way of emphasising the Irish beyond the ideals of the nationalists demonstrated that he did not indulge in creating a kind of ideal character from the peasantry of his age. Instead, he dared to illustrate the Irish reality of the countryside. As a member of the Protestant Ascendancy class, he showed the Catholic peasants of the rural countryside to the Catholic Dublin audiences of his time in an unconventional way.

In his plays, Synge represents different types of Irish people such as fisherman, tinker, vagrant, priest and common peasants, thus accentuating different social classes and backgrounds. In establishing an alternative to the stereotypical representation of the Irish who are mostly portrayed as a buffoon, a drunkard, a trickster, a rascal or a jerk on the English stage, Synge achieves to constitute certain rustic portrayals. When all the

characters in three plays are examined, a general portrait of Irish peasant appears. In this portrait, the Irish is primarily represented as agrarian who is impoverished, grief-stricken and uneducated. Since there are many hardships, the countryman has to be perseverant and hardworking in order to overcome the difficulties of rural life. It is true that such a life may seem bleak and arduous, yet the peasants' lives are full of vivacity and enthusiasm. Sports and pastimes could be regarded as one of the reasons lying behind this excitement as the Irish are very fond of sports. Besides, there are also references to, sometimes excessive, alcohol consumption among the peasantry through portrayals of the sheeben and its frequenters. Through conversations of the characters, Synge also reveals how humorous and witty the Irish are. The peasants, furthermore, are portrayed as superstitious people because supernatural and mythic forces are still present in their lives. In this regard, omens and blessings are of importance for these people. There are, however, negative characteristics associated with the Irish peasantry. The author, for instance, highlights the fiery-tempered nature of the rural Irish, which sustains the assumption that the Irish are prone to violence.

Synge wrote his plays within a short time, considering the fact that his first play was written 1902 and the last one in 1907. Producing his works in the same decade, the playwright's style and subject matter did not undergo a significant change in his attitude in terms of themes or characters throughout the plays. However, it could be seen that Synge set out to write one-act dramas, then tried his hand at plays consisting of two acts and ultimately wrote a three-act comedy at the end of his writing career. In spite of the fact that there are a few differences in terms of the length of the plays, certain aspects such as exploring the folklore and assertion of Irishness remained fundamentally the same in his plays. Yet, Synge displays a different facet of his genius in all of his plays while illustrating the traditional elements of the rural Irish people in a gradually more sophisticated way throughout his plays.

In *Riders to the Sea*, with regard to local colour, Synge conveys the folkloric elements of the remote Aran Islands to the reader. He explores and captures the world of the islanders with its pagan customs, traditions, legends, manners, beliefs and superstitions. The mood of the characters is conveyed through illustrating the wild and gloomy atmosphere and natural landscape that affect the inhabitants of the island negatively. The greyness of the island reveals the loneliness, isolation and fierceness of the

environment on the most remote side of Europe. In such an environment, closeness of death is a prevalent fact in the inhabitants' lives. Focusing on the fishing cultures of Inishmaan, Synge, thus, examines a community threatened by the dangers of the sea. He exhibits the fierce and harsh life on the island with respect to men's struggle to make a living by seafaring. He also implies the condition of women who are destined to face the deaths of their menfolk. It is true that men are the victim of the sea, yet it is women who suffer the pain. It is women who endure the harsher conditions alone — as in the examples of Maurya and her daughters Cathleen and Nora who must adopt the role of the male in the household after the death of Bartley at a young age. In this regard, the resignation of a community against its fate is illustrated by depicting the struggle between man and nature. Moreover, Synge also depicts the encroaching modernisation in this archaic and isolated community. This is enacted via an illustration of the conflict between the old and the young generations, namely between Maurya and her son and daughters in the play. The young people such as Bartley, Cathleen and Nora violate the traditional and social beliefs of island life. Synge manifestly illustrates the fact that the islanders may not be involved in the throes of the modern world directly, yet they are not untouched by it.

In the second chapter of the thesis, *The Tinker's Wedding* is discussed with reference to the position of the itinerant population as an ethnic community in the nineteenth-century Irish society. "Given the pejorativisation of nomadism, and the exclusion of travelling people form nationalist history and political discourse […], it is not surprising that the problem of defining travellers in Ireland, […] is almost as elusive as travellers themselves" (Mac Laughlin 9). Yet, Synge does not neglect the Irish tinkers as their position in society is of vital importance. What Synge focuses on in this play is the boundaries existing between the settled community and the tinkers, and he mainly criticises the restrictions imposed on the tinkers by the settled citizens. While examining and criticising these boundaries between these two groups in the society, he does not suppress the effects of the Great Famine that left so many vagrants in the streets, thus reshaping the social structure of the country. In illustrating the condition of the rural countryside after this tragedy, he eulogises the life of the vagrants unadorned by superficial customs and conventions of society. This is particularly manifested in Sarah Casey's confusion over the value systems existing in the community she lives in and her

disagreement with her prospective mother-in-law Mary Byrne. As a young tinker woman, Sarah adopts an unconventional approach against her community by rejecting to be a member of it. On the other hand, the old Mary Byrne is a traditional tinker woman who refuses to comply with the rules of the community in which she lives. The society poses some restrictions on the individual, but she finds revelry and joy in nature where there are no limitations. In Mary's challenging the idea of living in accordance with the rules and customs of society rather than nature, Synge's reveals his ideal, namely liberation from a destructive society by defying custom and tradition.

In the third chapter *The Playboy of the Western World* is analysed as an exemplar of a nineteenth-century peasant community's condition after the famines and emigrations in the previous decades. Synge provides a critique of paradoxical morals and customs among the peasantry of County Mayo by presenting a myth-making process through the play's protagonist Christy Mahon's arriving at a community suffering from loneliness and desolation. The original story of parricide that Synge heard on one of his visits to Aran creates the principal concern of the play that caused so much discussions and riots after its performance on the stage. Yet the most striking criticism is directed towards the Mayoites who are too ready to believe in the "heroic" deeds of a young and naive character. With the celebration of heroism by the Irish peasantry, the playwright accentuates the fact that the heroes of past could not exist in contemporary society, which also evidences the futility of the nationalists' ideals of creating a heroic national identity from the ancient past.

When the characters and issues in *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Playboy of the Western World* are taken into consideration, the following conclusions can be drawn about Synge's drama. Initially, it should be highlighted that all the plays are based on rural way of life that Synge either experienced during his visits to Aran Islands or encountered during his childhood. *Riders to the Sea* represents the islanders' way of living that Synge experienced himself on Aran, while *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Playboy* are based on folk tales that Synge personally heard from the islanders. In other words, "[e]verything important he wrote in his brief career is directly traceable to his stay [on the Aran Islands]" (Tracy 139).

Synge chose different settings for his plays in order to reveal different portrayals of the rural Irish community. In this respect, he focused on various rural regions of Ireland and their people in his plays. It is observed that both *Riders to the Sea* and T*he Playboy of the Western World* reflect the life of peasants dwelling particularly in the West of Ireland. *Riders to the Sea* is located on Inishmaan, one of the Aran Islands in order to depict the seafaring Aran community. *The Playboy* takes place in County Mayo, in the province of Connacht in the West in order to illustrate the conditions of the rural Irish communities with regard to a changing society. Only *The Tinker's Wedding* focuses on the life in County Wicklow located in the East, yet it is also purposeful as it shows the rapid transformation of the region as a result of colonialism and urbanisation. The fact that Synge chose the West and its inhabitants could be not considered a mere coincidence. During the nineteenth century, "Ireland was so thoroughly penetrated that, apart from a few scattered areas of the western seaboard, it had ceased to exist as an 'elsewhere' to the English mind" (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 251). It was mainly in the West where remnants of the ancient Irish civilisation could be found. In other words, the geographical aspects of these regions helped to protect Irish folklore and life from any intrusion of colonialism and urbanisation to a certain extent. Thus, rather than contemplating about the characteristics that would constitute the new Irish identity in accordance with the new nationalist movement, Synge set out to analyse the West of the country as the real Irish identity that the Irish nationalists were seeking was already present in these regions. Therefore, Synge, in these plays, did not bring the past into the present. On the contrary, he looked at the present and saw the epitome of the real Irishman among the rural peasantry inhabiting the West of Ireland.

As for Synge's characters, it can be asserted that they are entirely life-like representations of the rural Irish peasantry. The three plays studied show how men and women go through certain challenges during their lives. In *Riders to the Sea*, men need to struggle to eke out a living from harsh environment. The island fishermen are powerless against the forces of the sea, and they are destined to die young. In *The Tinker's Wedding* the male character faces the oppression of the community he lives in. In *The Playboy*, on the other hand, there are more male characters most of whom are those who have not left the country by emigrating after the Famine. As can be seen, Synge's prominent male characters either die at an early age or face the difficulties of

the post-Famine period. In other words, Synge illustrates the condition of men while the consequences of the Famine, immigration, oppression and poverty are hinted at on several occasions. In this illustration, "[t]he Irish father," as Kiberd asserts, "was often a defeated man, whose wife frequently won the bread and usurped his domestic power, while the priest usurped his spiritual authority" (*Inventing Ireland* 380). In other words, Synge represents the men of rural Irish countryside that was going through a cultural and political trauma. The consequences of these phenomena have obviously a huge impact on females, too.

In Synge's writings, the representation of the female characters was dramatically striking owing to the fact that it was mostly regarded as a libel on the purity of Irish Catholic womanhood. It was also Synge's concept of femininity that led to the riotous responses of the patriots against his plays. "In the specific context of Irish cultural history, symbolic identification of women has been intensified both by the influence of Catholicism and by association with images of Nationalism" (Llewellyn-Jones 67). In this regard, women were seen as the embodiment of purity due to religion, and as the idealised symbol of the country due to nationalistic views about colonialism. Hence, Synge's characterisation of women of his age could be considered a real challenge since he destroys the images of the female devised by men as well as eliminating a taboo about the chastity of Irish womanhood. Moreover, Synge undercuts patriarchy through his representation of femininity. Although the rural Irish society is seemingly patriarchal, it is actually a more matriarchal one. Synge's realising this fact is evident in his works as he gives more voice to the women of rural regions. Neither of his women characters are passive figures. On the contrary, they actively participate in the essential incidents in his plays. In *Riders to the Sea*, how the family matriarch Maurya and her daughters Cathleen and Nora survive without the support of menfolk is illustrated while their stoicism is praised. The women characters of this play are respected by the audiences while the subsequent plays' representation of femininity aroused controversy. In *Tinker's Wedding*, for instance, Synge portrays tinker women, Sarah Casey and Mary Byrne through whom the conflict between nature and society is asserted. In *The Playboy*, in which gender roles in society are reversed, women such as Pegeen Mike and Widow Quinn are powerful female figures who do not demonstrate adherence to the conventional roles of submissive girl or widow. In this regard, the drama of Synge

shows considerable insight into the lives of women. The author contrives to portray real women living in the rural Irish countryside without supressing their sexuality, frustrations, strength, tenacity, and isolation. His treatment of Irish Catholic women in such a way is far removed from the ideal of virtuous Irish womanhood, and thus controversial.

Another controversial aspect of Synge's plays is the portrayal of clergy among the peasantry. In fact, in none of the plays studied in this thesis priests are present on the stage. Even this point may reveal the priests' alienated position among the islanders. They are sent to the rural countryside as the agents of Christianity, yet they are not involved in the affairs of rural Irish people and remain an intruder. In this respect, Synge's plots highlight the aloofness of Catholicism towards the peasantry without conveying any kind of anti-Catholic thought in contrast to general assumptions.

While pointing to the role of Catholicism in the rural countryside through the absence of the priests, Synge, in fact, eulogises the pre-Christian values of the rural countryside. He uses many folklorist elements, particularly those related to paganism because national identity can be better understood in terms of specific cultural practices. In *Riders to the Sea*, for instance, the playwright employs the customary keening tradition in the islanders' expression of their sorrows after a young fisherman's death. Similarly, in *The Playboy*, the wake tradition is referred to. These references to pagan customs and practices of pre-Christian Ireland are essential as they depict the fusion of Christian and pagan beliefs. In addition to this, these folk rituals explain how the Irish peasants cope with the grief of death in the company of each other. Synge, thus, succeeds in depicting the essential folkloristic elements of rural Irish people.

In view of the fact that the nationalist portray the rural countryside as an ideal and completely pure and perfect community, it could be resembled to an idyllic place which is in great contrast to the urban areas of the nineteenth century. Thus, the inhabitants of the countryside could be regarded as if they were dwelling in a paradisiac place away from the troubles of their age. Yet, Synge reveals the Irish peasantry surviving under harsh conditions. Having witnessed the hard life of peasants through first-hand experience, he could not distort the reality by exalting the peasant life. In all of the plays in this study, Synge neither idealises Irish peasantry nor reviles them. In addition, he

does not overlook the problems of the peasants' lives which are isolation and poverty. He only represents the Irish people's pre-modern sociocultural values in opposition to the artificiality of urban civilisation.

In these three plays the life-like representations of the Irish peasantry are achieved via the use of authentic props. Since authenticity is a central issue in Synge's plays, he persisted in the use of authentic materials on stage. Therefore, the audience see the inside of a cottage with its nets, oilskins, spinning-wheels and flannels in *Riders to the Sea*. In *The Tinker's Wedding* a tent and ragged clothes meet the audience, while in *The Playboy* a rough and untidy sheeben with its interior decoration is presented. Particularly in the first play, all of these props act as a character themselves since they present the lore of inhabitants, their social customs and religious beliefs. In *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Playboy of the Western World*, they are also present to exhibit both the local colour of the rural Irish countryside and the characteristics of its inhabitants.

It is argued that "Synge tries not only to describe [the rural countryside], its exteriors and interiors, as he saw it, but to describe it in the rhythms that he heard around him as he looked" (140), writes Tracy in order to illustrate Synge's distinctive language in his plays. Synge uses the vivid language of peasants. This language is not based on the requirements of the stage, yet it derives from the daily speech of the rustic people. Through the use of colloquial speech, Synge instils poetry into his drama and creates a kind of poetic drama that reflects the hardships of his age through a rich and lively language.

While portraying how the rural Irish cope with their problems including living conditions, death, poverty, colonialism and emigration, Synge "focused on contrary aspects of life such as youth and age, life and mortality, illusion and reality" (Schulze 64). In other words, Synge was fascinated by the negative sides of life. Yet he also underlines that one thing is common in the lives of the rural people and this is joy. In fact, this joy derives from nature due to the fact that it has a significant impact on the everyday lives of the peasants. There is certainly a positive perception of life among peasants despite the harsh and poverty-stricken conditions. In other words, Synge does not reflect rural life in a bitter tone to make the audience feel pity for the Irish peasantry. What Synge reminds his audiences is that

> if the peasants' culture represented a mystical and virtuous tradition, that culture too had suffered from nineteenth-century imperialism and from the degradation of modern times; yet, even though their way of life was threatened by the outside world, the country people displayed courage and the ability to endure. (Fleming 1)

The peasants greet their fate in a stoic manner regardless of the brute facts of their lives. The fact that their life is filled with humour, joy and enjoyment is the reason why Synge is attracted to these people. "In a way, it is all heart-rending; in one place, the people are starving, but wonderfully attractive and charming, […]" writes Synge in one of his letters, and this remark conveys the intention of Synge's choosing peasantry and rural regions as his source material (qtd. in Saddlemyer 117). The playwright set out to find both reality and joy in rural Ireland. He fulfilled his aim among the peasantry. Hence, Synge conveys the harsh reality of rural people simultaneously with their joyous nature and lively imagination.

In doing this, Synge was always accused of his complete lack of understanding of the political struggles that dominated his age. It is true that neither the ongoing political conflicts over the ideals of creating a new nation nor the chaotic conflicts between colonialism and nationalism could be observed in his plays. As a result, his political apathy can be considered as evasiveness, or his drama may be regarded limited as his source material from rural Ireland could not reflect the traumatic background of the nineteenth century. Contrary to common assumptions, however, Synge was not indifferent towards the cultural, political and social conditions of his age. As Fleming argues, "he was less sanguine about the Irish peasants than he is often accused of having been" (11). Synge covertly unveils a heightened awareness of the current problems. He is not involved in nationalistic and colonial policies, and he reveals that he is not a propagandist or an activist but an artist. His main concern is the peasantry and he suggests a different perspective than that of the nationalists by pointing out the harsh realities and problems of the era inflicted on the rural community.

Synge regarded the basic facts related with the islanders' lives as the elemental facts of human existence appealing to all humanity. Therefore, the personal experiences and observations of Synge have turned out to be universal concerns. He put simple folk on the stage in a realistic manner hitherto unexpressed and unuttered, thus contributing to the development of peasant drama, "that would serve as the backbone of the modern

Irish dramatic movement, and is a genre that continues to influence Irish dramaturgy today" (Trotter 15). This manner of approach has attracted many audiences since then. With the distinct achievement of his plays, Synge has left a valuable legacy to world drama and engraved his name on it by his keen analysis of the Irish peasantry and its folklore in a realistic but blithesome manner.

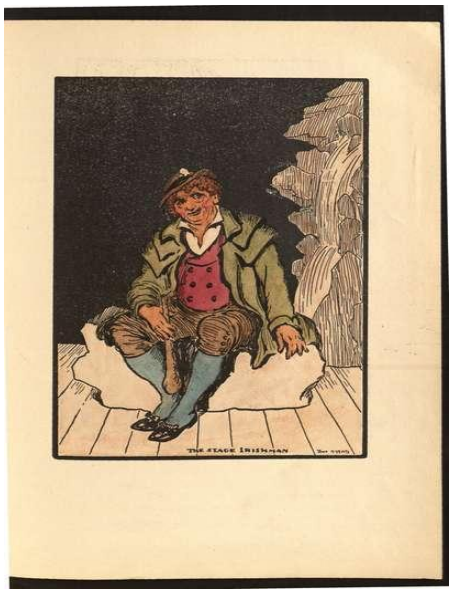
Consequently, reviving an indigenous culture in order to build a national identity and a new cultural tradition was the aim of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia. A new nation was being built. And Synge, in his own way, could be regarded among the architects of this social and cultural reconstruction of the country. Much as he was not directly interested in politics, he had an ideological stand. He thought that the rural people were the essence of national identity and the ideal of a new nation could only be achieved through these people. Thus, he contributes to the construction of Irish identity through his works. Notwithstanding that there were some controversies about Synge and his works during his age, he still had a profound impact on Irish drama and even Irish nationalism by virtue of initiating and fostering a literary revival and a national literature through popularisation of Irish rural life, and its people.

## END NOTES

[1] John Tenniel's cartoon published in *Punch Magazine* depicts the feminisation of Ireland while the masculinity and superiority of the British is highlighted, and the inferiority of the Irish race is stressed through an ape-like representation ("Two Forces").

TWO FORCES.

[1] "The Stage Irishman" by Jack Butler Yeats



[2] 


**“**The Irish Frankenstein”

[3] Rural and Urban Population Ireland (millions)

| Year | Rural | Urban |
|---|---|---|
| 1841 | 7.0 | 1.2 |
| 1851 | 5.3 | 1.3 |
| 1861 | 4.6 | 1.2 |
| 1871 | 4.2 | 1.2 |
| 1881 | 3.9 | 1.3 |
| 1891 | 3.4 | 1.3 |
| 1901 | 3.0 | 1.4 |
| 1911 | 2.9 | 1.5 |
| 1926 | 2.6 | 1.6 |
| 1936/37 | 2.5 | 1.8 |
| 1951 | 2.3 | 2.1 |
| 1961 | 2.1 | 2.1 |

(Brennan 35)

[4] Global Population of Ireland 1821-1991 (millions)

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1821** | 6.8 | **1881** | 5.2 | **1951** | 4.3 |
| **1831** | 7.8 | **1891** | 4.7 | **1961** | 4.2 |
| **1841** | 8.2 | **1901** | 4.6 | **1971** | 4.5 |
| **1851** | 6.6 | **1911** | 4.4 | **1981** | 5.0 |
| **1861** | 5.8 | **1926** | 4.2 | **1991** | 5.1 |
| **1871** | 5.4 | **1936/37** | 4.2 | | |

(Brennan 33)

[5]

"Irish women and men at work"

[6]

EMIGRATION FROM IRELAND TO VARIOUS COUNTRIES, 1876–1913

| Years | Irish Immigration to United States | Emigration to | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | United States | Canada | Australia | New Zealand | Great Britain |
| 1876–1880 | 28,356 | 27,924 | 1,300 | 3,408 | 2,159 | (33,901) |
| 1881–1885 | 69,080 | 62,736 | 5,497 | 2,234 | 753 | (18,480) |
| 1886–1890 | 56,016 | 59,965 | 2,460 | 3,319 | 167 | (9,832) |
| 1891–1895 | 45,440 | 46,494 | 842 | 927 | 109 | (4,306) |
| 1896–1900 | 32,243 | 33,006 | 475 | 779 | 59 | (6,878) |
| 1901–1905 | 36,819 | 30,768 | 1,447 | 418 | 91 | (8,634) |
| 1906–1910 | 30,996 | 24,125 | 3,538 | 542 | 165 | (6,224) |
| 1911–1913 | 27,622 | 21,411 | 5,980 | 841 | 192 | (2,012) |

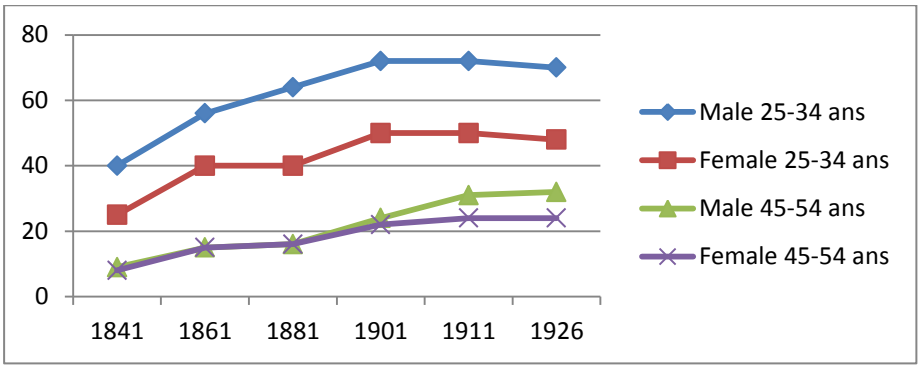
(Hatton and Williamson 577)

[7] Number of Female Emigrants to Every 1000 Male Emigrants

| Period | Women |
|---|---|
| 1871-1881 | 1010 |
| 1881-1891 | 1042 |
| 1901-1911 | 1223 |
| 1926-1936 | 1298 |
| 1951-1961 | 876 |

(Brennan 42)

[8] Male and Female Celibacy, 25-34 and 45-54 age groups %




(Brennan 45)

[9] The Number of Catholics and Protestants in Ireland at Each Census Year from 1861

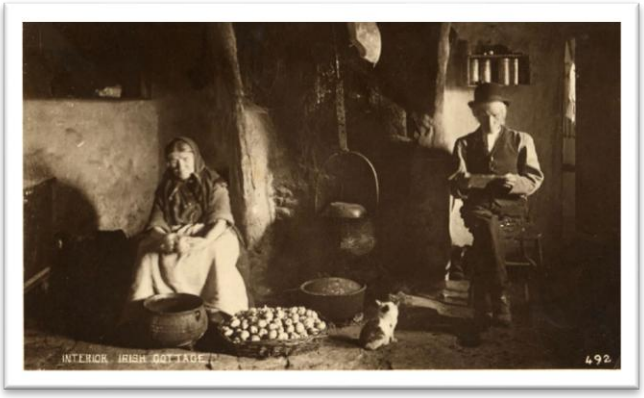
| Year | Total Persons | Catholics | Protestants |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1861 | 4,402,111 | 3,933,575 | 338,719 |
| 1871 | 4,053,187 | 3,616,426 | 317,576 |
| 1881 | 3,870,020 | 3,465,332 | 286,804 |
| 1891 | 3,468,694 | 3,099,003 | 264,264 |
| 1901 | 3,221,823 | 2,878,271 | 249,535 |
| 1911 | 3,139,688 | 2,812,509 | 164,215 |

[10] Occupations Grouped by Percentage of Protestants and Catholics Employed, 1861

| % *Protestant* | | % *Catholic* |
|---|---|---|
| 100 | needle makers, linen thread makers, damask designers, artisans in pearl | 0 |
| 90 | nobles, barons, knights baronets, cotton weavers, army surgeons, flax yarn makers | 10 |
| 80 | land agents, teachers of Irish, bankers, insurance agents, photographers, army officers, druggists, factory overseers, surgeons, authors, barristers | 20 |
| 70 | house agents, judges, physicians, linen and damask weavers, attorneys and solicitors, engravers, saddlers, merchants | 30 |
| 60 | watched makers, landed proprietors, portrait painters, artists, gunsmiths, weavers, poor-law clerks, coast guards, mill workers, prison officers, apothecaries | 40 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 50 | | 50 |
| | embroiderers, excise officers, rent collectors, post-masters, engineers, hotel keepers, clerks, drapers, flax dressers, grocers, parish clerks, factory workers | |
| 40 | | 60 |
| | milliners, shirt makers, pawnbrokers, leather dealers, sculptors, pensioners, painters, glassers and decorators, constabulary and metropolitan police, saddlers and harness makers, process servers | |
| 30 | | 70 |
| | gate keepers, letter carriers, stewards, dressmakers, shopkeepers, skilled weavers, coat makers, carpenters, farmers, loaders, housekeepers | |
| 23 | | 77 |
| | brick layers, rope and twine makers, carters, seamstresses | |
| 20 | | 80 |
| | flax spinners, tanners, bootbinders, musicians, publicans, bakers, blacksmiths, tailors, knitters, stablemen, domestic servants, prostitutes, waiters, butchers, thatchers, basketmakers, slaters, charwomen, farm labourers, fishermen | |
| 10 | tobacconists, peddlers, cattle-dealers, wool weavers, masons, chimney sweeps, old clothes dealers, carriage brokers, brogue makers | 90 |
| 0 | | 100 |

(Akenson 20)




[11] "Interior Irish Cottage. Real Photo"

12

“Poteen”

13 “Irish wake”


14 ”Keening at a Wake”

[15] The Trends in the Totals of Irish Speakers and non-Irish Speakers since 1881 (Thousands)

| | **1881** | **1891** | **1901** | **1911** | **1926** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Irish speakers | 925 | 664 | 620 | 554 | 544 |
| Non-Irish speakers | 2,945 | 2,805 | 2,602 | 2,586 | 2,428 |
| Total population | 3,870 | 3,469 | 3,222 | 3,140 | 2,972 |
| Irish speakers as % of total | 23.9 | 19.2 | 19.2 | 17.6 | 18.3 |

[16] After witnessing the response of the audience who have watched the play, E. H. Mikhail writes: "I cannot remember any applause, only that hush which falls on supreme art. The small audience had a discretion, a sense of tragedy, that purges through pity and through fear" (36).

[17] Joseph Holloway, who was a man dedicated to art and also the architect of the theatre, asserts that "a more gruesome and harrowing play than *Riders to the Sea* has seldom, if ever, been staged before" (35). Holloway further states that

> Mr. Synge has given us an intensely sad-almost weirdly so- picture of the lives of the humble dwellers on an isle of the West ... and, as it was interpreted with rare naturalness and sincerity, it held the interest of the audience in a marvellous way. This was a triumph of art, for the players as well as the dramatist, as the subject was one that the slightest error of judgment would have set the audience in a titter. But as the illusion was complete, no titter came, a profound impression was created instead. (35)

[18] The role of Bartley in conveying the tragic fate of the islanders to the audience cannot be ignored. Willie Fay, who was the actor portraying most of the major lead male roles in many of Synge's plays, performed the role of Bartley in the premiere of *Riders to the Sea* (Osnes and Gill 108). In fact, Fay was an important figure for the development of the Abbey Theatre both as an actor and a director. And through the characterisation of Bartley, he also contributed to the achievement of the play.

[19] The first performance of the play saw Helen Laird in the leading role of Maurya. She was one of the leading actresses of the Abbey Theatre. In this first stage performance, Sara Allgood who was one of the most beloved actresses of the Abbey Theatre performed the role of Cathleen and

"acted with a simplicity and sincerity that resembled nature so closely that it ceased to be acting to those who looked on" (Holloway 35). The role of younger sister Nora was performed by Vera Esposito who "made a successful debut as 'Nora' […] and played quite pathetically and unaffectedly, particularly in the final episodes of the play" (35). The acting performances of these three actresses elicited much praise from the press.

[20] "The Photos of the Aran Islanders taken by Synge"

21 "Spinning Wheel"

22 "An Aran Islander and Pampooties"


"The Curragh"

23

[24] "Irish Tinkers"

[25] "An old photo of Irish Tinkers"

[26] Nicholas Grene states:

> Throughout Synge's youth and adolescence Mrs Synge had taken a holiday house each year in Greystones and lived there as part of the tightly knit Greystones protestant community. From 1892 on, the houses she rented were in Annamoe area, close to Glanmore, most frequently Castle Kevin. Most years the Wicklow stay lasted from June through September, […]. It was from these summer periods spent with his family around Annamoe that Synge formed the impressions of Wicklow which served as the basis for his essays and plays. ("Synge" 695-6)

[27] Similarly, Jim McLaughlin enumerates Synge's reasons for his using tinkers as his protagonists in the play:

> J.M. Synge sympathised with 'tramps,' 'vagrants' and 'tinkers' both because they represented the marginalised 'other' in an increasingly petty bourgeois society, and because they rejected the mores of the society and were deeply scornful of its shallow, sanitised respectability. […] Synge rescues 'tramps' and 'tinkers' from cultural oblivion and gives them a place alongside islanders, peasants, potato 'hokers' and fishermen, the neglected and rejected in the bourgeois nationalist pantheon. Synge idealised these sectors of Irish society because they were the social antidotes to a stultifying, puritanical and late-Victorian nationalism that was in danger of suffocating cultural life in early twentieth-century Ireland. (31)

[28] The tinkers "have a pariah status and live in 'caste-like' isolation" (Hayes 134), but it is their own choice to reject the traditional norms of the society. Thus, it could be claimed that the tinkers do not experience the kind of isolation like that of the islanders living on the Aran Islands, instead they face alienation due to their own way of life.

[29] In addition to being the spokesman of Synge for his thoughts about religion, Mary Byrne is also closer to the author in terms of her views about life. Throughout the play, "Mary Byrne exemplifies in her speeches the dual world of the tramp, where life can be glorious or can also be full of loneliness and fear" (Barnett 121). Indeed, this dual world that old Mary alludes to is the one Synge had also stated in his Preface to *The Playboy*. According to Synge, life is both pleasant and bleak. And it is mostly nature that provides people with a joyous life. In the play, for instance, Mary Byrne reveals the joy of living: "[…] it's a grand thing to be waking up a day like of this, when there's a warm sun in it, and a kind air, and you'll hear the cuckoos singing and crying out on the top of the hills" (*TW* II. 30-3). Here it could be claimed that Synge's views about nature are also echoed through Mary Byrne. Like her, Synge is an admirer of the nature around him.

[30] For the actor and actresses of the play, Spehn states that

> Synge worked constantly with the actors in rehearsal and knew them well. He never mentioned that any of the actors were models for his characters, but it is likely that William Fay's genius for comedy went into Christy Mahon, that Sara Allgood's versatility was accounted for in Molly Byrne, Lavachram, and the Widow Quin, and especially that Maire O'Neill was responsible for much of Pegeen and Deirdre. (68)

All the characters of the play were performed colourfully by these leading actors and actresses of the Abbey. Upon watching the first performance of *The Playboy*, Joseph Holloway comments on the stage performances of the players:

> W.G. Fay as 'Christopher Mahon,' the hero, was inimitable in a very disagreeable role. Miss Maire O'Neill as 'Margaret Flaherty,' the publican's daughter who sets her cap at 'Mahon' and gives the cold shoulder to 'Shawn Keogh' (F. J. Fay), a sheepish admirer of her was excellent, and Sara Allgood as 'Widow Quinn' who had designs on 'Mahon' was also good. […] I only pitied the actors and actresses for having to give utterance to such gross sentiments and only wonder they did not refuse to speak some of the lines. (82)

[31] In 1907, Yeats wrote a poem entitled "On Those That Hated 'The Playboy of the Western World,'" about the controversies related with the play. In this poem, Yeats criticised the uncultivated reactions of the audiences:

> Once, when midnight smote the air,
> Eunuchs ran through Hell and met
> On every crowded street to stare
> Upon great Juan riding by:
> Even like these to rail and sweat
> Staring upon his sinewy thigh. (89)

[32] "The Murderer"

Act I (a potato garden) Old Flaherty describes his son's life and exasperates him so much that in the end he takes the loy and hits his father on the head with it then runs across the stage and out on left.
Act II (public house bar or shebeen) Christy bossing the show. Tells his story three times of how he killed his father, police afraid to follow him and other bombast, love affairs etc. At the slightest provocation he starts off again with the story.
Act III (he is being elected county councillor) Old man comes in first, and shows his head to everybody. He is as proud of it as his son is, as he is going round the crowd. His son comes out the elected member. He is put on a table to make a speech, he gets to the point where he is telling how he killed his father when the old man walks out—'You're a bloody liar, that's what you are.' Son attacks father and is handcuffed, then with his former dejection. He says … (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 271)

[33] Similarly, in his work *The Politics of Irish Drama*, Nicholas Grene writes about County Mayo in order to prove that Synge's choosing this region for his play is not just a coincidence:

> [i]f the British represented the Irish as inherently crime-loving and lawless, the West of Ireland, the most remote and least Anglicised part of the country, was thought of as the most endemically anarchic. For the nationalists, exactly reversing this cultural geography, the West became the preserve of uncontaminated Gaelic

purity where, setting aside the necessary resistance to colonial power, a naturally high respect for law and order was maintained. (97)

[35] "Typical Irish Villages"

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