

Deirdre Legend in W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge: a Comparative Assessment

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Abstract

J. M. Synge and W. B. Yeats shared a number of artistic principles but they are comparable as far as theme, style and content are concerned. There is a striking comparison between the two Irish playwrights steeped in Irish culture and folklore. Yeats de-emphasized character in order to highlight the heroic and the ritualistic. Synge on the other hand, grounded the drama firmly in character and incident. Yeats lacked the quality of ordinary life and ordinary things. Synge had little liking or affinity for the melancholic spirituality. The epic story was quite outside the previous range of material, and it had been used both by Yeats and A. E but Synge considered doing a version of the Deirdre legend in a different way and he thought that it would be amusing to compare it with W. B. Yeats.

Keywords: Irishness, Deirdre, Socio-Cultural, Legend, Mythology

Introduction

The history of Irish drama may be said to begin with Irish Literary Movement occurring at the end of the nineteenth century. Irish Literary Theatre, founded by Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats in 1898, was the first manifestation in the drama of Irish literary revival. Although Yeats came from Anglo-Irish Protestant family and spent some of most important years of his life in England, he thought of himself as a distinctly Irish writer dealing with most part with peculiarly Irish problems. It would be appropriate to note that Irishness is a convenient veil that hides the cosmic concerns of the writer.

One of the basic problems facing Ireland in 1880's and 90's was necessity of creating a national consciousness. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Irish found themselves in a situation common enough in a colonial country which had lived under the foreign yoke for so long that its people were no longer certain which part of civilization was their own, and which foreign. Ireland was an older country, with its own language, literary myths and great historical figures. The first step in achieving Irish independence was to restore to the Irish people a consciousness of their own culture. Various organizations felt the need to separate the native from foreign, the Irish from English.

Irish literary Theatre was replaced by Irish National Dramatic society. In 1904 Miss Horniman built the new famous Abbey Theatre to house the plays of different playwrights. Abbey won and maintained a worldwide reputation. After 1904 the Ulster Theatre formed an important part of the movement. Besides Yeats and Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge, A E (George William Russel), Edward Martyn and many writers of the Ulster Theatre drew upon the legendary and historical.

It is amply clear that from humble beginnings in 1898 with sustained efforts and a deep sense of pride in their Irish mythology a dedicated group of playwrights and artists set out to redeem their lost glory and heritage. As time passed more and more youngsters fired with the zeal and love of their ancient stories swelled the ranks of the old and not so old the thirst for cultural revival. Soon the Irish culture scene altered from a morose, lackadaisical one reeling under the overwhelming shadow of London stage to emerge as a vibrant and colourful theatre, self-sufficient, self-dependent, self-sustaining. They began to experiment areas, which were more dramatic than others, in a language that resembled the one spoken by the islanders. In other words, while on one hand, they lived to break away from the crippling hold of the British, on the other hand; they tried their best to come into their own by writing about themselves and their own ways of life. They were different, they realised and were not ashamed of their difference. In fact, they were proud of this and revelled in it.



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The plays written by Abbey dramatists reflected the contrasted ideals of the theatre's founders. Whereas W. B. Yeats's contributions dealt mostly with Irish Legends or simply morality plays in verse, the plays of J. M. Synge focus on the socio-cultural ethos of Ireland in general and Aran, in particular. It was in Paris that J. M. Synge met W. B. Yeats and the latter gave him his advice

I said "Give up Paris, you will never create anything by reading Racine and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French Literature. Go to Aran Islands, live there as if you were one of the people themselves; experience a life that had never found expression. I had just come from Aran and my imagination was full of those grey islands where men must reap with knives because of stones." (Yeats, 299) A number of circumstances combined to make Synge's journey to rich fruit. Synge's knowledge of European literature combined with sufficient Irish enabled him to master the pure but rapid and colloquial language of the Irish. His boyhood in Wicklow had given him the basic understanding of the peasantry that is not to be obtained, as Yeats and Lady Gregory had believed, by merely visiting cottages and collecting legends and fairy-lore.

A student of drama is bound to be struck by the different styles of the two well-known Irish dramatists. J. M. Synge and W. B. Yeats shared a number of artistic principles but they are comparable as far as theme, style and content are concerned. There is a striking comparison between the two Irish playwrights steeped in Irish folklore and culture. Yeats de-emphasized character in order to highlight the heroic and the ritualistic. Synge on the other hand, grounded the drama firmly in character and incident. Synge had Yeats in mind when he wrote in the Preface to his poems

The poetry of exaltation will always be the highest, when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life, and cannot write poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation (Henn, 288).

Yeats lacked the quality of ordinary life and ordinary things. Synge had little liking or affinity for the melancholic spirituality of the Celtic twilight or the artificiality of *fin de siècle* poets. The timbre of poetry must have strong roots among clay and worms.

Main Article

J. M. Synge had always admired the old Irish sagas, and had a particular interest in the Deirdre legend. It was probably in 1900-1 that had made a literal translation of an eighteenth-century version of the story by Andrew Mac Curtin entitled *The Fate of the Children of Uisneach*. The epic story was quite outside his previous range of material, and it had been used by both Yeats and A. E. in plays which had been produced by the Abbey. But Synge considered doing a version of the Deirdre legend in a different way and he thought that it would be amusing to compare it with Yeats's and Russell's. But if Synge dismisses A. E. it is because he felt that his art lacked a 'grip on reality'. In a series of notes written in 1908, Synge tried to solve the problems inherent in writing on historical or Saga stories. He felt that with a very few exceptions historical plays, novels and poems

were relatively worthless. But there were methods by which one might avoid artificial retellings of classical or Irish Sagas. The first was to recognise that the place of religious art had been taken by modern feelings for the beauty and mystery of nature. A second method was to demythologize his characters and forge for them a speech which would further humanize them. The many drafts of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* show Synge constantly seeking to recreate the remote world of Cuchulainn and Red Branch within the tragic and human dimensions of lover, loved one and rival.

Before proceeding further, it would be appropriate to outline the ramification and the nuances of the Deirdre legend. The story of Deirdre runs like this: Deirdre is born to a retainer of Conchubar mac Nessa while the king and the men are present at home. Conchubar's Druid Cathbad predicts that the child will bring destruction through her fatal beauty. The child is imprisoned in a remote location, and in most versions is to marry Conchubar when is of age. Deirdre sees and falls in love with Naoise, one of the sons of Usna, and the lovers elope with his brother. After many trials they are discovered in Scotland by Fergus, who comes to them by bearing a pardon from Conchubar. Fergus convinces them to return under his protection. When the exiles arrive in Ireland Fergus is detained by Conchubar's minion Barach. Fergus sends his own son with captives of Emain Macha, the central fort of Red Branch, where they are betrayed by Conchubar. The male characters are slain and Deirdre is captured and dies or commits suicide.

I would start pointing out how Yeats has handled the Deirdre myth. Yeats's play is based on one of the oldest of dramatic patterns- the sexual triangle of the old man and young man who are rivals for the favours of a beautiful young woman. Conchubar's villainous plotting highlights the melodrama inherent in the tale of the old dragon's revenge on the youthful adventurer who steals the fairy princess. The legend, because of this popularity, has undergone some of the most extensive modifications of any Red Branch legends. When Yeats's Deirdre was first enacted, many of the versions of the story were based on earlier and equally prolific Victorian adaptation of the legends. Yeats, like many of his contemporaries, relied heavily upon these earlier adaptations for Deirdre's story. The fact that Yeats spoke and read only English cut him off not only from the manuscript records but also to a great extent from the scholarly translations and criticism available in French and German. Yeats's Deirdre, like his Victorian sources, is the result of the complex evolution of Deirdre's story through oral manuscript and modern adapted forms. To some extent, it was ironical too because the deaths of the sons of Usna was probably not part of "the original" body of the Red Branch legends.

Another point that needs notice is that Yeats does not deal with the topic of Deirdre's birth. Yeats's Deirdre faces death with spirit and stamina and when she can no longer "strike a blow for Naoise", she earns a hard one but triumphant death. By facing

Conchubar directly and wrestling her life from his control, Yeats's Deirdre becomes the embodiment of the heroic facing the banal. She takes over the role Fergus had earlier played. While the older hero presents to the audience the image of the hero who has lived too long, Deirdre becomes the hero whose death is an expression of the power of passionate life. This Deirdre could not have developed solely from the manuscript's renditions of the tale. Her vibrant, intense emotion and her steely determination mark her as a Yeatsian tragic hero, a role which in the context of Red Branch works had increasingly come to be defied through opposition to the anti-heroic king. In transmuting the legend vastly beyond the earliest originals, Yeats, in fact, returns to its roots by reconnecting it with the central conflict of the Red branch cycle.

Yeats's Deidre became "Deirdre of the Sorrows" in the hands of J. M. Synge. While in Aran, in either 1900 or 1901, Synge made a translation of the Irish text "The Fate of the Children of Usneach," which had been published in 1898 by the society for the preservation of the Irish language. When he reviewed lady Gregory's Cuchulainn of Muirthemme, he singled out Deirdre's lament over the dead Naoise and his brothers. Here, it is necessary to illustrate the extent of Synge's commitment to the myth and his departures from it.

Deirdre, the foremost tragic heroine in Irish mythology, tells the well-known tale of young beautiful girl about whom it was prophesied that she would be very beautiful with curly golden-brown hair and mesmerizing grey green eyes but that kings and lords would go to war over her and Ulster's three greatest warriors would be forced into exile for her sake. In the play, Deirdre and Naoise, one of the sons of Usna, defy Conchubar, King of Ulster, by wedding and fleeing to Scotland. After seven years Deirdre fears the decay of their love and driven by some tragic necessity returns with Naoise to Ulster where they die.

In most versions of the legend Naoise had played the dominant role, Deirdre a subservient one. But Synge whose plays are dominated by strong women casts Deirdre in the same mould. Both Lavarcham and old woman refer continually to Deirdre's wilfulness, wildness and sense of self-esteem. In one version, Deirdre flung herself upon Naoise in the tomb and gave him three kisses and died. In another version, Deirdre is kept for a year in the threshold of Conchubar, in deep dejection and lament, resisting all Conchubar's attempts to soothe her. While she was driving off in king's chariot, she leapt out of the chariot and struck her head against the rocks and dashed her skull to pieces.

In Synge's later "Deirdre of the Sorrows", where reality in nature and the pity of love is that the young must grow old. Deirdre is a child of nature, capable of queenliness but quite unfitted to be happy amidst the cold formalities of the royal court. The idyllic seven years she spends in Scotland with Naoise come to an end essentially because she fears the inevitable day when Naoise's love for her will no longer be unforced and sincere. In the last act,

Deirdre accepts death because she cannot imagine life without Naoise. But death will be a cold and ugly contrast to the life the lovers had together.

Here, it is necessary to illustrate the extent of Synge's commitment to the myth and his departure from it. It has been necessary to set out the Saga plot at some length. Partly, in order to see what Synge has rejected, partly to convey something of the atmosphere in original. In contrast to Yeats, he rejected the magical elements of the fable, and the scene of Deirdre and Naoise playing chess. According to one version where Deirdre died with Naoise in his tomb, Synge has followed the outline of events that bring Fergus to Glen Laqi, and the hostility to the sons of Usnach.

It is here that I would like to emphasize the difference between the two playwrights. W. B. Yeats begins at the point Synge arrives at in his third act, but even where they overlap their treatment is very different. In Synge's play there is no hint of personal immorality and the only pleasure left the aged is caring or regarding the young. When the lovers appear, it is Naoise who takes the gloomy view of the shabby place Conchubar has prepared for their reception. Deirdre discovers a newly dug grave behind a curtain and urges Naoise to take her away at once. He refuses to abandon his two brothers (who don't appear in Yeats's play at all). With self-pity, he taunts Deirdre and advises her to remarry after his death, if she gets the chance and not go on lamenting him forever. But she is determined to die when he does. In all this the lovers show no desire for, or even consciousness of being figures in the legend. They are entirely concerned with the devastating prospect of an end to the happiness they have known together. The greatness of Synge's play lies in the supreme evocation of the joy and misery of the human mind. Synge's characters are human. Conchubar is no ogre dealing in magic but an old obsessed with the idea of having Deirdre to solace the desolation of his last years. He is cruel through self-pity. Naoise is a bold and beautiful youth, loving as he must and fighting when he must, but not at all desirous of dying with heroic propriety. Deirdre, sorrowing over her lost youth and love, casts life aside not with the hope of joining her lover in some cloudy nest but only with her clear knowledge that any conceivable future can only mar her perfect memory of what has been.

Aim of the Study

Though W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge belonged to the same cultural background, steeped in Irish culture and collaborated for the revival of Irish Literary Theatre yet their handling of Irish myths and legends, especially the legend of Deirdre, were quite different and therefore comparable. It would be appropriate to assess, evaluate and appreciate Deirdre legend in the hands of two great playwrights who discussed the same legend with such a striking difference that the readers are bound to be struck at their handlings.

Research Methodology

A literary work of art can be interpreted in more than one way. The greatness of a literary work lies in the fact that it is multi-dimensional, multivalent

and yet universal. It is this aspect of a great work that makes it superior to the others. Different approaches have been undertaken by various scholars and critics to analyse the works of J. M. Synge and W. B. Yeats. The approach to the present paper would be largely socio-cultural, though other approaches and insights shall be used wherever necessary. The socio-cultural approach is by and large opposed in thrust to the formalist approach as expounded by William Empson, R. S Crane, Yvor Winters, I. A. Richards, T. S Eliot, etc.

Review of Literature

The story of Deirdre has a great importance for the early twentieth century Irish dramatists for a number of reasons. Deirdre theme has been marked as a key concept by O' Connor for the Irish Literary Renaissance writers. *Cuchulainn of Muirthemme*, a collection of re-told Irish sagas, translated in to Anglo-Irish dialect by Lady Gregory became a seminal book for the writers of Literary Renaissance. When Yeats and Synge decided to treat the topic of Deirdre, it was already well-established in the mythology of Irish Nationalists. The people of Ireland saw the tragic and oppressed fate of their beloved country in the tragic story of Deirdre. She became a "heroic national history" (M. C King, 178). Deirdre was treated as a symbol of Ireland and its aspirations. Thus, the topic of Deirdre became very challenging for Irish dramatists and writers.

Conclusion

There is a striking comparison between the two playwrights in their handling of the Deirdre legend. The first striking difference is the use of language, while W. B. Yeats uses English, J. M. Synge is more comfortable with the use of Gaelic words which gives one the feeling of the latter's deep connection with soil of England. Synge has transformed the heroic and philosophical romance in to a proper theatre text or theatre piece by discarding its psychological non- commitment. Synge has been quite successful in treating and rendering of the antique Celtic romance. He has exploited the myth for want of personal inspiration. In Yeats's case, it was the beauty of the language and verbal lyricism which struck him the most. The second comparison is seen in the fact while W. B. Yeats romanticizes; J. M. Synge turns to the tragic aspects of the legend. J. M. Synge, thus, makes the play in to an intense tragedy in which human emotions, the separation, incertitude are the prime characteristics. Yeats's Deirdre died as an independent, determined and persuasive heroine.

She persuaded one of the musicians to give her knife with which she would kill herself and therefore would save herself from the evil intentions of the corrupt king. Unlike Deirdre of J. M. Synge crying over the death of her lover with sorrowful monologues, Yeats's heroine very coldly committed suicide. Another difference as found in the handling of the myth by two writers is regarding the relationship of the two lovers at the end. The relationship of the two lovers in J.M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* worsened as the two lovers approached their death. On the other hand, in Yeats's Deirdre, the two lovers maintained a very passionate romantic relationship. Their relationship got strengthened as they came to know that their end was near. As a result, I would like to conclude that J. M. Synge's presentation and portrayal of Deirdre is far more moving and heart rending. W. B. Yeats despite his superior credentials remain unable to scale the dramatic heights, which J. M. Synge does. Synge has used the word 'drama' in a much broader sense than Yeats. Yeats referred to the classical, conventional concepts or themes, such as plot, action, structure and dialogues where as Synge implies not only the text, but the aesthetics of the text, its provisions for the stage.

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