

Tension between Morality and Liberty

—Synge's View on the Life in *In the Shadow of the Glen*—

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In this strange little play, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, we feel the transience of youth and beauty. This is a play which is based on the tension between material security and a free, full imaginative life. As Mr. R. Skelton mentioned, although it was the first of Synge's plays to be staged, it has, as yet, received much less critical attention than its companions, and the reasons for this comparative neglect are easy to understand.¹⁾

It is, however, an endless subject in our human history. Moreover, in reality, it is a subtle and complex construction. In this play Synge has embodied pathos, humour and human interests of a serious kind.

In referencing to, "in the Shadow of the Glen, Skelton comments that the still young wife is trapped by the solitude of the glens and by her loveless marriage, and is stirred by a desire for freedom."²⁾ I think that the theme is more than this. The theme of the play is escape from the fear of growing old. Nora says:

Why would I marry you, Mike Dara? You'll be getting old and I'll be getting old, and a little while I'm telling you, you'll be sitting up in your bed—the way himself was sitting—with a shake in your face, and your teeth falling, and the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush where sheep do be leaping a gap.(p.114)³⁾

Synge's strategy in the opening scene is effective because it not only looks an emotional response, but establishes the theme of the action. As the tramp goes in, we can see where the human needs for food and warm shelter, and the reflection 'he that's dead can do no hurt', overcomes the fear of a dead body. And the raining day with darkness gives us the impression of loneliness and pity.

Another Synge's remarkable strategy is that the tramp noticed the dead man's queer looking and the uses of the black curse by the dead man. It is a big hint that something might be happening with the dead man—Daniel Burke.

Tramp(looking closely at the dead man). It's a queer look is on him for a man that's dead.

Nora(half-humorously). He was always queer, stranger, and I suppose them that's queer and they living men will be queer bodies after.

1) Robin Skelton, *The Writings of J.M. Synge*(London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p.53.

2) *Ibid.*, p.56.

3) *The Complete Plays of John M. Synge*(New York: Random House, 1960), p.114.

Tramp. Isn't it a great wonder you're letting him lie there, and he is not tidied, or laid out itself? Nora(coming to the bed). I was afraid, stranger, for he put a black curse on me this morning if I'd touch his body the time he'd die sudden, or let any one touch it except his sister only, and it's ten miles away she lives in the big glen over the hill. Tramp(looking at her and nodding slowly). It's a queer story he wouldn't let his own wife touch him, and he dying quiet in his bed. (p.102)⁴⁾

Here we see the lonely and desolate life and at the same time the superstition of the countryside. With this, tactic, Synge makes the circumstance increasingly isolated and restrained. As we see the black curse of the husband on his wife we can easily think it is not the normal life in that house. Synge uses outstanding techniques from the beginning to capture the audience's attention and the hints.

This play is dominated by the personality of a woman, Nora Burke. The three men are no more than her foils, and two of them are stock figures. Nora and the tramp are more varied in their emotional reactions to events.

Nora herself is a complicated character. Alone with a corpse, she shows courage and even humour, though she also reveals her belief in the efficacy of curses. As Skelton observed:

She is candid about her unhappiness and afraid of admitting her sexual frustration to a stranger, saying of her husband, 'he was always cold, every day since I knew him and every night...' (III. 35). She reveals in her boast, 'I never knew what way I'd be afraid of beggar or bishop or any man of you at all' (III. 37), and...⁵⁾

Nora experiences the frustration of loneliness rather than sexual hunger. As we see, she stressed after the fact that she is a lonely woman. She says, 'I got used to being lonesome'. Furthermore her husband seems especially old and cold in a such lonesome place. As a result she has a friendship with Patch, with others, now with Michael. But all in vain. On the other hand she envies those married women who have children to fit their loneliness. That is an instinct of women. She is afraid of time passing, growing old and looking on the past, even though she envies Mary Brien who has two children and another coming soon. Her fear of time—to grow old—is materialism. She thinks of Peggy Cavanagh walking the roads in poverty, and is fearful of the consequences of that freedom for which she fears and yearns. As she told Michael, she married Daniel because of a few material goods and a dwelling, but not satisfaction of her emotional and imaginative needs. Alan Price pointed out:

She is caught between two ways of life: the one, with her husband, humdrum, restricted, lonely, but fairly safe; the other represented by the tramp, more adventurous, offering scope for emotional and imaginative experience, but often hard and insecure.⁶⁾

4) Ibid., p.102.

5) Skelton, p.59.

6) Alan Price, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama*(London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1961), p.119.

Indeed she ~~doesn't~~ love her husband but property. Also she needs *free* as an air in the large world. Only the problem is afraid of *to be grow old* without money.

On the other hand the Tramp's view of the world is different from Nora's. He represents some of the positive values of the play, and his final words encourage Nora to follow a way of life with him that is worthwhile. As Price said, this shows the desirable relation between Man and Nature:⁷⁾

We'll be going now, I'm telling you, and the time you'll be feeling the cold, and the frost and the grear rain, and the sun again,.... you'll not be sitting up on awet ditch, self old with looking on each day and it passing you by..... you'll be hearing the herons crying out, over the black lakes, ...and its not from the like of them you'll be hearing a tale of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear. (p.117)⁸⁾

This is his lyrical description of the freedom of the wandering life and at the same time the scornful words for the old Dan Burke. The tramp acts as the focal sensibility of the play without ever straying from his role as a character within it. This is a means for Nora to find herself. Of course Nora has never known any landscape except that which oppresses her. On the other hand the Tramp knows the all of nature and the way of life in the wild. He is also a person who has a character opposite Dan's character. The Tramp, although poor, is much more fully alive; he has 'walked a great way through the world... and seen great wonders'; and is appreciative of simple comforts. More important character of the Tramp is his sensitive to the moods of people and of the natural world, and susceptible to feelings, language and rhythms. Also, he is quick to adapt himself to new situations: when Dan reveals his subterfuge, he soon accepts the role he is to play. Dan dislikes the Tramp because of his easy manner and his sympathy for Nora.

On the contrary Dan Burke and Michael Dara represent the complacent male materialism. Michael Dara is a superstitious and timid youth interested in Nora only for her land and money. His interest in her as prospective wife increases as the pile of money grows, and when the sum of 'five pounds and ten notes' is reached he suggests marriage. He is not really an independent force; he is akin to Dan. He also, like Dan, dislike the Tramp and is jealous of Patch. When the time of Dan's coming out from the bed and Michael and Nora are surprised by Dan, Michael panics without thinking of Nora: "Get me out of it, Nora, for the love of God; and his only response to Nora's mute appeal for help is the suggestion': there's a fine Union below in Rathdrum'. It is an irony, too.

Dan is sour and stingy. He doesn't love Nora. He is a possessive man who cannot bear his young wife even to speak to other men, and who is derisive of her expressions of emotion. Of course the adultery and slaughter of the tale do not occur in the play. A. Price says; The cunning and ruthlessness of the husband are the salient features of the tale; the

7) Ibid., p.124.

8) *The Complete Plays of John M. Synge*, p.117.

predicament of Nora Burke is the central issue of *The Shadow of the Glen*.⁹⁾

But it cannot give the answer of this play. Johnston says: And so they (Nora and the Tramp) go off together, not necessarily to a life of sin but to one of liberty. And the old man—who, after all, cannot help being old—settles down with a bottle by the fire, and with a sense of peace that suggests that he may be well able to look after himself in spite of his wife's prophecies to the contrary. In the same spirit of relaxation he invites his rustic rival to join him.¹⁰⁾

It is clearly very effective attack on a loveless marriage. And also the tension between morality and liberty. The liberty means freedom in the imaginative world. The problem is over there. Nora realizes Mike's limitations not because he is a timid young man but because he is a human being as she is. We, human beings, are all growing [old. The one who has more *imagination* feels more fear of old. There is a tragedy. Then we can interpret that this is a play with the tension between human and natural forces. Nora is in the theme of escape—escape from the fear of growing old.

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9) A. Price, p.119.

10) Denis Johnston, *John Millington Synge*(New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p.14-15.