

The Changing Phases of the Irish Dramatic Movement

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Abstract

Though **Irish Dramatic Movement** is an important literary development in the context of **Irish National Theatre**, it is often simplified as the combined efforts of just ‘three people’ namely Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory. In fact, even W.B. Yeats admitted that a number of other people were involved in the development of **Irish Dramatic Movement**. In this context, the names of Edward Martyn, George Moore (also a novelist), Sean O’ Casey, Douglas Hyde, Dion Boucicault, Denis Johnston and Teresa Deevy are quite important. Besides, a number of other people like Henrik Ibsen, G.B. Shaw and earlier dramatists like George Farquhar and Oscar Wilde also contributed to the development of Irish drama, giving it an international recognition. Finally, the roles of the **Abbey Theatre**, **Irish National Theatre** and **Gate Theatre** also deserve important mention. Besides, the influences of Ibsen, Maeterlinck, the Various French writers & Irish countryside also deserve mention.

In the present article, I would like to stress various phases of **Irish Dramatic Movement** in terms of various theatres and personalities, in chronological order viz from the late 19th Century to the late Thirties (30s) of the 20th Century. I would particularly like to highlight the contributions of the noted personalities in this direction, namely Yeats, Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge and Sean O’ Casey.

Keywords : Irish Dramatic Movement, Irish National Theatre, Gate Theatre, Abbey Theatre, Chronological, Invisible.

In general critical discussion, the term **Irish Dramatic Movement** is regarded as a part of **Anglo-Irish National Theatre** with an ‘independent identity’ (Roche, P-1). However, the fact remains that efforts were already there since Restoration period to create a separate identity of **Irish Literary Movement**. It received early inputs from Jonathan Swift & Oliver Goldsmith who were trying to highlight the neglect of Irish people but it was only in the latter half of the 19th Century that ‘experimental plays’ and ‘mythical stories and legends’ were exploited for enhancing the glory and ancient image of Ireland. Some dramatists were, however, forced to write in English (p-2) language for the lack of a proper literary recognition of Irish language. In this context, the names of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw are quite important. Previously, it was held that **Irish Dramatic Revival** was mainly the contribution of **Abbey Theatre** but the fact is, it was just the first theatre to support the cause of **Irish Literary Renaissance** and **Dramatic Revival** in terms of seniority but, later on, a **Working Class Theatre** also known as **Ulster Theatre** came into being and it played a major role in the development of Irish Drama (pp-2-3). The next development was the contribution of some determined women playwrights and patrons such as Lady Gregory, Teresa Deevy and Denis Johnston who wrote for the **Gate Theatre**. At a later stage, Sean O’Casey strengthened it through his numerous plays. Apart from plays of Yeats and Synge, some other plays were also produced as **Royal Court Theatre** in London. As one knowledgeable critic Anthony Roche has shown, the plays written for the **Irish National Theatre** were, ‘sincere, and written with a ‘noble’ aim but must be ‘aesthetic in aim and detached from ‘overt politics’(p-4). In fact, Yeats, Gregory and, to a certain extent, J.M. Synge shared the main goals and aims for creation of **Irish National Drama** but, ‘recent’(Mathews, p-78) modern criticism has shown that the people were very slow to react

to the new plays and at times missed certain subtle hints and comments of its exponents. Originally, **Irish Literary Movement** was national in expression was patriotic in impulse but the fact remains neither Yeats nor Synge or, for that matter, Sean O' Casey were mute observers glorifying the Irish legends and their main characters in the name of nationalism. This becomes clear in the 'ambivalent' response of Irish spectators to the plays of Yeats, Synge and other dramatists (*viz The Countess Cathleen (Yeats) & the Playboy of the Western World (Synge)*).

In tracing the origin and development of **Irish Dramatic Revival**, chronologically, the first important name is that of Douglas Hyde (Roche, P-7) who actually 'coined the phrase' **Irish Dramatic Revival** for the purpose of setting an agenda for Irish cultural and political issues. In fact, he wrote an 'important article' in which he stressed the need for liberating Ireland from the dominance of English language and culture. Thus, he showed the necessity of writing plays in Irish language and he actually wrote a number of one-act plays in collaboration with Lady Gregory and was encouraged by W.B. Yeats as well. His plays like "*Love Song of Connacht*" and "*Casadh*" were pioneering efforts. (p-7) In fact, he was responsible for writing experimental Irish plays in a kind of hybrid language and Irish Dialects which were dismissed as 'Kiltartanese'(p-7) meaning 'outmoded' or 'obsolete'. Eventually, he wrote for **Abbey Theatre** and other kinds of Irish Theatre and insisted that Irish Dramatists should concern themselves with the lives and customs of Irish Islands and coastal areas. He was followed by Dion Boucicault (p-10) but he was a commercial playwright and excelled in satiric and farcical play. The fact, however, remains that even Boucicault did not ignore the Islands of Ireland and their regional features. His masterpiece was '*The Shaughraun*' which actually deals with two neighboring Islands with their regional features but his main contribution to Irish Drama was the introduction of 'tramp' figure(p-

11). Even his Country characters were vulnerable poor, Irish peasants who suffer because of their backwardness and habits of over-drinking.

In the next phase, we have to consider the minor contributions of two playwrights namely Oscar Wilde and G.B. Shaw, both masters of comic drama. At first sight, it may not look proper to deal with them because they wrote English plays but in some of their plays, their Irish connections & interests in verbal music and tone become clear enough. Shaw's *Pygmalion* is a case in point where Professor Higgins and Mr. Pickering seem to be quite serious about the melody of English language (*Pygmalion*). Similarly, in the case of Oscar Wilde, we find a curious interest in mythical stories and legends, apart from his exposure of social pretensions. The main features of both Wilde and Shaw, however, in the context of the development of Irish drama, lie in the field of portrayal of powerful female heroines who are superior to male characters in terms of intellect and integrity. As Anthony Roche has rightly hinted, Shaw and Wilde 'contributed in important ways to the **Irish Dramatic Revival**' (p-18). In fact, their contribution was indirect but significant. The next important name in the development of **Irish Dramatic Revival** is that of Henrik Ibsen (p-19) who wrote various kinds of plays in Nordic language which were later translated in English. He was the first important international writer who was admired by Shaw and later on, by Yeats', Synge, even though W.B. Yeats and Synge eventually withdrew from Ibsen's political plays. However, W.B. Yeats, at least in his early plays, was inspired by Ibsen's latest Symbolic and Metaphysical plays like *Peer Gynt* Yeats' plays like *The Shadowy Waters* & *The Land of Heart's Desire* were inspired by Ibsen's plays. (p-19) Even Synge learnt to master dramatic language from his study of Ibsen. It is interesting to see that Synge's first play *The Shadow of the Glen* shows his influence in the choice of main character (Nora) and minor characters (the tramp) (Viz *A Doll's House* & *Peer Gynt*).

As for the idea of Irish Theatre, it was obviously the result of a long discussion between Yeats and Lady Gregory in the year of 1897. Apart from these two, there was a big landlord named Edward Martyn (p-22) who was a Catholic with strong literary interest and cultural pride. They jointly conceived the idea of **Irish National Theatre** and actively participated in popularizing Irish plays of serious interest. Martyn, like Lady Gregory and Yeats, wrote viable plays and gathered support of audience of Irish plays which were free from ‘buffoonery’ as well as ‘misrepresentation. (p-22) The fourth figure was another Irish Catholic landlord named George Moore. He was a practising novelist but even he wrote a play for the purpose. Thus, different plays like *The Countess Cathleen* and *The Heather Field* were written.

In the last phase of **Irish Literary Theatre**, an ‘era of collaboration’(p-1) followed and the **Irish Dramatic Movement** branched into various sub-movements such as **Working Class Drama** and **World Drama** supported by **Abbey Theatre** and **The Gate Theatre**. As already stated, in this phase, apart from Yeats, Moore, J.M. Synge and Sean O’Casey, a few other dramatists dealing with the conflict of urban people surfaced. The contributions of Yeats, Synge and Gregory were, of course, large and many-sided, Yeats acknowledged their roles in promoting Irish Drama in his ‘**Nobel Prize address**’(p-7) and various well-known ‘**Poems**’(p-1). He wrote various kinds of plays but his interest in promoting Irish culture and national Identity was always reflected. His earthly plays like *The Countess Cathleen*, *The Shadowy Waters* and his ‘*Cuchulain Plays*’ showed his interest in legend and glory of ancient Ireland. Lady Gregory also contributed in the various ways, viz providing materials and writing actual plays of the theatre.

In the case of the **Working Class Drama** (p-119), the names of Fredryn Terence, John Ervin, A.P. Wilson and Sean O’ Casey are quite important. Sean O’ Casey (p-120) was, however, a major playwright. He produced six plays of which the ‘Dublin trilogy’ namely

The Shadow of Gunman (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) are quite important but his masterpiece was *The Silver Tassie* (1928). Sean O'Casey was ahead of the times and he was more appreciated in London and other places because his plays had topical interest.

Apart from Sean O'Casey, Denis Johnston (p-145) is another name to consider. She was not appreciated by the Dublin audiences of **Abbey Theatre** and the adverse criticism of Yeats of his first play jolted her but she went on and produced a number of successful plays such as "*The Old Lady Says NO*", *The Moon and the Yellow River* etc. Apart from **Abbey Theatre**, a New Theatre called **Peacock Theatre** also played an important role in the success of Denis Johnston in the 1930s. Another Lady named Teresa Deevy (p-150) played a major role after Lady Gregory for enhancing and championing the cause of Irish drama and her plays were quite successful like those of J.M. Synge. Her best play was "*Ketti Roche*". She also introduced the 'tramp figure' in her plays and, in some ways, she anticipated the modernist plays of Harold Pinter, the most noted English dramatist after 1960s.

Lastly, something needs to be said about W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge once again because Yeats wrote various kinds of plays. Apart from purely Irish plays, Yeats turned towards **Noh Theatre** of Japan and wanted to revive Dublin Drama with Robinson. Similarly, J.M. Synge, though often regarded as a regional Irish dramatist, produced variety of plays with the background of Irish peasantry and coastal people. He wrote one-act, two-act and three-act plays and wrote plays of both kinds viz tragedies and tragi-comedy. (Such as *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's wedding* & *The Playboy of the Western World*). His other plays show his interest in Irish folk stories and 'miracles'. (p-27)

In fact, it is not easy to sum up the **Irish Dramatic Movement** as something marginal and sectarian. If it finally failed and took along new lines, it was the result of the public domain and new ideas and challenges.

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