
PERFECT PROTEST: A STUDY OF J.M. SYNGE'S *THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN*

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Abstract: The Shadow of the Glen under the title In the Shadow of the Glen, was performed at the Molesworth Hall in October 1903. The Shadow of the Glen is based on a story Synge had collected on the Aran Islands. It is set in an isolated cottage in County Wicklow during the early 1900s. It tells the story of Daniel Burke, an elderly farmer and Nora Burke, his young wife. At the end of the story Nora walks off the marriage with a stranger, as a protest. This paper tries to study this protest a perfect protest which preceded many such strong protests by women.

Keywords: Doubt, Incompatibility, Nora Burke, Pride, Protest, Synge.

Introduction: Protest is a form of registering one's view. Writers use literature as a form of protest with a view to making a difference in the lives of people. As Baron Lytton said, "The pen is mightier than the sword". And, with the might and power of the written word, writers try to change the real world. Because they recognize the great power of creative writing, they want to reach the masses and bring about a change in the world.

Protest Literature is not new to the world and it has existed in different forms throughout literary history. It focuses on dissent as a rich matrix of social critique. Some of the greatest writers in history, like Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), Charles Dickens, Henry David Thoreau ("Resistance to Civil Government"), Amiri Baraka (*Dutchman*), Richard Wright (*Native Son*), Eldridge Cleaver (*Soul on Ice*), John Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*) and Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*), have employed their talents toward awakening the public to injustices, local and world-wide.

John Millington Synge (April 16, 1871 - March 24, 1909) is an Irish dramatist, author and poet. Though he was never bracketed with the Protest Literature writers, he has made his characters register their protest in a unique way. He has contributed greatly to the Irish dramatic movement. He was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival and was one of the cofounders of the Abbey Theatre. He is best known for the play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, which caused riots in Dublin during its opening run at the Abbey. Although Synge came from a middle-class Protestant background, his writings are mainly concerned with the world of the Roman Catholic peasants of rural Ireland.

In 1903, Synge left Paris and moved to London. He had written two one-act plays, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen* the previous year. *The Shadow of the Glen*, under the title *In the Shadow of the Glen*, was performed at the Molesworth Hall in October 1903. *The Shadow of the Glen* is based on a story Synge had collected on the Aran Islands. It was based on a story of an unfaithful wife and was attacked in print by Irish nationalist leader Arthur Griffith as "a slur on Irish womanhood" (Pellegrino).

The Shadow of the Glen is set in an isolated cottage in County Wicklow during the early 1900s. It tells the story of Daniel Burke, an elderly farmer and Nora Burke, his young wife. Dan and Nora Burke live in "the last cottage at the head of a long glen in County

Wicklow"⁽¹⁴⁾. W.B. Yeats declares, "...*The Shadow of the Glen* ...is always liked in Ireland..." (Ayling 59-60). *The Shadow of the Glen* was the first of Synge's plays to be performed on stage. It is set in an isolated cottage in County Wicklow. This story brings out the family drama of a couple.

Dan feigns death, but not before he puts Nora under "a black curse" (15) not to touch his body and insisting that only his sister should lay him out. Nora says this to a passing Tramp who begs shelter from the wet night. She {Coming to the bed.} says "I was afeard, 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"⁽¹⁵⁾.

Nora begs to be excused and leaves the Tramp alone in order to call a young neighbouring sheep farmer, Michael Dara. Once she is gone, Dan Burke sits up. He shares his suspicions and his schemes with the Tramp and assumes his death-pose before Nora and Michael enter. When Michael is hatching plans for Dan's legacy, Dan announces himself with a sneeze. Dan banishes his wife from the house and the Tramp takes up her cause, soothing her with fine words to win her over to a life on the road. They leave together.

Incompatible Life: Nora is very young and Dan is very old. This need not be a cause for incompatibility, but Dan is the cause of the marital disharmony. When the Tramp comments on the "queer look on the 'dead' Dan", Nora "Half-humorously" says, "He was always queer, stranger, and I suppose them that's queer and they living men will be queer bodies after"⁽¹⁵⁾. This oddness or perplexity has set into the life of Nora. When the Tramp says, "It's a queer story he wouldn't let his own wife touch him, and he dying quiet in his bed" (16), Nora answers, "He was an old man, and an odd man, stranger, and it's always up on the hills he was thinking thoughts in the dark mist. {She pulls back a bit of the sheet.} Lay your hand on him now, and tell me if it's cold he is surely"⁽¹⁶⁾. "Looking uneasily at the body" she says, "Maybe cold would be no sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I knew him,- and every night, stranger..."⁽¹⁶⁾. She has no children and Dan's coldness has resulted in this barrenness. She does not leave her husband even though he is cold.

Lonely Life: Nora lives a lonely life. First she is alone. She clearly states this when she says, "Didn't you hear

me say it was only after dying on me he was when the sun went down, and how would I go out into the glen and tell the neighbours, and I a lone woman with no house near me?"(16). Next she is lonely. She confesses to this saying, "How would the like of you, passing in the dark night, know the lonesome way I was with no house near me at all?"(16). She speaks to other men because she lives in this lonely house. She says, "It's in a lonesome place you do have to be talking with some one, and looking for some one, in the evening of the day..."(18). She does not leave Dan, even though she is alone and lonely.

Doubt Fire Dan doubts her fidelity and he pretends to be dead hoping to catch her red-handed. He wants to beat the 'lover' of his wife black and blue. He says, "It is, stranger; it's a long time I'm keeping that stick for I've a bad wife in the house" (19). He calls her a bad wife. Even when the Tramp calls her "a grand woman"(19), he says, "It's herself, surely, it's a bad wife she is—a bad wife for an old man, and I'm getting old, God help me, though I've an arm to me still "(19).

When Dan comes out of his pretended death, he shouts at Nora, "It's little you care if it's dead or living I am, but there'll be an end now of your fine times, and all the talk you have of young men and old men, and of the mist coming up or going down. {He opens the door.} You'll walk out now from that door, Nora Burke, and it's not to-morrow, or the next day, or any day of your life, that you'll put in your foot through it again" (24). He also says, "Let her walk round the like of Peggy Cavanagh below, and be begging money at the cross-road, or selling songs to the men. {To Nora.} Walk out now, Nora Burke, and it's soon you'll be getting old with that life, I'm telling you; it's soon your teeth'll be falling and your head'll be the like of a bush where sheep do be leaping a gap" (24). He continues his curse saying, "The like of her would never go there.... It's lonesome roads she'll be going and hiding herself away till the end will come, and they find her stretched like a dead sheep with the frost on her, or the big spiders, maybe, and they putting their webs on her, in the butt of a ditch" (24).

Nora answers him and "Angrily" says, "What way will yourself be that day, Daniel Burke? What way will you be that day and you lying down a long while in your grave? For it's bad you are living, and it's bad you'll be when you're dead. {She looks at him a moment fiercely, then half turns away and speaks plaintively again.} Yet, if it is itself, Daniel Burke, who can help it at all, and let you be getting up into your bed, and not be taking your death with the wind blowing on you, and the rain with it, and you half in your skin" (24). Even after her angry outburst, Dan feels that she is dependant on him, so he says, "DAN It's proud and happy you'd be if I was getting my death the day I was shut of yourself. {Pointing to the door.} Let you walk out through that door, I'm telling you, and let you not be passing this way if it's hungry you are, or wanting a bed" (24).

Initially Nora is afraid to go out of the house, she says, "What good is a grand morning when I'm destroyed

surely, and I going out to get my death walking the roads?"(25), but after the encouraging words from the Tramp, she leaves the house and says, "What way would a woman live in a lonesome place the like of this place, and she not making a talk with the men passing? And what way will yourself live from this day, with none to care for you? What is it you'll have now but a black life, Daniel Burke, and it's not long I'm telling you, till you'll be lying again under that sheet, and you dead surely"(25-26). Thus she leaves the house triumphantly. At the end of the story Nora walks out of the marriage with a stranger, as a protest. The striking thing about Nora's protest, as it goes with any other protest, is that it is sudden and it shocks. There is a great change that has come over her in a very short while.

The only cause of the protest is that Dan doubts Nora's character and the consequences of this protest are many. There is a break up of a well set family. The little ruffling that is so common in a family ends up in a rupture because of Nora's protest. It could have been easily mended by Nora herself. There are other consequences like the breaking of tradition and culture. It is a set norm that a man should be married to a woman and they must remain together till death parts them. But here Nora's protest breaks this tradition and it is the beginning of a new world of opportunities and freedom, not only for Nora, but for any woman who lives after her. She will no more be bound by traditions.

"An authentic human relationship like marriage is not an easy process. It requires patience, love, honesty and sacrifice"(Sornam 75). In Nora's case, she is deprived of patience, love, honesty and sacrifice. "Nora's words are clearly understood by others and her husband Daniel lacks the ability to understand her. Her good nature is understood by others but misunderstood by Daniel. Thus the fault lies with Daniel, who fails to communicate with Nora and fails to understand the longings of Nora"(Frederick 306).

Nora is little bothered about the fact that she is going out with a stranger, and that she has nothing to depend on. In those days the Irish peasant girls did not have the right to choose her husband. A.E. George Russell in "Religion and Love" points out that "The Irish peasant girl 'will follow her four-legged dowry to the house of a man she may never have spoken twenty words to before her marriage'" (Mikhail 25). For Nora, everything about her survival would be a 'how' hence forth. But she is little anxious about it and is just gladly waiting to see how Dan would carry on without her. She perhaps sets her mind on things that she is sure about and she is sure about only one thing that Dan will suffer without her. This brings in a sense of pride in her.

Nora's protest is not only against an individual called Dan, but also against an institution called marriage. She boldly walks out of her marriage. Eugene Benson says, "In the course of the play Nora is offered another alternative – marriage with a young man, Michael Dara, and the possibility of having children" (75). Thus, she also had an opportunity to enter into an agreement with

Michael Dara, but she firmly rejects that to enter into nature to get solace. The rejection of the time-tested institution, marriage, also enhances the sense of pride in her.

There is no conjugal bliss or marital satisfaction in this married life of Nora. Conjugal bliss is the happiness that is derived out of happy family life. It includes not only good relations with the spouse, but also good children and a happy life in their company. But here there is no such bliss for her. Her husband is unfriendly and she has no other company in the house. Dan is also a "cold" person and he is not able to satisfy her. There is no marital satisfaction. Still she continues to be a wife without any protest. She even resists the invitation from

Michael Dara to marry him. She does not want to fall in the same trap made by the patriarchal society. Her protest is against the Irish society and that is why walks away with a nonconformist, that is the Tramp, who does not conform to the norms of the society. Nora jettisons the society. There is greater pride in protesting against the evils of the society.

Conclusion Thus Nora protests against her doubting husband, against her loveless, fruitless marriage and against the patriarchal Irish society. Surely this protest is a predecessor to many such strong decisions made/ to be made by women. Surely this is a flawless perfect protest.

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