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# The Twentieth Century Irish Peasant Play: Modernisation and Bourgeois "Respectability" in the Country Cottage Kitchen

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## Abstract

This master's dissertation examines the rise and fall of socially conservative ideals of "respectability" and "purity" in rural Irish society by analysing three important Irish "peasant plays" from distinct eras of Irish history within the last century: *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) by J. M. Synge; *Sive* (1959) by John B. Keane; and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) by Martin McDonagh. The action of each of these plays unfolds before the backdrop of a "country cottage kitchen" set, and each provides a glimpse into the hardships and social issues at the heart of rural Irish society in the distinct periods in which they are set. The economic, social and political circumstances of each of these periods contribute to forming the attitudes and values of the rural people. Modernisation theory posits that as a country transitions from an agrarian to an industrialised economy, the prevailing attitudes and values of that country become more open and tolerant. When examined together, these three plays clearly show the rise of socially conservative ideals of "respectability" and "purity" as Ireland establishes itself as an agrarian society, and their sharp decline as Ireland becomes industrialised. This paper examines the changing attitudes towards female autonomy, sexuality, religion, the poor and destitute, the Irish "Traveller" Community and mental health in the "country cottage kitchens" of rural Ireland.

Keywords

J. M. Synge, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, John B. Keane, *Sive*, Martin McDonagh, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, peasant play, Catholicism, sexuality, respectability, purity, mental health, conformity, modernisation, agrarian society, industrialised society.

## Introduction

Since the establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, various Irish playwrights have been concerned with depicting the lives of the rural, Gaelic-Irish peasantry in drama. Thought to embody the pure, uncorrupted spirit of the Irish people, "the West of Ireland peasant… became an icon for Irish nationalists" (Vandevelde 111). Dramatic representations of the peasantry, which hitherto had been portrayed almost exclusively as "comic buffoon[s]" (Robinson 36), became inextricably bound up in the struggle for political autonomy and "the construction of an Irish national consciousness" (Murphy 125). The stereotype of the "Stage Irishman", "the quick-witted but impractical male with a weakness for drink" (Vandevelde 110), was but the theatrical embodiment of a wider belief in Victorian Britain that the Gaelic-Irish race was "morally and socially inferior" (Geber, O'Donnabhain 164) to that of the Anglo-Saxon, and incapable of governing itself. Thus, to represent the Gaelic-Irish peasantry as something other than feckless, drunken anthropoids had the potential to subvert this Victorian justification for British rule in Ireland. The goal was to "reacquaint the Irish people with their lost culture, to restore to Ireland its sense of national unity through literature" (Bowman 8). It was in this climate that the Irish peasant play was born.

However, the Irish Literary Theatre, and later the Abbey Theatre, were founded and run largely by members of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy; sons and daughters of wealthy Protestant aristocrats and landowners. The lives of the Gaelic-Irish peasantry were foreign and exotic to them, as acknowledged by J. M. Synge himself on one of his various trips to the Aran Islands:

> In some ways these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals I have, yet I cannot talk to

> them when there is much to say, more than a dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog (Synge, "The Aran Islands" 364).

For this reason, their dramatic representations of the peasantry were the subject of much controversy and scrutiny from middle-class Catholics who "had invented their own version of the noble peasant" (Bowman 16). Synge and his associates were accused of having imbued the Irish peasant with "their own values" (Bowman 9), in stark contrast to the values of this Catholic bourgeoisie.

What Synge found on his trips to the Aran Islands, most notably on Inishmaan, was a people untainted by industry, class-consciousness and other features of Victorian society which he abhorred. He saw the islanders as living simple lives in communion with nature and maintaining many pre-Christian elements to their culture which had all but disappeared on the mainland. He writes that the islanders "have a peace and dignity from which we [civilised people] are shut forever" (Synge, "The Aran Islands" 409). However, these qualities did not appeal to the Catholic middle-class who wanted to believe that the peasants "lived lives of pious devotion and virtue" (Bowman 16), and were, above all else, Catholic. Thus, Synge's idealised figure of the primitive Irish peasant stood in opposition to that of much of Catholic Ireland.

Synge was, however, dedicated to realism in his plays; meaning that he was interested in presenting an accurate representation of Irish life. What he was not interested in was portraying a simple binary opposition between the noble, oppressed Gaelic peasantry and their evil British overlords, which was a common theme in nationalist Irish drama at the time. He rather focused his plays on exposing societal issues from within rural Irish society itself, which he felt were distancing the peasantry more and more from their primitive, spiritual roots. His plays draw attention to "the deleteriousness of nationalist self-congratulation and

the need for vigorous national self-criticism" (Pilkington 51). Whatever the validity of his primordial, pagan alternative vision for rural Irish life, his peasant plays capture the constraining nature of the social and moral values of the emerging agrarian Catholic petty bourgeoisie; a class which had been formed throughout the nineteenth century in the wake of the Great Famine (Quigley 1980). This class was staunchly Catholic, puritanical, intolerant of sexual or social deviancy, and totalitarian in its views towards female autonomy. Synge was the first to expose the restrictive nature of the society which resulted from these values and attitudes, but he was far from the last.

This paper will trace the emergence and slow disappearance of these restrictive, conservative values from rural Irish life throughout the twentieth century, as portrayed in J. M. Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), John B. Keane's *Sive* (1959) and Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996). Each of these plays uses the same stage set, which has become so ubiquitous in Irish drama as to become cliché; namely, the "country cottage kitchen". When examined together, these plays show the rise and fall of bourgeois conservatist values from the "country cottage" and, by extension, from rural Irish life. These values emerged as Ireland began to modernise and establish itself as an agrarian economy; they then began to recede as the country transitioned to an industrial economy in the late 1950s. Inglehart and Baker write that: "Economic development is associated with major changes in prevailing attitudes and beliefs" (50). We see evidence of this as we examine the dramatic portrayal of life in the rural Irish cottage kitchen throughout the last century as changing economic circumstances affect the value systems of the rural people. We will now examine the circumstances under which the agrarian Catholic petty bourgeoisie came into existence, and the reasons, both spiritual and economic, for their ultra-conservative outlook.

### (i) The Rise of the Agrarian Catholic Petty-Bourgeoisie

The period between 1850 and 1914 in Irish history is widely referred to as the "post-Famine" period (Clear 1998, Miller 2015), and, as Guinnane notes, is the "period during which the Irish economy and Irish society became 'modernized'" (77). Guinnane describes how Ireland's population "shrank continuously" (3) during this time. The Great Famine itself resulted in the loss of one million lives to starvation and a further million people to emigration, but the author notes that the population continued to shrink "after famine conditions had all but disappeared from the island" (3). What the author puts this down to is 1) continued emigration from the country, which "was inexpensive by the late nineteenth century" (22); and 2) Ireland's very high level of permanent celibacy, which he describes as "Ireland's most distinctive demographic trait" (21). This signals several fundamental changes in Irish society.

Guinnane contends that the celibate life was adopted by many rural Irish people of their own accord, as a rational decision towards their own greater economic prosperity. He notes that: "Before the Famine… early and universal marriage was the norm. Fathers were willing to subdivide their farms, permitting all their sons to set up their own households on land nearby" (92). However, the predominant system of inheritance changed after the Famine, to one based on primogeniture. This meant that only one son would inherit the farm and marry, and that the others would either emigrate or remain at home as bachelors or spinsters. Synge describes encountering this system among the country folk of Kerry: "When there is a long family, one son will stay at home and keep the farm, and the others will go away because they must go" (Synge, "In West Kerry" 267). While Guinnane's contention that this system of inheritance was taken on by its adherents for economic reasons may be correct, it was fostered and maintained by a strict code of social and moral conduct which

would result in the oppressively conservative societies we find in Synge, Keane and McDonagh's plays.

Marriage was strictly controlled in these societies. The older, land-owning generation would largely dictate the love lives of their sons and daughters, often through an institution known as the "Match" (Connell 1957, Inglis 2005, Guinnane 1997). Sons and daughters would be matched up for marriage by their parents, priests or "matchmakers". These would be decided based on what made the most economic sense. Connell writes: "A marriage came to be heralded by commercial rather than biological advances" (77). Given that land would rarely pass on to the chosen son until his father's death, or at least his retirement in old age, and that "the son elected to receive the land must remain unmarried until the time of its transfer" (Connell 88), it was quite common for a son to be in middle age before he was eligible to marry. However, his land, and not his age, would determine his eligibility. This often resulted in young women being married off to old men simply because the marriage made economic sense. We see this with "Nora" in Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* and the titular character, "Sive", in Keane's play. As both these plays show, this practice quite often, and quite unsurprisingly, resulted in unhappiness and bitterness between the couple.

It is equally unsurprising that those hardest hit by the Great Famine were the poorest. Larkin writes that: "The 'bulk' of the cottiers, labourers, and paupers were swept away by starvation, disease and emigration" (639). Those who had the resources to weather the storm were a more "'respectable' class of Catholics, typified by the Cullens and the Mahers of Carlow, who were economically better off" (Larkin 639). The Famine freed up large areas of land for people of this economically better off class, but also for the poorer few who remained. Connell writes that: "Formerly, while he remained a peasant, a man could seldom, within reason, aspire to a higher standard of living" (79). After the Famine, however, that was

to change. The poorer rural classes adopted many of the social practices which had already been in place within the wealthier, "'respectable' class of Catholics" mentioned above. Connell notes that: "Before the Famine, alien though the 'Match' was to the needs of the peasants, it was treated with more respect in the better-off farming families" (87). With a view to improving their lot, the poorer farming classes adopted the practices and values of the wealthier Catholic farmers. It was thus that the agrarian petty bourgeoisie became the dominant class within rural Gaelic Ireland.

Ireland was also experiencing at this time what has been widely referred to as a "devotional revolution" (Larkin 1972, Guinnane 1997, Quigley 1980). Throughout the nineteenth century the Irish Catholic Church had reorganised itself into an effective, disciplined institution after emerging from "over a century of legal impediments to the practice of Roman Catholicism in Ireland" (Guinnane 69). The number of priests per person in Ireland shot up from "one priest per three thousand Catholics" in 1840, to "one priest per nine hundred" (Guinnane 71) in 1900. Numbers of nuns rose to even higher levels: in 1900 there was "one nun per four hundred". This, among other factors, led to an enormous jump in mass attendance. In pre-Famine Ireland, 33% of Catholics went to mass; less than fifty years later that number had jumped to 90% (Larkin 636). The reorganisation of the Church, which led to this "devotional revolution", was spearheaded by Cardinal Paul Cullen (1803-1878); a member of the wealthy Cullen farming family mentioned above. He created a "uniform, disciplined, national Church" (Quigley 252) in which most of his fellow priests and bishops were, like him, the sons of the emerging agrarian petty bourgeoisie (Connell 1957). The peculiar brand of Catholicism that then established itself in Irish society preached social and moral values that suited the economic interests of this new class. For example, the new inheritance practices meant that marriage was not a viable option for most young Irish men

and women from rural, farming backgrounds. Celibacy was thus promoted as a virtue, even for lay people, despite the wider Catholic Church's teachings to marry and procreate.

This was in all likelihood not decided upon and imposed by a secret cabal of cardinals and substantial farmers eager for personal gain. It more likely arose naturally as the interests and beliefs of this farming class moulded to fit the teachings of the newly reformed Church and vice-versa. Larkin writes that: "The moral and social values of the community and the pressure the community applied in terms of what it considered to be right and wrong also affected clerical conduct" (632). Quigley argues further that: "the Church simply reflected the general tone of conservatism which characterised Irish capitalism" (264). However, the teachings of the Catholic Church, in which "sins of the flesh" (Inglis 4) are among the most dire, plainly fit with the petty bourgeoisie's interest in controlling the sexual activity of their young people. The economic strategy of the newly "respectable" farmer "intent on improving his standard of living could be ruined by the transgressive actions of his daughter" (Inglis 10). Catholic teachings regarding purity and sin were preached relentlessly because they fit with the interests of this newly emerging class and the poorer farmers who aspired to bourgeois "respectability". In the Ireland of today, these teachings would be the subject of ridicule. However, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Ireland, they were commonplace because the public allowed them to be.

The final major influence on the social and moral values of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie spread from the middle-classes of industrialised Victorian Britain. Certain aspects of the Victorian mentality became enshrined in law, such as the Vagrancy Act of 1824 and the later, more stringent, Vagrancy Act of 1871 (Clear 118), which essentially made homelessness illegal, and stemmed from a societal attitude that poverty was a "moral failing on the part of the poor" (Geber, O'Donnabhain 164). Other aspects were enforced more

covertly, by a system of class and "respectability" in which people who did not conform to societal standards of decency would be shunned, or quietly institutionalised. The "Victorian Lady" represented these standards of decency to which bourgeois women should conform. For the "respectable" Victorian Lady, it was expected that "self-control and restraint should govern both sexual activity and endeavours in other areas of life" (Landale, Guest 166). Inglis writes that: "Good women were expected to remain emotional and childlike" (7). A "respectable" woman was expected to remain innocent, pure and utterly subservient. This idea fit very well with the needs of Ireland's agrarian bourgeoisie as it created a society in which women who did not conform to the strict sexual code propagated by the Church could be ostracised and demonised, thus dissuading others from breaking the rules.

What resulted from all this was a newly class-conscious society, in which adherents to the strict moral code felt pride in themselves and felt no pity for those who deviated. Through these attitudes of superiority and inferiority, the society could essentially police itself. A system of pride and shame was inculcated in the minds of the rural Irish people, and "over the course of the nineteenth century, external constraints on sexual behaviour slowly became combined with internal self-control" (Inglis 10). It was, therefore, anathema to the bourgeois Catholic nationalists to see the figure of the Irish peasant presented as anything less than a noble, pious man-of-the-land. What was even more antithetical to their ideology was the representation of an Irish peasant woman as anything less than chaste, virginal and pure.

### (ii) Modernisation Theory and Rural Ireland

Bourgeois ideas of the "Victorian Lady" and "respectability" were soon challenged in Britain by subversive literature, political activism and a growing number of educated women and men who were willing to publicly decry them. In rural Ireland, however, these ideas persisted essentially unchallenged by the populace: "what we do not find in nineteenth century Ireland, at least not to the same extent, is the type of movements to be found in

Britain for women's rights and greater equality of the sexes" (Inglis 11). The reasons for this lack of resistance are open to debate but may be partially explained by the different stages of economic development Ireland and Britain were in at the time. Guinnane notes that "Ireland was not an industrializing, urbanizing society like England" (273). Ireland was an agrarian economy, and the majority of the population, being Gaelic and Catholic, could only truly begin to establish a foothold on the economic ladder during the nineteenth century after the Penal Laws were repealed. The country would not become an industrial economy until the period between 1958 and 1972 (Kearns 1974); a period in which, incidentally, women's rights movements began to emerge (Inglis 2005, Shannon 1997). Inglehart and Baker write that: "Industrialization leads to occupational specialization, rising educational levels, rising income levels… changes in gender roles, attitudes towards authority and sexual norms" (21), among other changes. These changes in social and moral values in rural Ireland are evident in the "cottage kitchen" plays of Synge, Keane and McDonagh. Each play exposes and challenges the prevailing attitudes in rural Ireland at the times in which they are set, and reveal the oftentimes suffocatingly conservative nature of rural Irish society.

Before examining the plays themselves, it should be noted that this paper's analysis is of the "dramatic" texts, or scripts, of the plays. A script cannot be read as a novel, as each script is written with the intent that it be performed. However, Wallis and Shepherd note that: "We can say that each dramatic text contains an implied theatrical production" (5). Although we will examine the audiences' reactions to the premieres of these plays, we will not examine the productions themselves in terms of acting, staging, etc. as these may deviate from the "implied theatrical production" present in the script. Each script was inspired by certain moments in history which subsequent productions cannot emulate.

## Part One – *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903)

J. M. Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* was first performed by the Irish National Theatre Society on the 8th of October, 1903, at Molesworth Hall in Dublin. The action of the play begins as a wandering tramp arrives to the door of the "[*last cottage at the head of a long glen in County Wicklow*]" (Synge 3) amidst a downpour of rain. He is invited into the cottage kitchen by Nora Burke, the woman of the house, and soon notices a supposedly dead body lying on a bed in the room under a sheet. As the play unfolds, we learn that Nora's husband Dan is simply playing dead as he suspects his wife of having been unfaithful to him. The unhappiness of their marriage, the loneliness of the glens and the insular nature of their society is made clear throughout. When Dan discovers proof of his wife's infidelity, he banishes her from the cottage forever. However, she leaves with the Tramp who, through his poetic speech and romantic nature, convinces her that a life of adventure on the road is preferrable to one of dreary conformity in "respectable" rural society.

The setting of the "humble cottage featuring tenant farmers, industrious women, resilient fishermen, or travelling musicians" (Vandevelde 110) would have been familiar to a largely Catholic, middle-class audience. Such an audience would have been used to representations of noble Irish peasants, unequalled in moral rectitude and purity, despite living under the tyrannical hand of "British imperialism" (Pilkington, "J. M. Synge and the Collapse of Constructive Unionism 1902-09"). However, in this instance, the playwright purposely subverts these expectations. Vandevelde writes: "the audience realizes that this playwright at once creates and breaks their familiar image of the country cottage kitchen" (112). Rural Irish life is not represented as a pastoral Eden, but rather as a society like any other; replete with its own deep flaws and injustices.

Perhaps the best demonstration of these deep flaws and injustices is to be found, ironically, in the audience's reaction to the play. The actress Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, who

played the part of Nora Burke in the Molesworth Hall production, writes that the play "had the unusual experience of turning a powerful nationalist club in Dublin against us" (22). She goes on to note certain reactions from the Irish press and public: "'Nora Burke is a lie'… [the play] is a staging of the old-world libel on womankind" (25). Prominent nationalist Arthur Griffith also denounced the play as "anti-national on the grounds that it was a slander on Irish womanhood" (Pilkington, "J. M. Synge and the Collapse"). Griffith was, in fact, so fervent in his condemnation of the play that he penned his own, called *In a Real Wicklow Glen* (1904), which "insists on the importance of female morality as the repository of national pride" (Pilkington, "J. M. Synge"). Famously, he also stated of the play, and the issues of made marriage and unhappiness that it explores, that:

> Men and women in Ireland marry lacking love, and live mostly in a dull level of amity. Sometimes they do not – sometimes the woman lives in bitterness – sometimes she dies of a broken heart – *but she does not go away with the tramp* (Arrowsmith xvii).

Griffith's values are made clear here; and they bear a striking resemblance to the very moral and social values that Synge exposes and critiques in his play. An Irishwoman's Catholic duty to her husband supersedes her own happiness; love is not an important consideration for marriage; homeless and impoverished people are deserving of scorn; and those who live outside the social and moral standards of Griffith and the Catholic bourgeoisie are not to be tolerated.

### (i) Nora Burke

The controversy caused by the heroine of Synge's play is almost entirely due to her decision to break free of the societal norms which Irish women were expected to adhere to. She is, at the beginning of the play, a victim of the social practices which led to her marrying

an old man with land. She makes clear that she felt she had had no other recourse: "What way would I live, and I an old woman, if I didn't marry a man with a bit of farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?" (Synge 10). She has entered into a loveless marriage for economic security and her loneliness and regret is evident throughout: "he [her husband] was always cold, every day since I knew him… and every night, stranger [referring to the tramp]" (Synge 4). The implication is that Dan holds neither affection nor attraction towards Nora, and that the marriage may not even have been consummated. As we have discussed previously, loveless marriage between an old man and a young woman was a common occurrence in rural Ireland at the time due to the institution of the "Match" (Connell 87). Nic Shiubhlaigh notes that various writers and journalists at the time believed that: "Synge was slyly attacking" (25) this institution. This is plainly true when we consider that the tone of the play has been set up as satirical.

Within the first minute of the play, the audience has been primed for a comedy. When the tramp notices the body lying on the bed, he remarks: "It's a queer look is on him for a man that's dead" (Synge 3). Nora replies, with the stage direction that the line should be delivered "[*Half-humorously*]": "He was always queer, stranger, and I suppose them that's queer and they living men will be queer bodies after" (Synge 4). This exchange hints to the audience that something might be afoot and that the husband may simply be pretending to be dead. This is a patently farcical situation, which sets the tone for the rest of the play. Therefore, when Nora soon after says the line mentioned above: "…and every night, stranger…", the implication is intended to provoke a laugh from the audience. The line is to be delivered with a pause both before and after: the first pause, for comic timing; the second, to allow the laughter to subside. By setting up his play within the conventions of "the peasant plays favoured by the Gaelic League" (Pilkington, "J. M. Synge and the Collapse") through his use of the cottage kitchen setting, and lulling the audience in with a few laughs, Synge

prepares to more adequately subvert the audience's expectations and confront them with their own biases and wrongheaded moral values.

An attitude that we can find present in Arthur Griffith's quote is that it is perfectly fine for an Irish woman to suffer within her marriage, but that she must endure that suffering and not attempt to better her lot by transgressing social norms. Inglis, summing up the work of Dympna McLoughlin, writes that: "There were three main characteristics of a respectable Irish woman: 1) an overwhelming desire to marry and remain faithful, dependent and subordinate; 2) an unquestioning readiness to regard the domestic sphere as her natural habitat and to engage in reproduction rather than production; and 3) a willingness to accept that women's sexuality was confined to marriage" (9). Nora's "respectability" is, therefore, not necessarily in question for much of the play. Although she hints that her marriage was both loveless and sexless, and states clearly that she has been unhappy and lonely, she has not yet violated Griffith's ideal of the Irish housewife who, if she suffers, does so in silence. The audience is soon, however, confronted with the hypocrisy of this attitude when Nora begins to hint that she may indeed have transgressed sexually.

It is hinted that Nora may have been, or may yet be, unfaithful to her husband with three men. The first is Patch Darcy, a rambling man who used to call in to the cottage often before losing his mind, dying on the back hills, and being "eaten by the crows" (Synge 5). When Darcy comes up in conversation between Nora and the Tramp, Nora says sorrowfully: "It's very lonesome I was after him a long while" (Synge 6) before glancing over at her supposedly dead husband. She quickly changes the tone of her voice as she remembers that she was a married, "respectable" woman at that time and should not alert strangers to her possible infidelity. The second is Michael Dara, the young farmer whom Nora fetches and brings into the house. As they converse, Michael suggests that they get married "in the chapel

of Rathvanna, and [he'll] bring his sheep up on the bit of hill you [Nora] have on the back mountain" (Synge 12). The familiarity with which they converse, and the talk of marriage, suggest an ongoing liaison between the two. Michael Dara is shown to have his mind on the potential economic gains to be had from their union, as he could move his sheep onto the back mountain. He presents to Nora the option to enter into another passionless marriage with another land-obsessed farmer.

The third is, of course, the Tramp with whom she leaves at the end of the play. Dan banishes her from the house when he discovers Michael Dara's plans to marry her, and Michael Dara shows himself to be a coward when he refuses to take her in. Nora looks round at him for support, but he cowers before Dan; timidly suggesting instead that: "There's a fine Union below in Rathdrum" (Synge 13). The Tramp is by no means a particularly brave man; he trembles in fear when Dan reveals himself to be alive, saying: "I meant no harm, your honour; and won't you leave me easy to be saying a little prayer for your soul?" (Synge 7). However, what the Tramp offers is an alternative to the lonely existence of the rural Irish housewife. He speaks poetically about the "herons crying out over the black lakes, and… the grouse and the owls with them" (14). This poetic speech and freewheeling attitude sharply contrast with Dan, who represents the hard-headed boorishness of the agrarian Catholic petty bourgeoisie.

When he banishes Nora from the cottage, he says scornfully: "Let her walk round the like of Peggy Cavanagh below, and be begging money at the cross-roads, or selling songs to the men" (13). Michael exhibits similar attitudes as he first beholds the Tramp and mockingly observes: "That's a poor coat you have, God help you" (9). Whereas Dan represents the vulgarity and pig-headedness of the petty bourgeoisie, Michael typifies the cowardly conformity of the same class. The Tramp is presented as the most admirable of the three men

because he does not allow himself to be constrained by these societal norms. However, to Griffith, Nora's suggested infidelity with the Tramp is much more grievous a transgression than her infidelity with a "respectable", landed man such as Michael Dara.

Finally on Nora Burke, it bears considering her resemblance to Ibsen's character Nora (Lonergan 2017) from *A Doll's House* (1879). Writing of Ibsen's Nora, Wallis and Shepherd describe how she "is drawn as a stage type very popular in 1879 – the delightfully innocent, young, happy, carefree yet devoted housewife" (35). They further note that Ibsen's audience would have expected her "to end the play yet more happily married" (35). Ibsen, however, challenges "bourgeois convention" (Wallis, Shepherd 35) by having his Nora stand up for herself and walk out on her marriage. Synge's Nora, likewise, finds the courage to leave her life of dull security behind and "go away with the tramp". Nora, after resolving to leave and walk the roads, turns to Dan and confronts him with the emptiness of his own existence: "What is it you'll have now but a black life, Daniel Burke; and it's not long… till you'll be lying again under that sheet, and you dead surely" (15). Synge, in turn, confronts his audience with their own prejudices and the needless constraints that the agrarian bourgeoisie place on themselves by holding these social and moral standards.

### (ii) The Tramp

Laws on vagrancy throughout the nineteenth century in both Ireland and Britain became progressively more stringent to the point that, in 1871, new vagrancy legislation effectively "put people without money and homes in the same category as housebreakers" (Clear 127). As the industrial bourgeoisie in Britain, and the agrarian petty bourgeoisie in Ireland, made gains in power and influence in their respective countries, so too did their value systems spread both upwards and downwards through society. Poverty came to be viewed as "a moral failing on the part of the poor" (Geber, O'Donnabhain 164). It was thus that, in rural Gaelic Ireland, we begin to see "social status in a community that was more differentiated

than formerly, more guilty of poverty and prouder of wealth" (Connell 81). Workhouses were built to provide for the poor and homeless but were "designed to make life psychologically unpleasant for their occupants" (Guinnane 61). This is testament to the public's view of those who had to live and work there. To be poor and destitute became shameful amidst "ever-rising standards of acceptability and respectability" (Clear 129). It is for this reason that Griffith is so vehement in his assertion that the Irish peasant housewife "*does not go away with the tramp*". This attitude is parodied in *In the Shadow of the Glen* through its portrayal of the Tramp as a dignified, mannerly, attractive gentleman, and of Dan as an impolite, obstinate, old boor.

Synge was attracted to the romantic, wild existence of the vagabond. In his several books and essays written on his travels throughout different parts of Ireland he often mentions this. For example, while in Wicklow, he writes that: "In all the circumstances of this tramp life there is a certain wildness that gives it romance and a peculiar value for those who look at life in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the arts also" (Synge 240). He also finds, in the wildest parts of the west of the country, the remnants of a culture in which the tramp is not regarded with disdain but rather welcomed with open arms: "I do not think a beggar is ever refused in Kerry" (Synge 299). It is on Inishmaan, as mentioned in the introduction, that he finds a society of people "among whom there is absolute equality" (Synge 388). There is no shame in poverty on Inishmaan and there is no pride in wealth according to the author. These are values, along with a penchant for folk superstition and pagan magic, that we find in Synge's Tramp.

It is by design, therefore, that the Tramp is presented as the most attractive male character in the play. This once more subverts the audience's expectations by first introducing a character to whom they can feel superior, a vagrant; in the context of a comedy,

a genre in which the audience feels superior to at least some characters. As the play progresses, Dan shows himself to be a bitter, old curmudgeon and Michael shows himself to be a spineless, cowardly fool. The Tramp, in the meantime, has comported himself like a gentleman addressing Nora as "lady of the house" (3) and Dan as "master of the house" (8). As Nora and the Tramp show themselves to be more sympathetic through their tolerance and open attitudes, Dan and Michael show themselves to be more worthy of ridicule through their insularity and small-mindedness. Frye writes that: "As soon as we find sympathetic or even neutral characters in a comedy, the action begins to show a conflict between these characters and the ridiculous ones" (550). The Tramp thus serves, among many other purposes in the play, the formal function of the foil to Dan and Michael; thereby exposing their absurd intolerance, and, by extension, that of the Catholic petty bourgeoisie.

The Tramp embodies a culture which has all but disappeared from Wicklow. The wandering vagrant still had a place in West Kerry and other parts of the west, as mentioned earlier, but was by then a figure worthy of pity or scorn in most parts of Ireland. The Tramp keeps alive certain folk superstitions which persisted in the west at the time. After asking Nora for a needle, which she supplies, he tells her: "There's great safety in a needle, lady of the house" (7). Later, as he is going to sleep, he: "[*puts the needle under the collar of his coat*]" (Synge 10). This superstitious practice was thought to be a protection against ghosts and fairies, as told to Synge on the Aran Islands by storyteller Pat Dirane: "'Take a sharp needle,' he said, 'and stick it under the collar of your coat, and not one of them will be able to have power over you'" (Synge 337). This practice, and others like it, were in Synge's eyes, residue of a pagan, pre-Christian past before strict binaries of class and morality were inculcated in the minds of the Irish peasantry. As the influence of the Catholic Church grew, these folk-practices were stamped out. Synge portrays the Tramp as continuing to adhere to

this older way of life; free of bourgeois class-consciousness, self-consciousness and puritanical moral binaries.

### (iii) Patch Darcy and Peggy Cavanagh

Neither Patch Darcy nor Peggy Cavanagh appears in the play, but each serves to reveal, and juxtapose with, the moral values and attitudes of the characters present. Both Patch and Peggy, we are told, were exceptional people: "There was never a lamb from his own ewes [Patch] wouldn't know before it was marked; and he'd run from this to the city of Dublin and never catch for his breath" (10); "To look on Peggy Cavanagh, who had the lightest hand at milking a cow that wouldn't be easy, or turning a cake" (11). Despite this, to Dan and Michael, Patch and Peggy are shameful figures. Due to their wayward nature, and the deterioration of their mental health, they are undeserving of the admiration of the "respectable" bourgeoisie. Dan curses Patch bitterly: "Darcy… the devil choke him" (8). Michael, despite Nora and the Tramp's praise for Patch's skill at sheepherding, can only remember him as "the man [that] went queer in his head the year that's gone" (10). They likewise view Peggy as a figure of shame for her "walking round on the roads" (11), "begging money at the cross-roads" and "selling songs to the men" (13). Patch and Peggy are derided by the "respectable" farming classes simply for not conforming to their standards and values.

Synge, however, clearly intends to juxtapose Patch's skill at sheepherding with Michael's ineptitude. Speaking of his sheep, Michael admits that he cannot control them: "It's destroyed I was, surely. They were that wilful they were running off into one man's bit of oats, and another man's bit of hay, and tumbling into the red bogs till it's more like a pack of old goats than sheep they were" (9). The brave Patch cuts a decidedly more appealing figure than the timid Michael Dara. Likewise, Patch is presented to us as having been a "leader" of sheep, whereas Dan, with his conformism and "inflexible Catholic bourgeois

ethics" (Murphy 130), is likened to a sheep himself at various times throughout the play. Nora recounts Dan's supposed death to the Tramp, telling him that Dan "let a great cry out of him, and stiffened himself out like a dead sheep" (4). Later in the play, when Nora tells Michael that he will soon end up just like Dan, with "the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush where sheep do be leaping a gap" (12), Dan, in a comic moment, sits up suddenly from the bed with "[*His hair sticking out round his head*]" (Synge 12). Michael is here shown, through his unquestioning conformity to the standards and morals of the agrarian bourgeoisie, to be on the exact same trajectory as Dan: soon to end up a bitter, old curmudgeon. Patch is a leader of sheep because he flouts convention; Dan and Michael are sheep themselves because they blindly follow it.

Patch and Peggy are, however, easily dismissed by Dan and Michael due to their supposed "inferiority". For Patch, this stems from his mental health. When the Tramp speaks well of Patch, Nora remarks that: "Isn't it a grand thing when you hear a living man saying a good word of a dead man, and he mad dying?" (10). Such a remark only bears making within a culture that stigmatises mental illness. Nora finds it to be quite out of the ordinary for someone to speak well of a man who had lost his mind. Likewise, Peggy Cavanagh is shunned by bourgeois society for her mental health, her appearance and her vagrancy. Vagrancy, according to Clear, was "seen as a symptom of 'degeneration'" (20). However, on the west coast, in places such as Connemara, few to no arrests were recorded for vagrancy throughout the nineteenth century. Clear hypothesises that this may have been because "the people who were on the move through Connemara were so accepted and valued by the Connemara people that they would not have complained about them" (130). Ideas of bourgeois "respectability", embodied in the characters of Dan and Michael, and expressed by such men as Arthur Griffith, had not yet permeated the farthest reaches of the west. Synge deftly exposes how these bourgeois ideas of "respectability" were antithetical to, what he saw

as, the “true” rural Irish way of life; namely, that of the islands and remote areas of the west coast.

### (iv) Modernisation

Yeats called the moral uproar that followed *In the Shadow of the Glen* and Synge’s most famous work, *Playboy of the Western World* (1907), a “defence of virtue by those who have but little” (7). Synge penned these works in order to “castigate [an] encroaching modernity… and… to provoke their bourgeois audience out of their complicity in this process” (Arrowsmith xvi). Both Synge and Yeats abhorred the “driving materialism” (Patten 2) of the nineteenth century and the rise of the bourgeois value systems that came along with it. It was on Inishmaan that Synge thought himself to have found a final bastion of premodern Gaelic culture. Even on the other islands that make up Aran, he sensed they had already been somewhat tainted by modernisation, and bourgeois class-consciousness:

> I am in the north island again, looking out with a singular sensation to the cliffs across the sound. It is hard to believe that those hovels I can just see in the south are filled with people whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend. Compared with them the falling off that has come with the increased prosperity of this island is full of discouragement. The charm which the people over there share with the birds and flowers has been replaced here by the anxiety of men who are eager for gain (Synge, “The Aran Islands” 366).

As Irish rural society began to establish itself on the economic ladder, it adopted the many conservative practices and moral values discussed above. However, many of these societal attitudes and values, although they manifest themselves in different ways, are predicted by modernisation theory.

This theory posits that capitalist societies tend to follow similar developmental trajectories and that the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of their populations change along predictable lines as different economic stages are reached. Societies with agrarian economies tend to have certain social and moral values, industrial societies tend to have slightly more tolerant and liberal values, and post-industrial societies (service economies) tend to be even more tolerant and liberal. The post-Famine period, as discussed above, saw Ireland's economy make great leaps forward due to the changes in inheritance and marriage practices: "This was the current… [that]… by the new century… had carried the mass of peasants out of their chronic poverty and to the prospect, if not the reality, of comfort" (Connell 87). Thus, the rural people who had a chance at bettering themselves did so by adopting and imposing a new, more stringent set of moral and social values on their communities.

Michael Dara, as we can see from his obsession with land and money, is clearly a young farmer bent on improving his economic situation. Inglehart and Baker write that agrarian societies tend to "emphasize social conformity rather than individualistic striving, believe in absolute standards of good and evil, support deference to authority, and have high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook" (25). As we have seen, he is certainly more of a conformist than a trailblazer. We see evidence of his beliefs in absolute standards of good and evil in his dismissal of Patch Darcy; his reasoning being that: 1) Patch Darcy was mentally unwell; 2) Being mentally unwell is bad; 3) Therefore, Patch Darcy is bad. His deference to authority is evidenced by when he is confronted by Dan, the man of the house. He defers to his authority by siding with him over Nora. Although the character himself does not overtly espouse any nationalistic views, the emerging class he represents certainly did. His attitude and several of the other issues in rural Irish society at the time which are explored in the play fit with the societal attitudes and practices predicted by the modernisation theory model.

Although Synge does not openly condemn the Catholic Church in *In the Shadow of the Glen*, he certainly disapproved of its propagation of values of "respectability" and "purity". The priests, coming from the same background as the farmers, implanted these bourgeois values in the populace through fiery, puritanical preaching. Quigley goes so far as to say that "the Catholic moral order, Irish-style, was an arm of the farming wing of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie" (451). The Church's rise in power and influence in the nineteenth century coincides with Ireland's economic development as an agrarian economy. The "devotional revolution" saw mass attendance figures skyrocket, and the Irish people became more widely conservative in their outlook.

Inglehart and Baker write that "if the people of a given society place a strong emphasis on religion, that society's relative position on many other variables can be predicted" (28). As Ireland's particular brand of puritanical Catholicism took a firm hold on the populace throughout the nineteenth century, the values it espoused became the norm. When Ireland gained partial independence in 1921 and became a Republic in 1937, the Catholic Church's influence over state matters grew even more. Ireland remained a poor, agrarian economy after independence but became even more puritanical in its moral values. The next play we will look at, *Sive* (1959) by John B. Keane, which is set just before the period in which Ireland transitioned to an industrial economy, demonstrates the same draconian marriage practices in 1950s rural Ireland, but with an amplified culture of moral purity.

## Part Two – *Sive* (1959)

John B. Keane's *Sive* was first performed by the Listowel Drama Group on the 2nd of February, 1959, in Walsh's Ballroom, Listowel, County Kerry. The crowd received the play enthusiastically, although "some were dismayed at the harshness of the language, [and] others by scenes that cut too close to the reality they experienced" (Kealy 241). The "country

kitchen" setting hearkens back to the peasant plays of the early twentieth century but provides the backdrop for a portrait of rural Irish life that has changed in the intervening fifty years. Whereas Nora Burke effectively has to "drop out" of rural Irish society altogether in order to gain some measure of control over her own life, what we find in *Sive* is an intergenerational clash of values from *within* rural society itself. Roche describes this as: "A conservative Ireland struggling to deal with the rapid onset of modernisation" (29). Keane says that he was inspired to write the play after visiting the remote townland of Renagown, in the Stacks Mountains in Kerry, and meeting the people there. He describes them as "'Post-Famine' in their way of life" (Roche 30) and slowly adjusting to changes within their community. The speech of the characters he thus creates, being from such a remote region of the west, abounds with Irish-language words and expressions, which suggests that "these characters are not far removed from a time when Irish was spoken" (Hogan 211). Although the action of the play takes place fifty years after the events of *In the Shadow of the Glen*, the remote mountain regions of Kerry were slower to abandon older, traditional Irish ways of life than Wicklow.

We find, in the play, three generations of rural folk represented by the three female characters: 1) Nanna, grandmother to Sive and representative of an older, somewhat more tolerant way of life; 2) Mena, daughter-in-law to Nanna and representative of the hard-headed, economically minded values of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie embodied in Dan and Michael in Synge's play; and 3) Sive, granddaughter to Nanna who wishes to study and someday marry, not for economic reasons, but for love and happiness. These characters are introduced to us in the same order.

We first see Nanna sitting by the fire "[*bent forward with age*]" (Keane 9), smoking and dressed in black like an old crone. It is when she raises her skirts to hide her clay pipe as Mena enters that the audience sees "[*A great quantity of red petticoat…revealed*]" (Keane 9).

Red petticoat was the traditional dress of women in certain parts of Kerry, Connemara and the Aran Islands that made a lasting impression on Synge during his travels there (Synge 190, 214, 221, 317, 328, 333, 335, 380). This signals her connection to an older way of life which stands in contrast to Mena, who enters the kitchen and is described in the stage directions as being: "[*strong, well-proportioned, hard-featured, in her early forties*]" (Keane 9). She has worked hard all her life to improve on the little she has had. She is practical, highly class-conscious and concerned with bourgeois "respectability". After a venomous exchange of unpleasantries between these two, Sive enters. She is "[*a pretty young girl… about* 18], and she carries [*a satchel filled with books*]" (Keane 11). The books signal her studious, curious nature. She enters the cottage enthusiastically talking about how "lovely" the dinner of "fricassee with dortois" (Keane 11) was at the convent. Her cheery enthusiasm is a source of resentment for Mena due to their differing value systems.

The plot centres around the offer of a "Match", or arranged marriage, similar to, though quite distinct from, the arrangement between Nora and Dan Burke. The local "matchmaker", Thomasheen Seán Rua, has been approached by a rich old local farmer named Seán Dóta who lusts after young Sive, and offers £200 to Sive's family and £100 to Thomasheen to arrange the marriage. Thomasheen and Mena conspire together, out of their own economic and familial interest, to ensure that the marriage comes to pass. Sive gradually becomes more and more despondent as, in their efforts to control her, Thomasheen and Mena strip her of everything that had given her life joy and meaning. The plot culminates with Sive escaping the room they are keeping her in, running out across the bog and drowning herself in a bog hole.

Liam Scuab, Sive's young love interest, retrieves her body from the bog and lays it out in the cottage kitchen. This melodramatic climax so heightens the audience's sympathy

for Liam, and hatred for those who have brought about Sive's death, that when he turns on Mena, his smouldering rage is felt by every audience member as he cries: "You killed her! You… you… you killed her! You horrible filthy bitch!" (Keane 93). The image the audience is left with as the curtain is drawn is of Sive's dead body laid out in the kitchen, and Nanna softly weeping over it; the pain of the loss being driven home by this image of the old mourning the death of the young.

Mena is not, however, a one-dimensional, pantomime villain, motivated solely by a desire to do evil. Although she acts largely out of self-interest, she does believe that Sive would do well to marry a "respectable man with a good bit [of money] put away by him" (Keane 25) like Seán Dóta, despite his age. She is shown to be a product of her upbringing and of the culture in which she has had to survive. She sees the match as a safe option in which Sive would have security. Inglehart and Baker write that: "People in societies shaped by insecurity and low levels of well-being tend to emphasize economic and physical security above all other goals" (26). This is certainly the case with Mena. Nanna is not slow to shame her for her impoverished childhood, as we see from the beginning of the play when Nanna jeers: "We all know what you could do, girl, and the stock you came from… and the cabin you came out of!" (Keane 10). Mena is therefore not wholly undeserving of some degree of understanding. All that said, she clearly embodies the mindset of the puritanical, agrarian petty bourgeoisie which has, by this point, been enshrined in the constitution of Eamonn de Valera's Republic.

### (i) Puritanical Ireland

The Irish press's denunciation of *In the Shadow of the Glen*, as we have seen, was largely due to its representation of Nora Burke, an Irish peasant housewife, as having been sexually active outside her marriage. What was being challenged here was a deeply held ideological belief in the purity of Irish women, which is why it provoked such a zealous

reaction. This “national myth of an Ireland of Catholic Celtic virtue” (Keating 149) later became a central tenet of the Irish state . What the figure of the “Victorian Lady” was to Victorian Britain, the figure of the “Virgin Mary” became for Ireland (Inglis 2005, Meaney 2011). Meaney argues that this was simply “another permutation of the Virgin-Whore dichotomy at the heart of Western culture’s representation of women” (Meaney, “Virgin Mother Ireland”). Irish women who adhered to the strict codes of sexual, domestic and social conduct were saintly and pure; those who deviated were thought of as “fallen women”. With the Irish Free State, and later the Republic, the enforcement of these codes of conduct was no longer solely carried out through gossip, exclusion and other such community-level methods; rather, they became enforced at a state level.

A tyrannical regime of puritanism was imposed on the country. The government introduced censorship legislation in 1929 and “from every pulpit and Catholic journal dire warnings were issued that Ireland was being driven towards destruction steered largely by the ‘modern woman’ and the nation’s youth, both driven to depravity by the forces of ‘foreign’ evils such as the dance hall, cinema and contraception” (Keating 138). In school “boys and girls were kept apart” (Quigley 283) from an early age to avoid fraternisation. Sexual transgressions were criminalised, which effectively resulted in the criminalisation of “single mothers and their children as well as the victims of rape, incest and paedophilia” (Smith 228). These were “indiscriminately marked as aberrant and were all deemed deserving of scorn and punishment” (Smith 228). Although these crimes occurred regularly, they did not square with the national myth of Celtic purity and were, as such, swept under the rug (Smith 2004, Keating 2012). The myth had become “central to the dominant ideology” (Inglis 14) of the new Ireland, which grew largely out of the values and economic interests of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie.

### (ii) Mena Glavin as Ireland: "The Hungry Sow"

Mena Glavin is by no means the embodiment of the "Virgin Mary" model of respectable Irish womanhood. If we compare her to Dympna McLoughlin's characteristics of a respectable Irish woman (as summarised by Inglis), we see that she in no way fits the bill. A respectable Irish woman should have, for example: "An overwhelming desire to marry and remain faithful, dependent and subordinate" (Inglis 9). Mena has married by means of a "match" and shows no particular affection for her husband beyond the economic stability he can provide. She laments that: "I could have done better if I bided my time" (Keane 10). This suggests that, had she had the choice, she would have married the man with the most wealth.

She is a practical woman, driven by a desire to better herself economically, and is by no means subordinate to Mike. In fact, the opposite is true. From the moment of their first exchange of dialogue, we clearly see the power dynamic between them. Mena asks him: "How much [money] today?" (Keane 22). Mike ignores the question and asks: "What have you in the skillet?" which Mena, in turn, ignores before asking her question again more forcefully. Mike, who "[*does not move his head*]" gives in and answers her. He does not move his head because this is not an uncommon occurrence. He is the man of the house and should, by the standards of Irish society at the time, hold absolute authority. However, it is clearly shown that he is subordinate to Mena as he capitulates and answers her question rather than insisting that she answer his.

Mena therefore does not embody the standard of chaste, virginal, subservient Irish housewife. However, she is the character who, by the words she says and not necessarily the motives that may hide beneath them, most strongly believes in these standards of purity and the binary opposition between "respectable" and "fallen" women. She makes several cryptic remarks aimed at Sive about her mother in Scene 1: "You'll come to no good either, like the one who went before you!" (Keane 11); "Enough that had children in their time" (Keane 14).

We soon find out that Sive is a “bye-child” (Keane 18), or illegitimate. Thomasheen suggests that Mena use this information to blackmail her niece: “Tell her you will bell-rag her through the parish if she goes against you” (Keane 18). Although it might seem alien to us nowadays, a woman’s reputation “constituted a powerful controller of women’s prospects for marriage, employment, social standing or indeed her freedom” (Keating 143). Sive would be ruined were Mena to do this. Mena only shoots down the suggestion because she believes that it might not produce their desired result, not because she holds any moral scruple against doing such a thing: “The girl is flighty like a colt. Threats might only make her worse” (Keane 18). Mena doesn’t threaten Sive with this information, though she does reveal it to her as she tries to convince her to go ahead with the marriage: “You will have no name till you take a husband… You are a bye-child, a common bye-child – a bastard!” (Keane 59). Rather than embodying the figure of the pure, chaste, submissive Irish housewife, Mena demonstrates the mythical nature of the idea. Much like the Irish state, Mena uses the ideas of purity and respectability to exert social control; to manipulate people to her own ends. Nanna refers to Mena as a “hungry sow” (Keane 67) later in the play. Here Keane is subtly nodding to Stephen Dedalus’s famous quote that Ireland is “the old sow that eats her farrow” (Joyce 171). Mena, through her destructive meddling in the lives of the youth, is compared with the Irish state.

### (iii) Inheritance and Marriage Practices

The personal and societal circumstances which give Seán Dóta, Mena Glavin and Thomasheen Rua motive to ensure the marriage can largely be explained by the inheritance and marriage practices which became widespread in Irish rural society in the nineteenth century. As discussed in the section on the rise of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie, farmers began to adopt a system of inheritance based on primogeniture, in which one son would inherit the farm. The previous system, in which each son would inherit an equal portion of the

father's land, was geared towards subsistence living; each son could cultivate enough potatoes to feed a family but had no real hope of improving his living standards. The new system was designed to curb early marriage and procreation to allow for greater economic prosperity: "The systematic suppression of the impulses towards romantic love, courtship and marriage in the late teens or twenties was a basic guarantee for maintaining the viability of the farm and preventing competition for the land" (Quigley 281-82). From the tension within the Glavin household, to Seán Dóta's being a bachelor so late in life, the strict system of marriage and inheritance of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie can explain much of what motivates Mena, Thomasheen and Dóta to act.

How Nanna, Mike, Mena and Sive came to live under one roof can be easily divined from our knowledge of these systems. We know that Nanna was originally the woman of the house because she says so to Mena: "What a happy home we had before you came into it!" (Keane 10). The patriarch of the Glavin house must have died and bequeathed his house and land to Mike, thus freeing him up to marry. Mena is described as being in her early forties (Keane 9); we can assume that Mike is a similar age or somewhat older. Mena worked hard to "assemble a dowry" (Guinnane 157) to make herself eligible to marry: "When I was [Sive's] age… I worked from dawn till dark to put aside my fortune" (Keane 14). In light of this, when Mike protests that Sive is too young to marry, Mena retorts indignantly: "And wasn't I young?" (Keane 66). They therefore likely married while Mena was still in her twenties. During the intervening years, Mena has been living under the same roof as her mother-in-law, Nanna, who resents her for usurping her position as woman of the house. This "trouble between a mother and a new daughter-in-law" (Guinnane 160) was a common consequence of the inheritance system. Mena feels that she has earned her position in the house, whereas Nanna believes that because she was there first the house is hers. The resentment and bitterness that they feel creates a toxic atmosphere that Mena wishes dearly to

escape from, saying she would: “give [her] right hand to have that oul’ hag out of [her] way” (Keane 20). This, coupled with the £200, is what motivates Mena to support the match.

Sive was in the Glavin house before Mena. Nanna, appealing to Mike’s sensitive nature, reminds him: “We were happy and content before that woman came into the house. Where is the love you used to have for Sive? Everywhere you went you used to take her with you” (Keane 73). Sive was likely taken in by her uncle in the wake of her mother and father’s deaths; her father having died in England working to secure enough money to marry her mother and legitimise his daughter: “Coal-mining he was… over in England” (Keane 12). Sive’s father was either not in line to inherit land or lost his right to inheritance by having Sive. Given the strict rules around marriage and “respectability”, he was left with no other recourse than to seek work in a foreign country. Due to the economic constraints of not being able to raise enough money to start a family, and a culture in which sex outside of marriage was not only shameful but effectively illegal, Sive’s mother and father were left with very few options. Their sexual transgression would not only destroy their reputations, but the reputation of their daughter, who would be born a “bastard”.

### (iv) The “Tinkers” – Carthalawn and Pats Bocock

The “Tinkers” are travelling musicians and are well known in the Glavin household. They sing songs and ask for a few pennies or sundries as they travel from house to house. The “travelling people” of Ireland whom they represent had been a part of rural Irish life for centuries by the time in which the play is set, travelling from town to town providing services for the settled community. They traded horses and donkeys at fairs around the country, such as the Puck Fair in Kerry and the Aughrim Fair in Wicklow. Synge notes, as he wandered through the Aughrim Fair during one of his trips to Wicklow, seeing “the usual camp of tinkers… selling cans or donkeys” (Synge 256-57). Although not always trusted by the settled community, they were certainly tolerated, and “complete families of travelling traders

or craftsmen were never identified as a public order problem by the police" (Clear 126). The rural folk distinguished travellers from beggars and vagrants because "the travelling man was seen to be supporting his wife and family" (Clear 126). This attitude was to change gradually as standards of "respectability" and "purity" permeated through rural Ireland as the agrarian petty bourgeoisie rose in prominence.

The travellers came to be known as "tinkers" because of the type of work that they were involved in. They would make or mend tin cans and sell them to the rural people. These types of "trades and services… seem to have been in genuine demand in many rural areas up to the 1930s" (Clear 126). After this time, they came to be classed more and more commonly as beggars and tramps. However, this was not the beginning of widespread bigotry and prejudice against the travelling people. Bhreatnach notes that, during the War of Independence, "deeply respectable and class-conscious IRA activists" (63) resented the participation of travelling men and women in the movement. The Cork IRA was involved in the murder of both tinkers and tramps; Bhreatnach writes that "a minimum of 8% of those shot [by the Cork IRA] could be categorised thus" (63). By the 1950s, when ideas of "purity" and "respectability" were enshrined in law, and the services that travelling families provided were no longer in demand, travellers began to be seen more and more as a nuisance. However, Keane portrays the "tinkers" as decent men with a deep moral conscience. They hatch a plot to help Sive escape the house and elope with Liam Scuab which sadly does not come to pass.

Mena and Thomasheen, however, denounce the tinkers at every turn as beggars: "Why should a man beg when there is work before and after him?" (Keane 47); "Go on away to yeer smelly caravan and not be disgustin' respectable people!" (Keane 49); "Into jail ye should be put, a brace of dirty beggars" (Keane 50). Nanna, on the other hand, refers to them

as "Dacent [decent] poor people" (Keane 45). As mentioned earlier, she is of an older generation. She distinguishes between tinkers and tramps, unlike Thomasheen and Mena. She tells them: "They are the people of the road – travelling people. They are above the class of beggar" (Keane 45). Nanna is shown to still be very class-conscious, but with different standards to those of Mena and Thomasheen's generation. Keane effectively exposes, not just the deleteriousness of Mena and Thomasheen's bigotry, but also the harm caused by class-consciousness altogether. Nanna shames Mena for her impoverished upbringing at the beginning of the play by calling her father "a half-starved bocock of a beggar" (Keane 14). "Bocock" is itself a slang term for beggar (Keane 124). We see Nanna's hypocrisy in shaming Mena's father for being destitute and treating Pats Bocock as an equal. Although the highly "respectable" Seán Dóta arrogantly asserts his superiority over the travellers when he says: "How dare you, tinker?" (Keane 91), Nanna is shown to be participating in the same culture of shame and respectability in her attitudes towards the destitute.

### (v) Modernisation – A Shift in Values

The picture of rural Ireland that we find in *Sive* is one of changing values and attitudes in a "conservative Ireland struggling to deal with the rapid onset of modernisation" (Roche 29). Hogan writes of the play that: "If there is any deficiency in the character-drawing, it is in Sive herself" (212). However, it is precisely her lack of a voice that best demonstrates the needlessly constrictive aspects of Irish society and culture, which are imposed by the older, established generations, and which strangle the youth. Sive and Liam Scuab's love could have grown had it been allowed to, and had it not been stifled by the machinations of their parents' generation.

The hard-headed, economically minded Mena, for one brief moment, lets her guard down as she speaks to Sive and inadvertently begins to recall a young love lost: "the sound of fiddles playing airy hornpipes, the light of a moon on the pale face of a river, the whispered

word… the meeting of soft arms and strong arms…" (Keane 58-59). She immediately catches herself when she realises, and we do not see her let down her guard at any other point in the play. Any thoughts Mena may have had of "romantic love" in her life were superseded by the exigencies of living in utter penury and struggling to survive. This need not have been the case for Sive. Through her studies she could have built a life for herself and married for love. The marriage practices and social attitudes of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie, as embodied by Seán Dóta and Mena in the play, are what ultimately cause Sive's tragic death. Keane's play shows us a picture of a "vanishing Ireland" (Kealy 242) which, even by the end of the 1950s, was slowly receding in influence.

The following decades would see widespread changes in moral and social attitudes throughout the country. Feminist movements challenged de Valera's ultra-conservative 1937 constitution which declared "the family… the basic social unit and women's primary role that of 'wife and mother'" (Shannon 262). This political resistance to the subjugation of Irish women coincided with "the gradual dismantling of the paternalistic state apparatuses of the 1940s" (Pilkington, "Irish Theatre and Modernization") such as the Censorship Board. Kearns, writing in 1974, notes that: "In the short span of 15 years Ireland [had] literally been transformed from an agricultural to an industrial country, the economic and social consequences of which are indeed far-reaching" (299). Due to changes in economic policy, Ireland began to see rapid "industrialization, urbanization and secularization" (Shannon 257) which resulted in predictable societal changes, such as "occupational specialization, rising educational levels, rising income levels… changes in gender roles; attitudes toward authority and sexual norms; declining fertility rates; [and] broader political participation" (Inglehart, Baker 21). Changing economic circumstances, a wider range of opportunities and a dilution of censorship regulations resulted in challenges to the status quo. Ireland was slowly entering the next phase of its modernisation.

Deeply held moral values and attitudes do not, however, change overnight. The feminist demonstrations of the 1970s were largely contained to Dublin and university cities. Although the gradual decline of censorship saw more and more depictions of sexually and politically liberated women appear on cinema and television screens across the country, "in real life public transgressors were shamed and castigated" (Inglis 26). Conservative ideals of "respectability" and "purity" were slow to recede, particularly in rural areas, and sexual transgressors risked ostracization or institutionalisation. However, these movements spelled the end of the Irish people's "cultivated ignorance" (Smith 226) on sexuality, reproduction and female autonomy. Demonstrations such as the Condom Train event in May 1971, in which condoms purchased in Belfast were illegally taken over the border and "openly flaunted before Gardaí officers" who were "too embarrassed to seize the contraband" (Shannon 264), exposed how outmoded the values of the Irish establishment were. That a group of grown men were so horrified by the sight of a condom that they could not carry out their job is a sign of the risible nature of puritanical Irish conservatism.

The 1980s would see a rise in the use of the contraceptive pill, which could only be obtained by prescription, but which still resulted in a drastic fall in fertility rates. The average fertility rate for an Irishwoman fell from "3.07 in 1981" to "1.89 in 1991" (Shannon 264). Moreover, women were no longer confined to the role of housewife after marriage and entered the workforce in record numbers. However, a significant cohort of puritanical Catholics remained, and ensured that, on issues such as abortion and divorce, Ireland "remained on the conservative end of the spectrum" (Girvin 137). Although the puritans had lost a lot of ground in the wake of Ireland's becoming an industrial economy, their values and attitudes remained, and were still held by large swathes of the population. Nanna and Mena's attitudinal differences are evident in *Sive*, but the intergenerational differences we find in Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) are more pronounced still. Mag, a

grandmother of some 70 years of age, is a representation of puritanical Ireland in its death throes; still prudishly meddling in the sex lives of the younger generation but very much dwindling in political importance.

## Part Three – *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996)

Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* was first performed on the 1st of February, 1996, in the Town Hall Theatre in Galway City. The playwright uses the same "country cottage kitchen" setting as so many Irish playwrights had before him. However, he uses the setting in order to better satirise the myths that surround it; Pilný writes that McDonagh seeks to dismantle "stereotypes of Ireland, in particular the myth of the pastoral West" (226). The west coast, so idealised by Synge almost a century previously, is demythologised in *Beauty Queen*. The play portrays "an Ireland dislocated between the fiction of myth and the grim reality of a dysfunctional rural society" (Pilný 226). Much like Keane and Synge's plays, the reality of life in the remote regions of rural Ireland is shown to have its own fair share of issues and problems. The central issue in *Beauty Queen* is the intergenerational clash of values between Mag, a seventy-year-old woman, and her daughter Maureen, a forty-year-old virgin who longs for a love life of her own but is thwarted at every turn by her absurdly puritanical mother. Mag and Maureen have grown up in two different Irelands and their values reflect the differing economic, social and political conditions.

The characters are foul-mouthed, manipulative, moronic and, at times, downright evil; yet even so, the play was received without instigating a riot on the part of the largely Irish audience. The puritanical fervour with which Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* was received would have been wholly incongruous with the industrialised, urbanised and secularised Ireland of the 1990s. The country had changed, and the attitudes and priorities of the people had changed with it. The nationalist desire to see portrayals of a noble Irish peasantry that lived "lives of pious devotion and virtue" (Bowman 16) was no longer relevant

in Celtic Tiger Ireland, characterised by "growing national confidence, economic optimism and cultural sophistication" (Shannon 257). What we find in *Beauty Queen* is a rural Ireland which has been slower to escape the grip of old orthodoxies and has been somewhat left behind in terms of the economic advances we find in Dublin, Cork and Galway.

Leenane is a small, wet village on the west coast of the Irish language-speaking region of Connemara in County Galway. Synge, on his travels through the region, notes that Carraroe, a nearby townland, was the "poorest parish in the country" (Synge 193). He later records speaking to a local man there who laments that: "Now there is no dancing or singing in this place at all and most of the young people is [sic] growing up and going to America" (Synge 195). Roughly seventy years later, Kearns writes of the same region, and others like it along the west coast, that "life is rigorous here and people have become habituated to emigrating" (305). Fifteen years on from Kearns article, despite the economic advancements enjoyed in other parts of Ireland, this culture of emigration remains in Leenane. Pato, Maureen's love interest in the play, invites her to "Riordan's hall out in Carraroe" (McDonagh 14) to meet him. Pato is home from England for a few days to see his "Yankee uncle" (McDonagh 14) who will be returning to Boston soon. Emigration is shown in the play to be, not only a reality and economic necessity in the region, but also a desirable option for those wishing to escape an all-too-small village in the west. The motivating factors for leaving the area have changed drastically over a very short space of time because the economic and social circumstances have changed. Emigration remains a desirable option, but it is no longer a question of survival.

McDonagh, through his exaggerated characters and satirical tone, deftly portrays the realities of these changing circumstances and values, albeit in an unrealistic way. His play is set in 1989, thirty years after Keane's *Sive*. In the intervening time, Ireland has transitioned

from an agrarian to an industrial economy, occasioning a shift in morals and values. This follows modernisation theory's model, as laid out by Inglehart and Baker: "As a society shifts from an agrarian to an industrial economy and survival comes to be taken for granted, traditional religious beliefs tend to decline" (46). As religious beliefs tend to decline, society experiences "a shift toward secular values and tolerance" (Inglehart, Baker 42). Mag, in *Beauty Queen*, grew up in and lived through roughly the same period of Irish history as Mena, in *Sive*. As we will see, Mag and Mena share a lot in common in terms of their social and moral values. However, due to the massive economic and social changes, by 1989, these values are very much an unwanted remnant of the past.

### (i) Mag Folan

After having received Pato Dooley's message for Maureen about the party in Riordan's, Mag decides not to tell her daughter. Maureen has already run into Ray, Pato's brother and deliverer of the message, as he is leaving the cottage, so she is fully aware of the invitation to the party when she asks Mag: "Nobody visited us…?" (McDonagh 17). Mag has decided to withhold the information and replies: "Ah no, Maureen. Who would be visiting us?" (McDonagh 17). Maureen then angrily confronts her mother for: "Interfering with [her] life again" (McDonagh 19). Mag's justification is that: "Young girls should not be out gallivanting with fellas…!" (McDonagh 19). Maureen's ire suggests that this is far from the first time her mother has interfered in her love life. Mag's justification is born of the same puritanical notions of "respectability" and "purity" that we find in both Keane and Synge's plays. Mag's reasoning is patently absurd; her daughter is a forty-year-old virgin who has only ever kissed two men in her life. Mag's line that: "Two men is two men too much!" (McDonagh 20) would certainly provoke a laugh from the audience. Soon after this, as she gets more and more flustered and defensive, she calls her daughter a "Whore!" (McDonagh 20). However, Maureen responds by laughing; not defiantly, but rather because Mag has such

a misguided view of morality that she would call her daughter, who remains a virgin in middle-age, a whore.

Mag's motivations for interfering in her daughter's life are shown, not to be solely driven by her puritanical standards of morality, but also to stem from a fear that, should Maureen find a man, she would leave Mag in a home. Mag point blank states her position on this when she says: "I'd die before I'd let myself be put in a home" (McDonagh 48). This is reminiscent of Nanna's fear of institutionalisation in *Sive* when Thomasheen threatens her with "the County Home": "Sure the county home is filled with the likes of her. You will see the crowds of them sticking their heads out of the windows watching the visitors coming and going and they hoping that someone will come to take them away out of it" (Keane 52). Mag's fear, therefore, partly explains the measures she takes to ensure that her daughter does not find love. Apart from the loneliness, to be left in the county home would be a great shame to someone who holds such strong core beliefs of respectability and purity.

Mag sincerely holds these beliefs and, at least in one sense, is looking out for what she thinks are her daughter's best interests. Mag and Maureen's differing views of morality are the source of much acrimonious bickering throughout the play. The atmosphere in the cottage is tense; both women are fed up and they slyly try to manipulate each other to their own ends. Similar to when Maureen knows that Mag is withholding information about the party in Riordan's, Mag later finds herself to be abreast of information that Maureen believes to be secret. Mag, having read and later destroyed the letter Pato sends to Maureen inviting her to move to Boston with him, knows that Pato failed to perform sexually on the night that he and Maureen spent in the cottage. Maureen, unaware that her mother knows this, still talks about that night in order to flaunt her newfound sexuality and tease her mother for her prudish morals. Mag plays along with Maureen as she recounts what happened that night.

However, Mag soon lets it slip that she knows more than she should, which signals to Maureen that her mother has once again interfered with her life. As Mag tries to backtrack, she pleadingly tells her daughter: “You still do have the look of a virgin about you, you always have had. (*Without malice*.) You always will” (McDonagh 52). In this moment of sincere compassion, we see Mag’s true beliefs. Her highest standard of womanhood is the same as that of puritanical Ireland: the image of the chaste, pure, “Virgin Mary”. She attempts to appeal her daughter on compassionate grounds by expressing a sincerely held pride in her daughter’s virginity.

### (ii) Maureen

However, this appeal falls on deaf ears as it comes from an ideological position that Maureen does not share with her mother. Maureen, when she believes that she is going to Boston to be with Pato, says: “Be it married or be it living in sin, what do I care?” (McDonagh 56). This reveals Maureen’s more tolerant, liberal attitude; no longer should “extramarital sexual unions” (Guinnane 282) be a source of shame. She then asks: “What do I care if tongues’d be wagging?” (McDonagh 56). This speaks to the insular nature of rural Irish society in which the values and attitudes that Mag embodies had been slower to disappear than in towns and cities. This “gossiping” was (and is, though its objectives have changed) a cultivated form of soft social control which had been used to shame and ostracise non-conforming women in rural Ireland since the nineteenth century and the rise of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie; Inglis writes that: “Girls from this class were continuously watched and subjected to gossip” (Inglis 10). Maureen, like the modern Irish woman of the 1990s, refuses to be made to feel shame over her sexuality. She rejects the culture of purity, respectability and shame which had sought to control and dominate Irish women for almost two hundred years.

As mentioned previously, Maureen confronts her mother with her newfound sexuality by essentially bragging about her night with Pato. Maureen gets up the next morning and, "[*wearing only a bra and slip*]", enters the room and "[*sits across* **Pato***'s lap*]" (McDonagh 32). This is a far cry from the beginning of the century in which a riot erupted at the premiere of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) "ostensibly because of the mention of the word 'shifts'" (Pilkington 2002: 52); "shifts" in this sense also refers to a woman's undergarments. In 1907, the mere mention of the word was enough to provoke a riot; in 1996, an actress portraying an Irish peasant woman can appear on stage in her underwear and provoke a laugh. Mag "[*watches in disgust*]" (McDonagh 32) as her daughter openly flaunts her sexuality, similar to the Gardaí officers at the Condom Train event in 1971. The source of the comedy here is demonstrated in the differences in reaction between the old-fashioned Mag and the affluent Celtic Tiger Ireland audience.

Maureen jumps at the opportunity to wave her newfound sexuality in her mother's face because of the depth of resentment she feels. She is in such misery, living with the obligation to take care of her mother out of a sense of familial duty, that she resorts to extraordinarily petty measures to make her mother suffer. She buys Kimberley biscuits, not because she likes them, but because her mother hates them: "I only get them to torment me mother" (McDonagh 24). As the play progresses, we find out that she, not only psychologically torments her mother, but physically tortures her as well: "[**Maureen** *slowly and deliberately takes her mother's shrivelled hand, holds it down on the burning range, and starts slowly pouring some of the hot oil over it, as* **Mag** *screams in pain and terror*]" (McDonagh 53). Despite how utterly wanton this act is, the audience has been set up to support Maureen. Frye writes that the: "motto of comedy, and the principle of the happy ending is 'this should be'" (552). He continues by noting that: "Comedy often represents the defeat of the older generation by the younger one" (553). As mentioned above, earlier in the

play Mag's antiquated value system and morals are exploited by the playwright for comedic purposes. The audience is therefore squarely on Maureen's side as she struggles to free herself of her mother's tyrannical prudishness.

The ending, therefore, proves all the more poignant when they realise that Maureen's chance at happiness has been scuppered, and that she is effectively doomed to become her mother. Maureen kills her mother with the "[*poker*]" (McDonagh 55) for the fire; symbolically vanquishing the last remnants of the sexually repressive Ireland of her mother's generation. Maureen believes that she is on her way to be with Pato in Boston and that they will live happily ever after. However, McDonagh sets up this ending to further deepen the tragedy of Maureen's story.

It seems as though Mag is dead and that her influence will be gone from Maureen's life forever. However, the tragic ending as it comes to pass recalls a prophetic remark made by Mag at the end of Scene 2, in which she asserts: "I *will* be hanging on for ever!" (McDonagh 21). Although Mag is dead, the influence she has had on Maureen's life continues to shape it. Ray says to Maureen: "The exact fecking image of your mother you are" (McDonagh 65). The final image of that scene, and the final image of the play, is of Maureen alone in the cottage kitchen before she: "[*exits into the hall*]" (McDonagh 66). She does not leave the cottage, as she had planned to. Maureen has missed her final chance at happiness and is doomed to become her mother. The tragedy is that Maureen's chance at happiness is blocked by a persistent set of antiquated values which should no longer be significant in modern Ireland.

### (iii) Mental Health

Another key intergenerational difference between Mag and Maureen is to be found in their attitudes towards mental health. The intolerant attitudes of the past towards those with

mental illness are evident in Dan and Michael Dara's belittlement of Patch Darcy and Peggy Cavanagh in *In the Shadow of the Glen*. In *Sive*, we see these attitudes in the Catholic stigma around suicide, wherein after Sive's death Mike begins to babble idiotically: "The priest… we must go for the priest… she must have the priest… Holy ground… she must be buried in holy ground" (Keane 94); the implication being that the Church could refuse to bury her on consecrated ground due to the "sinful" nature of her death.

In *Beauty Queen*, we see these attitudes in Mag's attempts to shame her daughter in front of Pato for having had a mental breakdown: "Difford Hall! Difford Hall!... It's a nut-house! An oul nut-house in England I did have to sign her out of and promise to keep her in me care" (McDonagh 35). Maureen, ashamedly, admits to Pato that this is true: "It's true I was in a home there a while, now, after a bit of a breakdown I had" (McDonagh 35). However, Pato responds to this with compassion and empathy: "I do have trouble with me nerves every now and then, too, I don't mind admitting. There's no shame at all in that. Only means you do think about things, and take them to heart" (McDonagh 35). Pato's quiet, compassionate understanding juxtaposes with Mag's hysterical barking as she re-emerges from the hall, manically waving papers and screaming: "Eh? Here's the papers now, Difford Hall!" (McDonagh 38). The scene ends with the two women staring at each other, unable to understand the other's perspective. Maureen ask: "Why? Why? Why do you…?... Just look at yourself". Mag fails to fully understand how terribly she has acted and, as Maureen exits the room, responds with: "Just look at *your*self too" (McDonagh 39). Here we clearly see an intergenerational gap of understanding between two women who cannot comprehend the other's behaviour.

### (iv) Modernisation

The driving force behind McDonagh's play is this intergenerational clash of ideals. Mag and Maureen have grown up in very different economic, social and political

circumstances which have, in turn, shaped their views of the world, their priorities and their values. The conservative Irish rural society of the past, in which a woman's "reputation" was paramount, was the world in which Mag grew up and had her children. In light of the massive upheavals that Ireland underwent from 1958 onwards, it is little wonder that someone growing up in these circumstances would hold different values. Maureen sneers at her mother: "We do have equality nowadays. Not like in your day" (McDonagh 49). She is, of course, referring to the societal advancements in gender equality. Mag, however, sternly responds: "There was nothing wrong in my day" (McDonagh 49). To some extent, people are shaped by the environments and circumstances that they find themselves in. We see this clearly in the differing attitudes of Maureen and Mag. Mag scoffs at the idea of gender equality because she grew up in an Ireland in which it was enshrined in the constitution that "women's primary role [was] that of 'wife and mother'" (Shannon 262), and in which purity and deference to male authority were held as virtues of "respectable" women. Mag has had to survive in a country dominated by these principles and, as such, must be absolved of some degree of blame for having internalised them.

The Catholic Church, which, as we have discussed, propagated many of the pernicious ideas that Mag would have been subjected to, is shown to have greatly receded in importance. The solemn respect paid to members of the clergy throughout much of the twentieth century is lampooned in *Beauty Queen*. The characters cannot so much as remember the local parish priest's name, "Father Welsh- Walsh" (McDonagh 13); "Father Walsh- Welsh" (McDonagh 14). Ray tells Mag that he would not buy the car that Father Walsh/Welsh is selling on the grounds that he would "look like a poof buying a car off a priest" (McDonagh 13). When Mag tells him that she had heard a news story about a priest who had "had a babby with a Yank!" (McDonagh 14), Ray replies in an exaggeratedly satirical manner: "That's no news at all… It'd be hard to find a priest who hasn't had a babby

with a Yank" (McDonagh 14). The reasons for this decline in reverence for the Catholic Church in Ireland is at least twofold: 1) The coming to light of various abuses committed by the clergy; 2) Improving economic conditions and the rising levels of education and political participation that industrialisation entails. Inglehart and Baker write that: "As human control of the environment increase[s], the role ascribed to religion and God dwindle[s]" (21-22). Ray, who is twenty years old and represents the young generation of rural Ireland at the time, holds no respect or deference towards the clergy.

Furthermore, the behaviour of the clergy themselves is shown to have changed. Ray says to Mag: "Father Welsh seldom uses violence, same as most young priests. It's usually only the older priests go punching you in the head. I don't know why. I suppose it's the way they were brought up" (McDonagh 14). As prevailing moral values and attitudes have changed, so too has the behaviour of the clergy. The young priests have grown up in the same Ireland as others of their age in other walks of life and, therefore, hold more liberal attitudes than their predecessors. Moreover, as deference to religious authority diminishes, priests can no longer enforce their standards of morality with impunity. Guinnane writes that there exist many accounts of "priests (and nuns) doing everything they could to prevent young men and women from mingling in even the most innocent circumstances" (74) in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. Dances and fairs were curtailed as they could potentially lead to sexual immorality. In this time, priests could, and often did, "denounce members of their flock" (Guinnane 76) from the pulpit. Ray openly admits to Mag that he quit the church choir when he became interested in girls and that now he goes to "discos" (McDonagh 16). However, he holds no fear of being denounced from the pulpit for sexual immorality because prevailing attitudes have changed. Ganiel describes this change as: "A shift in consciousness in which the Catholic Church is no longer held in high esteem by most of the population and can no longer expect to exert a monopoly influence in social and political life" (32-33). The

power of the Church over the lives of its parishioners is shown to derive from the power its parishioners are willing to afford it.

The decline of the influence of organised religion on a society is predicted by modernisation theory. However, it must be remembered that the theory paints a picture very much in broad strokes and that a myriad of other factors can influence a country's development along this trajectory. For example, as a country secularises, the specific religion or religions which had previously been dominant, such as Catholicism in Ireland, continue to exert an influence. This is due in large part to the "historical impact [each country's] respective churches had on their societies, rather than their contemporary influence" (Inglehart, Baker 37). By extension, the outmoded value systems of bygone eras can continue to influence our present-day cultural psyches, however much we may want to leave them behind. Inglehart and Baker note that: "Generations have 'collective memories' imprinted in adolescence and early adulthood, that persist throughout the life cycle" (42). This is clear to see in the case of Mag, whose outmoded values and attitudes blinker her view of the world. What is less clear is the extent to which her values and attitudes have shaped those of Maureen and her generation. Ideas of "respectability" and "purity", which arose with the emergence of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, have been slow to disappear and they continue to influence subsequent generations.

## Conclusion

Each of the plays examined exposes and critiques the societal issues of rural Ireland in the times they are set. When examined together, they reveal to us an Ireland in flux. The rapid economic and social changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought with them changes in the attitudes and values of the Irish people. The marriage and inheritance practices which were adopted by the emerging agrarian petty bourgeoisie during the post-Famine period contributed to forming the insular, deeply conformist society we find in early

twentieth century rural Ireland. The new system necessitated a change in societal attitudes; namely, an adoption of ideas of bourgeois "respectability" and Catholic "purity". A society in which sexual behaviour was strictly controlled allowed marriages to be arranged solely on economic grounds, thus ensuring the viability of inherited farmland and the possibility of economic advancement. Those who did not conform to the new regime of morality were shunned, ostracised or, as was often the case with "fallen" women, institutionalised. These draconian measures became widespread in rural Gaelic Ireland when, for the first time in hundreds of years, Irish farmers could reasonably aspire to a higher standard of living. The post-Famine period can be considered Ireland's first transitional phase of "modernisation": when Gaelic Ireland could first establish itself on the capitalist economic ladder. The conservative values and attitudes adopted by rural Irish society at this time mirror those predicted by the modernisation theory model for pre-industrial, agrarian societies.

*In the Shadow of the Glen* is primarily a critique of these new value systems. The class-conscious, conformist ideals we find embodied in the characters of Dan Burke and Michael Dara were, by that time, commonplace in much of rural Ireland. Synge's play exposes the deep-seated issues at the heart of this society, and the pernicious nature of the social practices of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie. Through his character of Nora Burke, Synge critiques the mythical idea of the chaste, pure, self-sacrificing Irish housewife which was so central to this new regime. Nora reveals to the audience the unhappy reality of a loveless marriage born of economic interests in the lonely hills of Wicklow. Her husband, Dan, is a frigid old man who holds neither affection nor attraction towards her. Her unhappiness, however, is immaterial to the new moral regime in which a wife is expected to sacrifice her own happiness in order to better perform her wifely duty. The primary source of controversy surrounding the play was caused by Nora's implied extramarital sexual liaisons with various men. Synge, however, portrays her very much as the heroine of the piece, in

stark contrast to the pig-headed Dan and the spineless Michael Dara. Nora stands up for herself and regains some semblance of power and autonomy over her own life by leaving the cottage behind and walking the roads with the Tramp. She rejects a life of dreary servitude in the country cottage by refusing to live by the standards of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie.

In the intervening time between *In the Shadow of the Glen* and John B. Keane's *Sive*, twenty-six of the thirty-two counties of Ireland would gain independence from Britain. The ideals of "purity" and "respectability" which had begun to emerge in rural Irish society a century previously became, if anything, even more stringent than in Synge's time. The Catholic Church, which had grown so much in power and influence during the "devotional revolution" of the nineteenth century, became even more influential after independence. The "national myth of Catholic Celtic virtue" (Fleming 149) became a central doctrine of the new state. The Church was highly puritanical in nature and reflected the economic interests of the agrarian bourgeoisie. These interests were, at that time, the interests of the nation at large, and were enforced by both the Church and the State. Eamonn de Valera's 1937 constitution of the Irish Republic effectively established "a demilitarised totalitarian state in which the lives of its citizens were to be controlled not by a system of coercive force and secret policing, but by a kind of applied spiritual paralysis maintained by an unofficial federation between the Catholic clergy, the judiciary and the civil service" (Banville 147). A woman's role was to be that of a housewife and mother, as laid out in Article 41.2 of the constitution. This was puritanical Ireland, in which sexual crimes were kept under wraps, consensual sexual acts that transgressed the social norms could result in institutionalisation, the Censorship Board prohibited even the most vaguely sexually explicit literature, and boys and girls from a very young age were kept apart so as to avoid the occasion of "sin".

It is in this climate that John B. Keane's *Sive* is set. The "country cottage kitchen" setting provides the backdrop for the tragic story of a young life needlessly squandered due to the machinations of an older generation. The importance of "respectability" and "reputation" remain extremely important in the rural society that Keane portrays. The loneliness, unhappiness and bitterness that result from the marriage and inheritance practices of the agrarian petty bourgeoisie, in large part, motivate Mena and Thomasheen to pursue their plot. Mena at a very young age had to put aside any notions of romantic love and married out of pure economic necessity. Thomasheen sees an opportunity to escape his loneliness, as the £100 he would receive for arranging the marriage would mean that he would finally have enough money to marry. At a time when Ireland was finally beginning to industrialise and enter its next stage of economic development, opportunities were open to Sive that had not been open to Mena and Thomasheen when they were young. The tragedy of the play lies in the needlessness of Sive's death. She could have married Liam Scuab for love, yet the meddling of puritanical Ireland, embodied in the hard-headed Mena, controls and manipulates her to such an extent that she takes her own life.

The period between 1958 and 1972 would see Ireland finally transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. In keeping with modernisation theory's model, as Ireland began to industrialise, Irish society saw a shift in prevailing values and beliefs. The patriarchal attitudes and values that we find represented in *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *Sive* began to be challenged. Censorship was relaxed. Feminist movements promoted female empowerment and campaigned against such discriminatory practices as those legislated in Article 41.2 of de Valera's constitution. By the 1990s, when McDonagh would pen *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Ireland had become industrialised, urbanised and, to a large extent, secularised. What resulted was a much more tolerant, liberal society in which women had gained a much higher degree of autonomy than in Keane or Synge's time, and the ideals of

"respectability" and "purity" which had arisen with the agrarian petty bourgeoisie over a century previously were finally on the way out.

However, as we see in McDonagh's "cottage kitchen" play, these ideals were slow to disappear completely. What we find in Mag and Maureen's toxic relationship is an intergenerational failure of understanding. Maureen has grown up in an Ireland in which the societal expectations for how a woman should act have changed drastically. Mag constantly interferes with her daughter's chances at romance because she has grown up in an Ireland wherein chastity and purity were upheld as admirable virtues. However, these outdated attitudes are the source of much of the comedy in the play; for example, when Maureen enters the kitchen in her bra and slip after having spent the night with Pato, Mag's horrified face would certainly provoke a laugh. The tragedy of the play is that Maureen, after symbolically vanquishing the last remnants of prudish, puritanical Ireland by killing her mother, fails to find happiness. Maureen is doomed to live out the rest of her days in the country cottage a lonely spinster; just like so many women before her.

The vision of rural Ireland that we find in McDonagh's play is a far cry from what we find in Synge or even Keane's plays. Ireland has become industrialised, urbanised and secularised. This has resulted in, among other advances, "occupational specialization, rising educational levels, rising income levels… changes in gender roles; attitudes toward authority and sexual norms; declining fertility rates; [and] broader political participation" (Inglehart, Baker 21). As a result, people's values have become more tolerant, more accepting and more cosmopolitan. Ray does not hesitate in telling Mag about how he chases girls at "discos". Pato, on hearing of Maureen's mental breakdown, responds with compassion and empathy rather than by shaming her. The Church has very much diminished in importance in the lives

of the rural Irish people. The culture of "respectability" and sexual "purity" that had arisen in the nineteenth century is seen to finally be receding in importance.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Ireland has continued to take steps towards a more tolerant, liberal society. Same-sex marriage was legalised in 2015 and abortion was finally legalised in 2018. As Ireland's economic, social and political circumstances change, so too do the prevailing values and attitudes of the population. The extent of the horror visited upon Irish women and children as a result of the puritanical sexual regime of Catholic Ireland may never fully be known. However, the staunchly conservative, Catholic society that gave rise to that regime is certainly a thing of the past. Although progress has certainly been made in many respects across rural Irish life, old problems give way to new problems. What we can say for certain is that there will be drama in the Irish "country cottage" for years to come.

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