

8-2005

John Millington Synge and the Irish women's suffrage movement

Nicholas A. Ewen
University of Texas-Pan American

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/leg_etd



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ewen, Nicholas A., "John Millington Synge and the Irish women's suffrage movement" (2005). *Theses and Dissertations - UTB/UTPA*. 809.

https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/leg_etd/809

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations - UTB/UTPA by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE
AND THE IRISH WOMEN'S
SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

A Thesis

By

NICHOLAS A. EWEN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

August 2005

Major Subject: Theater

JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE
AND THE IRISH WOMEN'S
SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

A Thesis
By
NICHOLAS A. EWEN

Approved as to style and content by:



Dr. Marian Monta
Chair of Committee



Dr. Eric Wiley
Committee Member



Dr. Robert Johnson
Committee Member

August 2005

ABSTRACT

Ewen, Nicholas., John Millington Synge and the Irish Women's Suffrage Movement. Master of Arts (MA), August, 2005, 43 pp.

John Millington Synge is considered to be among the greatest playwrights of the English language. During his lifetime, however, his plays caused controversy and even riots. Of particular interest is the fact that much of the controversy surrounded Synge's portrayal of Irish women. Because of the radical Irish nationalism that developed in the early 20th century, much of Synge's work has been interpreted in light of this movement. This thesis, however, explores the theory that Synge was more closely connected with another movement that was taking place in the early 1900's: women's suffrage. His sympathies for the enfranchisement of women are presented by comparing the tenets of the suffrage movement to Synge's plays and by looking at the personal and social life of J.M. Synge.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Source of Conflict.....	3
Synge's Motivation.....	9
CHAPTER II. THE NATIONALISTS & THEIR THEATER.....	11
The Search for Identity.....	11
W.B. Yeats & The Abbey Theater.....	13
The Power of Theater.....	18
CHAPTER III. WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN IRELAND.....	22
Early 20 th Century Suffragists.....	22
Recognizing Domestic Violence & The Rights of Women.....	24
Pagan Versus Catholic Values.....	27
Enfranchisement Before Nationalism.....	30
CHAPTER IV. SYNGE'S CONNECTION TO SUFFRAGISM.....	33
His Plays.....	34
His Life.....	39
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION.....	42
VITA.....	47

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"When I was writing "The Shadow of the Glen," some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen".

- From J.M. Synge's introduction to *The Playboy of the Western World*

On Saturday, January 26th of 1907 John Millington Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World* opened at the Abbey Theater in Dublin. The play ran smoothly for two and a half acts until something happened that sent the crowd into an uproar. The audience became so raucous that actor Willie Fay, who played the lead role in the show, described them as "a veritable mob of howling devils" (Ellis). Fay writes that the mob was kept from storming the stage by a call-boy who "had armed himself with a big

axe... and swore by all the saints in the calendar that he would chop the head off the first lad who came over the footlights" (Ellis). It is very difficult in modern times to imagine the wild passions that ignited such riotous behavior from the audience. Obviously, Synge had touched a raw Irish nerve with a perceived insult (whether intentional or not) against the people in the audience that night. However, this event, while violent and uncivilized, was anything but unanticipated.

John Millington Synge's first play to be produced at the Abbey was called *In The Shadow of the Glen*, which drew harsh criticism. His second play, *Riders To The Sea*, was better received, but his third play, *The Well of Saints*, brought him more disapproval. One year before the *Playboy* was produced, Synge's fourth play, *The Tinker's Wedding*, was rejected for production at the Abbey because W.B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory considered it "too dangerous at present" (Grote, 134). During the weeks preceding opening night, *The Playboy of the Western World* was rehearsed in secrecy, perhaps out of fear of pre-performance hostility. When the rioting broke out on opening night, the audience didn't have to run out to buy groceries. They came prepared with fruits, vegetables, and even a slice of fruitcake to hurl at the stage. The cast and crew of the

Abbey Theater knew, as did the people of Dublin, that when J.M. Synge wrote a play, something bad was probably going to happen.

THE SOURCE OF CONFLICT

The question that the people in the audience were asking themselves as the show began may have been, "When is the hammer going to fall?" They were just waiting for something to happen, for something to be said that would spark controversy. While volumes upon volumes have been written about Synge since the riots, the best way to understand the reaction of the audience on January 26th, 1907 is to look at a first hand account of the disaster. It is from Lady Gregory, who was there on opening night of *Playboy*, that we obtain the clearest picture of what transpired there. The following is her description:

There was a battle of a week. Every night protestors with their trumpets came and raised a din. Every night the police carried some of them off to the police courts. Every afternoon the paper gave reports of the trial before a magistrate who had not heard or read the play and who insisted on being given details of its incidents by the accused and by the police . . .

There was a very large audience on the first night . . . Synge was there, but Mr. Yeats was giving a lecture in Scotland. The first act got its applause, and the second, though one felt that the audience were a little puzzled, a little shocked at the wild language. Near the end of the third act there was some hissing. We had sent a telegram to Mr. Yeats after the end of the first act "Play great success"; but at the end we sent another - "Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift. (Whitaker, 59)

The two telegram messages sent to W.B. Yeats tell us so much about why the riots broke out over *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Following the first act, the audience appeared to be very receptive. Up until this point, no one in the crowd had found anything offensive about the play. Not only that, but her description of a 'great success' proves that they weren't just tolerating the play; they were enjoying it. Then, towards the end of the third act, actor Willie Fay said this line: "Its Pegeen I'm seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of Mayo girls, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the eastern world?" Then chaos ensued.

As Lady Gregory wrote in her second telegram to Yeats, "Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift". In 1907, the word 'shift' referred to the undergarments worn by women. While the line seems relatively harmless today, there are several reasons why this was so offensive to 1907 Dubliners.

First of all, the Victorian modesty of the audience would have been a little uneasy with the mention of women's undergarments in any play. Secondly, according to T.R. Henn, "...the term *drift* is applied to a drove of heifers" (Whitaker, 61). Thirdly, Willie Fay actually misspoke the line in question. Instead of 'a drift of Mayo girls', the line was supposed to be 'a drift of chosen females'. Georg Grote explains the impact of this statement by writing, "To establish a connection between 'shifts' and the girls from Co. Mayo was nationally insulting and intolerable" (Grote, 136). The word 'shift' on its own, may not have caused much trouble, but compounded by the words, 'drift' and 'Mayo girls', it became what the critics labeled an "...unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and, worse still, upon Irish peasant girlhood" (Grote, 137). Again, however, this was not the first time Synge had received an accusation concerning the portrayal of women.

Indeed, the women of his plays were directly responsible for most of the controversy surrounding Synge's work. His first play, *In The Shadow of the Glen*, revolves around a woman who runs away with a tramp when her husband fakes his death in order to spy on her. Georg Grote explains the wave of criticism that followed *In The Shadow Of The Glen* by writing the following:

This debate over the virtues of Irish women seemed to be the key issue: the *Irish Times* howled the play down as a 'slur on Irish womanhood' and Arthur Griffith's *United Irishman*, which had only a short while earlier published John Butler Yeats's attack upon 'our Irish institution, the loveless marriage' (Skelton 1971b, 82), now blamed Synge for having come forward with 'a corrupt version of that old world libel on womanhood,' - *The Wife of Ephesus*. (Grote, 129)

It is clear from the beginning of Synge's theatrical career that his depiction of Irish women would be scrutinized. *Riders To The Sea*, while met with praise, was even more female oriented in its tragic focus than *In The Shadow Of The Glen*. This short play concerns two sisters

and their mother who has lost her husband, father-in-law and all six sons to the sea. Even without the violent criticism that followed *In the Shadow of the Glen*, the emotional impact of this woman's story was no less severe. Grote includes this statement from Joseph Holloway:

Mr. Synge has given us an intensely sad... picture of the lives of the humble dwellers on an isle of the West... it held the interest of the audience in a marvelous way... I have come to the conclusion that a more gruesome and harrowing play than *Riders to the Sea* has seldom, if ever, been staged before. The audience was so deeply moved by the tragic gloom of the terrible scene on which the curtains close in, that it could not applaud. (Grote, 132)

The tragedy of *Riders to the Sea* belongs to the women, as it does again in his next play, *The Well of the Saints*. The story of Synge's third play revolves around an old blind couple that is blessed with sight by a passing saint. When the husband looks on his wife, however, he sees only an ugly old hag instead of the beautiful lady he imagined. At the end, the two regain their blindness and return to their contented lives as beggars. *The Well of the Saints*

infuriated the critics once more. As Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel quotes from Joseph Holloway:

I have never witnessed a play that repelled me so much at this same *Well of Saints* written by one who has as much sympathy for the humbler Irish and their Catholic faith as a Maxim gun with an Englishman at the side of it has for a lot of unarmed savages! It raised my gall every time I saw it. (Ritschel, 24)

Although the controversy over *The Well of the Saints* did not concern the portrayal of women directly, there is an indirect expression of the roles of women in Ireland, which will be discussed later in the paper. After *The Well of Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World* was Synge's final play to be produced before he succumbed to Hodgkins Disease in 1913. While his two other plays, *The Tinkers Wedding* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, didn't make it to the stage during his lifetime, they too express tragedy through the lives of women.

SYNGE'S MOTIVATION

Studying the works of John Millington Synge and the works about the works of Synge would be a life-consuming

SYNGE'S MOTIVATION

Studying the works of John Millington Synge and the works about the works of Synge would be a life-consuming task. So much has been pondered and written over his plays since the first production of *In the Shadow of the Glen*, that it has become very difficult to separate the actual person of J.M. Synge from the idea of J.M. Synge. The question of what Synge's plays mean is important and difficult to answer. Synge's interest in language and nature has been well discussed, but the most intriguing aspect of his career is his relationship with the nationalist movement.

It has been well agreed on that Synge did not write his plays for the nationalist agenda. The very fact that his plays aroused so much ire is testament to the fact that Synge seemed to care little for the movement. As will be discussed later, Synge's disassociation with the nationalist ideals caused trouble not just for himself, but for the Abbey Theater. The most pressing question that arises however, is this: if Synge did not support Irish nationalism, what did he support?

Obviously Synge had a deep love and curiosity about his native land, and despite the criticism that his plays were 'un-Irish', it is impossible to read or watch one of

them without thinking of the Irish people. So if it wasn't Irish nationalism, where did Synge find motivation in what he wrote for the Irish theater?

While several historians have theorized excellent answers to this important question, there is one aspect of the plays that still remains somewhat unexplained. This aspect is the important roles of women, and the passionate reactions to the portrayal of women. Instead of only considering Synge's relationship with Irish nationalism, the purpose of this research paper, then, is to support an explanation for the reason Synge's plays are female oriented. This explanation comes from an equally important, and an ultimately more universal conflict that was also taking place in the early part of the 20th century: the women's suffrage movement.

Perhaps a more complete understanding of the works of John Millington Synge can be reached by taking notice of the similarities between his plays and the characteristics of the Irish women suffragists rather than those of the Irish Nationalist movement. To understand the unique situation of the suffragists, it is necessary to first understand the nature of the Nationalist movement and its role in the Abbey Theater.

CHAPTER II

THE NATIONALISTS AND THEIR THEATER

THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Radical Irish nationalism was shaping the Irish culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. The primary goals of the Irish nationalists were Irish unity and freedom from English rule. In order to accomplish this goal, the nationalists sought various ways to identify and unify the Irish people. The nationalist movement was keenly aware that without a definite idea of what it means to be Irish, there could be no separation from their British overlords. Thus was born a renaissance of Irish literature.

With the rebirth of Irish literature at the end of the 19th century came a renewed interest in the Irish language. For the purpose of keeping the Irish language spoken in Ireland, Douglas Hyde founded Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League). An Claidheamh Soluis (The Sword of Light) was the league's newspaper, and Hyde himself wrote three

plays in the Gaelic language. Fitz-Simmons discusses this Gaelic experimentation by writing the following:

Douglas Hyde's influence on Irish literature was greater than his stature as a playwright. *Casadh an tSugain* (1901), *An Tincear agus an tSidheog* (1902), *An Posadh* (1902) and others are based on folk tales. They are genial unpretentious comedies that seemed to herald the dawn of a school of playwriting in the Irish language. The dawn, however, did not break, for although there have been a number of fine plays in Irish over the years, and although there has been active State encouragement, all the most important Irish plays of the twentieth century have, like those in the preceding three centuries, been written in English. (Fitz-Simmon, 138)

While his goal of reviving the Irish language never truly blossomed, the revival of interest in folklore and folk music lead to rediscovery and translation into English of early heroic sagas.

Standish James O'Grady authored many such Irish novels and histories. He is considered by many to be the father of the Irish literary revival. He has been given this

title less for his own direct cultural impact than for his influence on historical figures such as W.B. Yeats.

W.B. YEATS & THE ABBEY THEATER

After reading the works of Standish James O'Grady, W.B. Yeats had found his true literary calling that would shape his own life work, and that of the theater in Ireland. As Christopher Fitz-Simmons quotes from Yeats, "I turned my back on foreign themes, decided that the race was more important than the individual, and began "The Wanderings of Oisín" - a consciously 'Celtic' poem" (Fitz-Simmons, 135). In 1898 Yeats met with Lady Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn where they decided to found what would be known as the Irish Literary Theater. It is important to understand their motivation for founding this new theater, and for that purpose there is no better source than the manifesto written by Yeats:

We propose to have performed in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence, will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland and uncorrupted and

imaginative audience, trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom of expression which is not found in the theatre in England, and without which no new movement in art or in literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. (Fitz-Simon, 135)

There are three main goals set out by this manifesto. First is that the theater will be a theater for writers instead of actors or directors, specifically, for writers who will add to a collection of truly Irish literature.

Secondly, the Irish Literary Theater was founded on the idea that the Irish people are, by nature, lovers of great literature and that a presentation of truly Irish culture (as yet unseen on the stage) would be welcomed.

The third note may seem to be a gratuitous stab at previous Irish oriented playwriting. It is well documented, however, that the vast majority of Irish representation on the stage was exactly as Yeats described: buffoonery and easy sentiment. Overcoming this stereotype

was not just vindication for Yeats and the Irish Literary Theater, it was tantamount to establishing the value of the Irish identity that nationalism sought to define.

By proclaiming their source of drama to be 'an ancient idealism', the Irish Literary Theater was essentially creating a connection with the revival of Irish literature, the search for Irish identity, and (somewhat indirectly) with the Irish Nationalist movement. The indirectness of the Irish Literary Theater's association with Irish nationalism comes from the paradox of Yeats artistic approach. His entire career is marked by the struggle to place artistic expression before popular appeal. Because of their close correlation with the revival of Irish literature, however, the nationalists adopted his plays as political, rather than poetic expressions.

May 1899 was when the nationalists got their first taste of Yeats's Irish theater. The Irish Literary Theater opened with a four-act play by W.B. Yeats, entitled *The Countess Cathleen*. The Irish ideals presented in *The Countess Cathleen* were attractive and popular among the nationalist culture. Especially interesting were the powerful symbols of Irish womanhood found in *The Countess Cathleen*. Georg Grote points out that the "nationalist interpretation was one of a play which celebrated the

noble-hearted spirit of a caring woman who is consequently lauded by her country-folk" (Grote, 126). The nationalists appreciated the idealization of Irish women who sought spiritual rather than materialistic values. The popularity of *The Countess Cathleen* gives the first hint of the importance of theater in the Irish nationalist movement.

Three years later, the Irish Literary Theater became the Irish National Theatre Society, thus creating a link to the nationalist movement in name and in deed. That same year, 1902, W.B. Yeats introduced the nationalists to his play *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*. The story revolves around a poor old woman (who symbolizes Ireland) seeking the help of young men to rid her lands of invaders. If these men risk their lives for the old woman, she will become young and beautiful again. With *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* Yeats again presented a profoundly important unifying national symbol in the character of Kathleen. Grote explains the importance of Yeats's *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* by writing:

Therefore, the literary movement's influence on the shaping of an Irish identity will not be found in blunt political agitation, but more subtly in a new interpretation of the Irish past and its unifying symbols. The most significant of these symbols was

Kathleen Ni Houlihan: once a poetic symbol for Ireland, she became the paramount nationalist icon through the writings of Yeats. (Grote, 216)

Grote, however, does point out that there is an irony regarding the glorification of Yeats Kathleen. This irony comes from what Grote calls a 'new interpretation of the Irish past and its unifying symbols'. Through differences of time, situation, and religion, the new interpretations distorted these mythical characters to fit the nationalist agenda. Quoting again from Grote, we find this explanation of the distortion of the character of Kathleen Ni Houlihan:

In O'Grady's works Kathleen ni Houlihan appeared as a pure and innocent symbol of national unity - a far cry from original pagan sources in the Gaelic language. By adding their own personal slant the Anglo-Irish writers transformed this Kathleen into a Victorian image of moral and patriotic behaviour. This process can best be studied in Yeats's interpretation of Kathleen Ni Houlihan: she transmuted from a fertility goddess into an Anglo-Irish political activist based on Maud Gonne - the object of Yeats's desires. (Grote, 217)

The new Kathleen was pure and upright, displaying morality and spirituality. She became young and beautiful through the sacrifice of her people. She was the ideal Christian Irish woman, and gave this promise to those who defend her: "They shall be speaking for ever, The people shall hear them for ever". The nationalists took this promise to heart, and they would defend her indeed.

THE POWER OF THE THEATER

The Easter Uprising of 1916 was perhaps one of the most defining events in the history of the Irish nation. On that infamous day, the symbol of Kathleen Ni Houlihan was present in the hearts and minds of those who fought and died in a hopeless battle for the freedom of Ireland. According to Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel, many important historians have noted the connection between Yeats's play and the Easter rebellion. His summary of this work leaves no question of the presence of the symbol of Kathleen Ni Houlihan during the rebellion. As he writes in his book, *Synge and Irish Nationalism*:

Greene (as in Nicholas Greene) insinuates that there was a direct tie between this play, which

premiered in April 1902, and the Easter Rising of April 1916. He writes that when the great rebellion came it "[was] dramatic, transformatory, as the ending of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*" (Greene, *Politics* 136). Certainly *Kathleen* was "thematically" very much a presence on the streets of Dublin during the last week in April 1916. The play's nationalist influence cannot be ignored. The Parliamentarian Home Rule advocate Stephen Gwynn voiced upon leaving the play's premiere: "such plays should not be produced unless people were willing to shoot and be shot" (qtd. In Kiberd, "Irish Literature" 284). More telling of the play's nationalist influence is the example of Countess Constance Markievicz, who forswore her privileged aristocratic life to eventually fight for Ireland. She wrote from an English prison cell in 1916 that Yeats's play bore spiritual influence for her. (Ritschel, 1)

Not only were other writers noting the important role that Yeats's play had within the nationalist culture, Yeats himself would question his influence. Grote explains by writing the following:

In his poem 'Man and the Echo' William Butler Yeats posed the question 'Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot?' This question hints at the role of the Irish Literary Revival, and the Abbey Theatre as its mouthpiece within the cultural and revolutionary phases of Irish nationalism. (Grote, 215)

Clearly, Yeats and the Irish National Theatre Society (which would become known as the Abbey Theatre) were deeply connected to Irish nationalism. The important plays of W.B. Yeats were influenced by and had influence upon the entirety of the Irish literary revival that correlated to the nationalist search for Irish identity. What Yeats would later come discover, however, is that by the time John Millington Synge came onto the scene in 1903, the nationalists had already gleaned what they needed from the Abbey Theater.

Synge's arrival and subsequent condemnation by the nationalist community is partially due to the fact that Yeats had already given them the symbol of Irish identity they sought with *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*. When the vastly different female characters of Synge's plays began to appear on stage, the nationalists were blinded by offense

and unable to truly grasp the meaning of it all. But John Millington Synge wasn't the only person having trouble with the nationalists. So too were the advocates for the enfranchisement of women in Ireland.

CHAPTER III

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN IRELAND

EARLY 20th CENTURY SUFFRAGISTS

Cliona Murphy, perhaps one of the most important Irish feminist historians, begins her book, *The Women's Suffrage Movement and Irish Society in the Early Twentieth Century* by stating:

Although the movements for women's suffrage have long enjoyed a privileged position in women's history, the Irish women's suffrage movement has almost entirely escaped the attention of Irish and women's historians alike. At least until recently, Irish history has emphasized nationalism and shown very little interest in broader social issues. Yet the few historians who have even noticed it in passing have dismissed any call for further investigation on the grounds that it constituted little more than a shadow of the British movement, or conversely, a weak extension of the Irish Nationalist Movement.

(Murphy, 1).

The problem here is that while modern historians have devoted large amounts of work on the study of women's suffrage, there has been very little work discussing the unique situation of the Irish suffragists. This problem, however, is not only a modern development.

Indeed, their contemporaries equally shunned those women truly devoted to the cause of enfranchisement for women during the early 1900's. Murphy continues by writing, "... the suffragists were viewed by their contemporaries and the next generation as unnationalistic, if not traitors, for putting another issue before the sacred cause of nationalism" (Murphy, 1). Because of the nationalistic fervor in Ireland at the time, Irish feminists were forced to choose loyalty to the cause of suffrage or the cause of nationalism.

Due to the nature of nationalism and the accepted myth of Irish womanhood through Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the suffragists who sought enfranchisement for women were at irreconcilable odds with Irish nationalism on three primary issues. Those issues are the recognition of domestic violence and the rights of women, the pagan versus Catholic

values of the Irish culture, and the importance of women's suffrage over Irish independence.

An analysis of each of these differences will provide a foundation for the connection between the Irish women's suffrage movement and the works of John Millington Synge.

RECOGNIZING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

For Irish women's suffrage (and possibly any suffrage movement) one of the first steps to arguing for the right to vote is proving that there is indeed a problem that must be solved. For the feminists of Ireland this meant that the dark side of masculine domination must be revealed. And make no mistake, Ireland was perhaps one of the most masculine dominated cultures in the world. Louise Ryan quotes from Louie Bennett stating, "Probably no country has suffered more severely than Ireland as a victim of purely masculine political ideals" (Ryan, 492). The source of this political suffering comes from the disregard for deep-rooted problems of domestic violence toward women. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'domestic violence' refers to any action, physical or emotional, that places women on an inferior level of humanity than men.

On the issue of wife-beating Ryan quotes Mrs. Priestly-McCracken, stating that: "Wife beating is of common occurrence and is suffered in most part in silence by the victim for the sake of her social or financial position or for the sake of her children" (Ryan, 496). Also important was the abuse of women in the work place. The suffragists set about to overcome the ignorance that surrounded such abuses by informing the public. According to Ryan, "A survey carried out by the Irish Women's Reform League in 1913 indicated the extent of exploitation of working women in Dublin" (Ryan, 496). Louise Ryan thoroughly discusses the motivation behind the attempt to publicize the unfashionable truths about their masculine dominated society by writing:

They were prepared to discuss publicly subjects which were deemed indecent and unsuitable for 'polite' conversation, challenging the taboos around topics like child abuse, incest, rape and marital violence. Suffragists, both militant and constitutional, raised these issues at public meetings, in speaking tours around the country and in the *Irish Citizen* newspaper. They highlighted these topics when no other newspaper would even admit that such abuses happened in Ireland.

The suffragists pointed out that one reason why such things went on in secret was because the professions were male dominated and unwilling to address such issues affecting women and children. One solution, therefore, was to make more women aware of what was really going on and then to encourage women to enter the professions where they could exert some influence on policy and decision-making. (Ryan, 495)

Hand in hand with the recognition of the problem of domestic violence against women comes the issue of greater rights for women. However obvious it may seem, it should be stated that the suffragists were not merely seeking the right to vote. They were seeking acknowledgment of their rights as human beings and seeking the power to overcome the kind of domestic violence mentioned above. Louise Ryan continues with the following explanation:

They demanded that women have the right to participate at every level of the legal system, as judges, jurors and as lawyers. The suffragists from right across the political spectrum argued that women could never expect justice from a system which was so male biased and which excluded women from its

profession. As one writer to the *Irish Citizen* put it, "It was the knowledge that women had no protection and need expect none under a man run system of society which provided all the driving force of the suffrage agitation".[54] Several cases of biased judges and lawyers were reported in the *Irish Citizen* newspaper as well as cases where crimes like rape and child abuse were not taken seriously. (Ryan, 495)

Besides the recognition of domestic violence and the battle for equal rights, while important on an immediate social level, there was deeper and more culturally powerful argument being made by the early 20th century Irish suffragists. This argument was that through the traditions of the Catholic Church, women would never enjoy the freedom and equality of men.

PAGAN VERSUS CATHOLIC VALUES

One of the greatest obstacles of the Irish feminist movement was the overwhelming majority of the Catholic religion. In fact Catholicism and nationalism were virtually inseparable in the first decades of the 20th century. The problem with the Catholic faith, as Louise Ryan professes, comes from a double moral standard for men

and women. While nationalist writers supporting Catholic values would rail against the moral degradation of modern thinking women, no such statements would ever be made about men who displayed the exact same behavior. Ryan states this problem most clearly by writing:

The standard bearers of this modesty cult in Ireland... were the Priests. A clergy man in the West of Ireland... had threatened to refuse communion to girls who paraded their nakedness before him by showing off their necks. Connery complained that priests were in a privileged position because while they could condemn women from the safety of the pulpit, women could not defend themselves.

(Ryan, 497)

In agreement with Ryan's view that Catholic tradition held Irish women under the domination of men is Cliona Murphy. As she states:

The Ireland that gradually evolved after the independence was imbued with a Catholic ethos, glorifying the family and the institution of marriage, and though it considered it had elevated women to a

revered position it had no time for remembering the women who strode a very independent path. Rather it told them their place was in the home as wife and mother. (Murphy, 2)

To counteract the Catholic subjugation of women, the suffragists sought to revive the culture of their ancestors, the pre-Catholic pagans. Claiming that Catholicism was inherently an unwanted outside influence on Irish culture, the feminists asserted that in order to be truly Irish, the culture must go back to the days of yore when men and women were supposedly equals. Louise Ryan writes:

The suffragists regularly invoked the Great Gaelic Civilization where women allegedly had equality with men. The *Irish Citizen* editorial of September 1916 says of Ireland: "as of old her civilization was based on feminism"... The suffragists used this apparent feminist heritage to criticise their contemporary nationalists, as in April 1917 when the editor of the *Irish Citizen* asked of Sinn Fein: "Will it be true to the fine traditions of Ireland's past, when Ireland's

men and women were equally honoured and equally free?.

(Ryan, 493)

Naturally, the feminist accusation against Catholicism was met with hostility in Ireland at the time. In many ways the struggle with the Catholic tradition was a central aspect of the battle for women's rights. It was the church that had established the strongly patriarchal and masculine dominated culture that women were dominated by. Also, it was largely through the actions of Catholic traditions that the domestic violence discussed earlier was kept hidden and unresolved. Finally, because it was this radical nationalism that kept domestic violence and Catholic traditions firmly in place, the suffragists were forced to choose enfranchisement over national independence.

ENFRANCHISEMENT BEFORE NATIONALISM

As stated earlier, the women's suffragists were looked upon as traitors to the cause of Irish independence. The nationalists were unable or unwilling to give up their dominance over the female sex, even though their struggle for independence as a nation reflected the same basic human emotions. According to Louise Ryan:

Many nationalist men were "forced to admit that whilst they were determined to resist national subordination they did not want to forgo their own domination of women". In a similar way, Irish feminists argued that nationalist men were using women to further the nationalist cause but were offering those women no guarantees of rights, citizenship or equality in an independent Ireland. (Ryan, 488)

As Ryan points out here, women were not merely being dominated by their masculine culture - they were being used by it. For example, the symbol of Kathleen Ni Houlihan was useful to the nationalists not through her independent spirit, but through her mythical purity. As part of their perceived cultural identity, the nationalists truly believed that Irish women should be as pure, upright, and (most importantly) dependent on men as Yeats's Kathleen Ni Houlihan. As Louse Ryan states:

National identity often glorifies masculinity while keeping women in narrow, family-oriented roles. Thus the national ideals offered to women may not be something with which they can actually identify" (Ryan, 490).

Until the nationalist agenda included some kind of provision for the equal rights of women, the suffragist ideals would never be compatible with Irish nationalism. Despite the harsh criticism and accusations they would receive from the nationalist community, the struggle for women's rights continued throughout Ireland. By publicizing the problems of domestic violence, opposing the masculine traditions of Catholicism, and prioritizing enfranchisement over nationalism, the Irish women's suffrage movement fought their unique battle for equality.

CHAPTER IV

J.M. SYNGE'S CONNECTION TO SUFFRAGISM

It has already been established that J.M. Synge's plays devoted great attention to the lives and tragedies of Irish women. This in itself does not make him unique; there were many playwrights whose main characters were women. What raises the question of whether Synge was connected to the women's suffrage movement is the unique reactions his plays received. While other playwrights in Ireland focused on women, only Synge's women created such controversy. It may be possible to establish a connection by looking at the works of Synge and comparing his female characters with the ideals of the Irish suffragists. Equally important is the details of J.M. Synge's personal life. Examining the setting of Synge's life may reveal that Synge could very likely have been familiar with women's suffragists and their movement.

HIS PLAYS

The most striking evidence of Synge's sympathies for feminists is the fact that his plays focus on almost exactly the same issues as the suffrage movement. First of all, Synge openly portrayed domestic violence toward women. Again, domestic violence is any action that places the female sex on an inferior social level than males.

In *In The Shadow of the Glen*, Dan Burke kicks his wife Nora out of the house after he feigns his own death to catch her cheating on him. When a tramp comes along and offers Nora the freedom of traveling with him, she accepts because she believes her husband is dead. When Dan springs to life and basically accuses her of adultery, she chooses to go with the tramp. In her article, "*Cute Thinking Women*": *The Language of Synge's Female Vagrants*, Jane Elkins discusses Nora's situation:

She is the Irish woman bound to household work and isolated from society. Ironically, Nora chose servitude as Dan Burke's wife in hopes of attaining financial security although she regrets that practical decision now. (Elkins, 119)

Nora Burke is the quintessential image of the Irish suffragist seeking to overcome domestic violence and inferiority to men. If she had chosen to remain under the domination of her husband, she could have an unhappy security. By choosing to leave behind his domination, however, she faces hardship, yet glorious freedom.

The criticism that nationalist writers, such as Arthur Griffith, launched at this play highlights the similar struggles of Synge and the suffragists. The nationalists were either unaware or unwilling to fathom the possibility that any Irish man would behave as the character of Dan Burke does towards his wife. And according to Grote, "This absurd idea was only topped by 'the notion that any Irish woman, however miserably married, would commit adultery'" (Grote, 129). Like Nora Burke, several other female characters from Synge's plays either display the desire to be free of masculine domination, or display their tragic inability to overcome it.

In *Riders to the Sea*, when Maurya has lost the last of her six sons to the sea, she proclaims relief and freedom from worry. For Pegeen in *The Playboy of the Western World*, her temporary hero, Christy Mahon, could save her from a loveless marriage to Shawn Keogh. It is her tragedy at the end of the play, when she realizes that Christy is

only a faker and cannot give her the freedom she hoped for. Sarah Casey from *The Tinker's Wedding* claims that the only reason she wants to be married is so that 'from this day on, there will be no one have a right to call me a dirty name'. In Synge's final play, *Dierdre of the Sorrows*, Synge portrays the mythical figure of Dierdre in the same feminist light. Instead of accepting the domination of her betrothed husband, King Conchubor, she desires freedom to choose her own path. Even though Conchubor will have her put to death, she chooses her own lover, Naisi. The lives and motivation of these women revolve around the desire to be free of domestic violence and masculine domination.

The condemnation of the Catholic tradition is also plainly evident in all of Synge's plays. This anti-Catholicism is most obviously displayed in *The Well of the Saints*. Martin and Mary Doul are happy in their lives until the priest comes along and 'blesses' them with sight. However, their sight only causes tragedy for the couple. At the end, when they have again become blind, they refuse the saints' offer to heal them permanently. In their blindness the couple are equals and share a beautiful connection and awareness with nature. When their eyes are opened all they see is ugliness and unhappiness. Like the suffragists, Synge clearly viewed Catholicism as an outside

influence that only served to bring discontent to the Irish people.

Riders to the Sea also presents Synge's anti-Catholic orientation, as Eugene Benson writes, "... the opposition of Christianity and an older, pagan ethos - is suggested in the reference to the young priest who is characterized as powerless when faced with the strength and cruelty of the god of the Aran islands" (Benson, 3). The clearly anti-Catholic message of *The Tinker's Wedding* may very well be the reason it was not performed at the Abbey. As Grote comments, "... Synge's characterization of an Irish priest as worldly, card-playing, singing and drinking would probably have been regarded as too *risqué*" (Grote, 134). J.M. Synge's views on the Catholic church have been well documented by many historians, but nothing so far has been written on the fact that his negative view of Irish Catholic traditions are shared by the suffragists.

Finally, Synge's obvious lack of enthusiasm for the nationalist movement coincides with that of the Irish women's suffrage movement. While his un-nationalist approach drew much criticism, Synge was much more devoted to a 'truer' Irish culture than even the nationalists. True, Synge never actually professed his support of the suffrage movement, but his idea of a modern Ireland closely

resembles the feminists. Synge and the suffragists shared a deeper sense of nationalism, one founded in the ancient traditions of equality and unity. Like the women struggling for equal rights, Synge's plays de-emphasise the importance of the nationalist movement. This is probably the reason why the attacks of the early 20th century nationalists did not change Synge's writing style. From Synge and the suffragist's viewpoint they were, as Ritschel defines, 'superficial nationalists'. Ritschel describes this clearly by writing:

The call for a deeper nationalism, as found in Pearse's poem "I Am Ireland" that unambiguously and consciously connects not to Christ but to the ancient culture, grew from a nationalist playwright with a more profound sense of "true" Ireland: John Synge. (Ritschel, 3)

Looking at how Synge's plays agree with the message of the Irish women's suffrage movement does help support the theory that he sympathized with their cause. In order to prove the possibility, however, it must be shown that the life of J.M. Synge was in the same social and geographic sphere as that of the suffragists.

HIS LIFE

John Millington Synge's father died when John was only one year old. Raised by his mother and grandmother, he claimed to have had a happy childhood. Obviously, Synge's childhood would have given him a greater appreciation for the roles of women in society. Synge was also fond of taking walks and having conversations with people that he met, or listening to what people were talking about. For the most part these people were the women who stayed at home while the men were off to work. John Masefield, a close friend of J.M. Synge tells us,

When I turn over my memories of him, it seems that his grave courtesy was only gay when he was talking to women. His talk to women had a lightness and charm. It was sympathetic; never self-assertive, as the hard, brilliant Irish intellect so often is. (Masefield, 5)

Perhaps his young life made John Millington Synge pre-inclined to sympathize with women and their struggle for equal rights.

Synge left for school in France, and then at the suggestion of W.B. Yeats, traveled to the Aran Islands on

the west of Ireland. There, Synge found the material for most of his plays. As he himself proclaimed, he drew more inspiration from the conversation of the girls in the kitchen, than from any amount of schooling. The most important connection to the suffrage movement, however, would be his life and associations in the city of Dublin. According to Louise Ryan,

Although suffrage societies were set up in the late 1800s, only in the early 1900s did the movement grow and develop a higher public profile... Dublin became the cultural capital of this renaissance. Many of the best known and most active suffragists of this period were highly involved in the arts, literature and theatre. During the cultural renaissance many hopeful young artists flocked to Dublin. Within this milieu of creativity and radical critique suffragism underwent an important transformation from genteel drawing room 'get togethers' to militancy and activism. (Ryan, 491)

Aside from the fact that these suffragists were involved with theater in Dublin, is there any evidence to show that Synge could have been associated with these people? According to Cliona Murphy,

They mixed in the same circle as the actors the Fay brothers, the writer and poet Padraic Colum and his wife, a writer in her own right, Mary Colum, James Joyce, James Stephens, "A.E." and W.B. Yeats. They were involved in the productions at the National Theatre and in the Irish language revival attending the popular language classes. (Murphy, 28)

The Fay brothers mentioned by Murphy include Willie Fay, the man who played Christy Mahon in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. Obviously Synge was in close relationship with the Fays, A.E. (playwright George Russell), and W.B. Yeats. Although she never mentions Synge's name, there is little doubt that J.M. Synge would have been introduced and involved with some of the women's suffragists in Dublin.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The works of John Millington Synge have influenced thousands of people, and possibly altered the course of theatrical history in Ireland. In the aftermath of the *Playboy* riots, the nationalists permanently severed their connection with the Abbey Theater. In the years following his death, Ireland would finally come to understand his genius. Many historians have asserted that Synge is among the greatest playwrights of the English language. As Fitz-Simmons claims,

John Millington Synge was the figure for which the Irish Literary Renaissance had been waiting. He provided the Abbey Theatre with its master work, *The Playboy of the Western World*, still the greatest play to come out of Ireland in the twentieth century.

(Fitz-Simmons, 150)

Considering the incalculable worth of Synge's literary contribution, what then, does Irish literature owe to Synge's possible allies, the Irish women's suffragists? Did Synge's work ultimately achieve the effect that he envisioned - a modern Ireland based on ancient values and equality of the sexes? Or has his sympathy for their plight been attributed to some other cause? These questions will be difficult to answer considering the amount of time and the events that have transpired in Ireland since his untimely death. Hopefully, however, with the work of scholars such as Cliona Murphy and Louise Ryan, devoted to educating the world about the unique history of Irish women, we may achieve a clearer understanding of the works of John Millington Synge.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ellis, Samantha. The Playboy of the Western World,
Dublin, 1907. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/curtainup/story/0,12830,937744,00.html>, 2003.
- Ellis-Fermor, Una. The Irish Dramatic Movement.
London: Methuen & Co LTD, 1977.
- Fitz-Simon, Christopher. The Irish Theatre. London:
Thames and Hudson, 1983.
- Fletcher, Ian Christopher. Women's suffrage in the
British Empire; Citizenship, nation and race.
London: Routledge, 2000.
- Gonzalez, Alexander G. Assessing the Achievement of
J.M. Synge. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Grote, Georg. Anglo-Irish Theatre and the Formation of
a Nationalist Political Culture between 1890 and
1930. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.

Howe, P.P. J.M. Synge, A Critical Study. New York:

Greenwood Press, 1912.

Masefield, John. John M. Synge: A Few Personal
Recollections, With Biographical Notes By John
Masefield. Shannon, Ireland: Irish University
Press, 1971.

Murphy, Cliona. The Women's Suffrage Movement and
Irish Society in the Early Twentieth Century.
Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

Ritschel, Nelson O'Ceallaigh. Synge and Irish
Nationalism. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002.

Ryan, Louise. Traditions and Double Moral Standards:
the Irish suffragists' critique of nationalism.
Women's History review, Vol.4, Num.4, 1995.

Sekine, Masaru. Irish Writers and the Theatre.
Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe,
1986.

Whitaker, Thomas R. Twentieth Century Interpretations
of The Playboy of the Western World. Englewood
Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969.

Van Wintergreen, Sophia A. The Women's Suffrage
Movement in Britain, 1866-1928. London: Macmillan
Press LTD, 1999.

VITA

Nicholas A. Ewen is a native of Greybull, Wyoming. Upon graduating from Greybull High School, Nicholas attended Howard Payne University in Brownwood, TX. There he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in the Theater Arts. Nicholas received high academic marks and received numerous awards including: Best Supporting Actor(2001), Outstanding Achievement in Technical Theater(1999, 2001), Most Outstanding Achievement in Theater(2002), Deans List(1999, 2001), and Who's Who in America's Colleges and Universities(2002). In January of 2004, Nicholas entered the Master of Arts program at the University of Texas Pan American. While working full time as a graphics artist, Nicholas also managed to complete his studies in just under two years while maintaining a 4.0 GPA. In May of 2005, Nicholas' first full-length play, "An Extremely Normal Man", was successfully produced at his alma mater; Howard Payne University. Also, in June of 2005 Nicholas was honored to present a research paper at a symposium of The Vergilian Society in Cumae, Italy. Nicholas has been accepted as a Doctoral student at Texas Tech University, where he plans to further his career in Theater.