



AWARENESS OF DEATH IN J.M.SYNGE'S POETRY

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Abstract

Edmund John Millington Synge (16 April 1871 – 24 March 1909) was an Irish writer. He was a playwright, poet and lover of folklore. He was influenced by W.B.Yeats after meeting him and with his advice he decided to go to Aran Islands to prepare himself for further creative work. He joined W.B.Yeats, Lady Gregory, Augusta, and George William Russell to form the Irish National Theatre Society, which later was established as the Abbey Theatre. He is best known for his play *The Playboy of the Western World*, which caused riots during its opening run at the Abbey Theatre. His poetry reflects his love for nature and the richness of the landscape. Synge was educated privately at schools in Dublin and later studied the musical instruments like piano, flute, violin. He was interested in music and his knowledge of music reflects in his poems. He wanted to make career in music but changed his mind and decided to focus on literature.

Key Words: Aran, Enigma Etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

Synge is commonly described as an enigma, a person who is hard to read and understand. John Masefield, Synge's acquaintance, also thinks Synge, a strange personality and Synge's problems and thoughts about life are due to his poor health. In stanza IV of Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", he summarizes his view that Synge was unhealthy, sick and in pain throughout his career.

As Synge had been suffering from Hodgkin's disease, he perhaps was thinking of the approaching death. His poetry reflects this element of approaching death that makes him pessimistic. Synge fell in love with Cherrie Matheson, a friend of his cousin and was turned

down. This rejection also made him pessimistic. The Poems and Translations (1909) gives some indication of Synge's range from the spiritual delicacy of Petrarch to the earthiness of Villon, from nature mysticism to the acute observation of Irish people in an Irish landscape. Though his fame rests on the plays, his thought in poems is worthwhile. As it has been described in The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature(1990) edited by Margaret Drabble as, 'His Poems and Translations (many of which foreshadow his imminent death) appeared in 1909.' We can relate his concept of premonition of death through his following poems – On an Anniversary and To the Oaks of Glencree.

On an Anniversary
(After Reading the dates in a book of Lyrics)
With Fifteen – ninety or Sixteen – Sixteen
We end Cervantes, Marot, Nashe or Green:
The Sixteen – thirteen till two score and nine
Is Crashaw's niche, that honey – lipped divine.
And so when all my little work is done
They'll say I came in Eighteen-seventy-one,
And died in Dublin What year will they write
For my poor passage to the stall of Night?

The poet has expressed his feelings very directly and with the rhetorical question. The poem has the references to the poets like Cervantes (1547-1616), Marot, Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), Robert Greene (1558-1592). Further he speaks of the period between 1613 and 1649 referring to Richard Crashaw (1612 - 1649), a devotional poet. In the first part, he perhaps refers to all those poets from Cervantes to Crashaw who lived between the later half of 16th century to first half of the 17th century, which is supposed to be the most celebrated period of the English poetry. This period refers to the golden Elizabethan i.e. Shakespearean and Jacobean i.e. Metaphysical period in English Literature. In the concluding part of the poem, Synge calls his poetic output 'little work'. He modestly calls it negligible in comparison with the poetic output by the masters he has referred to directly in his poem and wants to refer some of them indirectly. The readers and the lovers of literature would state his birth-year as they know that the poet was born in 1871. He is certain about this 'little work' remaining 'little' because of the approaching death due to the disease he suffers from. After having read the title of the poem, the parenthesis makes us aware the impulse behind the poem. Every reader reads the writers information and learns about his life and death or the life span. Here the poet also reads the periods of different writers but realizes the death approaching due to the disease. But he doesn't know the exact date and time but is certain of it. After the death, he is unable to see the date and time recorded against his name. His rhetorical question –

“.... What year will they write

For my poor passage to the stall of Night?” – makes the readers introvert. It also suggests the certainty of Death and the ignorance of it by the human beings. His very small life and scanty

literary career has been expressed using a very proper phrase 'my poor passage'. This passage was about to end by the forthcoming death referred as 'the stall of Night'. Synge's poem, To the Oaks of Glenree also reflects the similar mood. It runs as under:

To The Oaks Of Glenree
My arms are round you, and I lean
Against you, while the lark,
Sings over us, and golden lights and green
Shadows are on your bark.
There'll come a season when you'll stretch
Black boards to cover me;
Then in Mount Jerome I will lie, poor wretch,
With worms eternally.

The poem in question also reflects the same feeling of premonition of death. In the poem, On an Anniversary, the poet reminds the thought of approaching death after reading the information about the life span of the poets. He then expresses his uncertainty about the date and year the people are going to quote against his name as the death year.

In the poem, To the Oaks of Glenree, the poet addresses the Oak tree. Within these two quatrains, he reflects both the moods of joy and pessimism very effectively. In the first stanza, he describes how the narrator has been leaning against the oak tree. At the time, the lark is singing over the tree and the poet. The branch of the tree has golden lights and the shadow of green leaves. As the narrator is leaning against the tree, he also facilitates with the entire natural happiness. But in the very second stanza, the poet reflects the sordid reality of his and obviously of everybody's life. He tells the oak tree that the same oak tree, pouring shadow or golden sunlight, might become a cover of his coffin. He speaks of his burial somewhere in Mount Jerome decaying his dead body with worms. The phrase, 'the poor wretch', is used for the body of a person in general and of the poet himself which is one or other day is going to decay in the soil i.e. in Nature. In the last line, he refers to the body buried after death as eternally lying with worms. It reflects the everlasting soul and triviality of the physical structure.

Both these poems reflect his knowledge of music in rhyme and rhythm. In On an Anniversary, he uses rhyming couplet; whereas in To the Oaks of Glenree, he uses alternate rhyme in quartet. The brevity of expression is effectively conveyed through the phrases and the metaphors.

If we relate the arguments in both the poems, we feel the poems reflect the premonition of death of the poet-narrator, due to Hodgkin's disease. In the poem, On an Anniversary, he regrets over 'poor passage' means the small life-span and literary career; but in To the Oaks of Glenree, he accepts the reality and addresses the oak as the symbol in Nature, performing both the acts of happiness in the life when alive and of peace when dead in the lives of human beings. The reference to the 'Mount Jerome' suggests his premonition of death, as we learn from the biographical details that - 'Synge died in Dublin on 24 March 1909. He is buried in Mount

Jerome Graveyard, Harolds Cross, Dublin . He lived a very short span of life but is yet alive through his works and makes his words true: Then in Mount Jerome I will lie, poor wretch, With worms eternally.

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