Premonition of Death in J.M. Synge’s Poetry

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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.

Synge was born in Newtown Villas, Rathfarnham, County Dublin on 16 April 1871. He was the youngest son in a family of eight children. His parents were part of the Protestant middle and upper class: Rathfarnham was rural part of the county, and during his childhood he was interested in ornithology. His earliest poems are somewhat Wordsworthian in tone. 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. Synge graduated in 1892 from Trinity College. In 1893, he published his first known work, a Wordsworth-influenced poem, *Kottabos: A College Miscellany*. He was interested in Irish antiquities. He had been the member of Irish League but due to the differences of opinion between Maud Gonne and Synge. Synge had different opinions about the revolution and regeneration of Ireland. He also had questions with regard to the religion as he got acquainted with the Darwinian theory.

Synge suffered from Hodgkin's disease, a form of cancer at the time untreatable. He died some weeks before his 38th birthday when he was trying to complete his last play, *The Last Black Supper*. 
Synge suffered his first attack of Hodgkin's disease in 1897. The following year, he spent the summer on the Aran Islands. He spent the next five summers on the islands, collecting stories and folklore and perfecting his Irish, while continuing to live in Paris for most of the rest of the year. This collection became the basis of most of his work. His first account of life on the islands was published in the *New Ireland Review* in 1898 and his book-length journal, *The Aran Islands*, was completed in 1901 and published in 1907. Synge was advised to remove the direct references of place or names from it by Lady Gregory, he refused to do it as he wanted to make it more realistic.

In 1903, Synge left Paris and moved to London. He had written two one-act plays, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen*. Both these plays were based on the stories he had collected on the Aran Islands. *The Shadow of the Glen* was performed in 1903. *Riders to the Sea* was performed in 1904. *The Shadow of the Glen* was based on a story of an unfaithful wife. A third one-act play, *The Tinker’s Wedding* was drafted earlier but published in 1908 due to the anti-clerical elements. His next play, *The Well of the Saints* was staged at the theatre in 1905. All his plays were performed at the Abbey Theatre. Synge became director of the theatre along with W.B.Yeats and Lady Gregory but differed with their idea of theatre on account of realism.

The play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, was first performed in the Abbey on 26 January 1907. It was the controversial yet is regarded as the masterpiece by Synge. The comedy centers on the story of apparent parricide. There were riots only for mentioning the name of one undergarment. The rioters were addressed and rebuked by W.B.Yeats when returned. He felt it disgrace of the audience for welcoming the Irish young writers.

His *Poems and Translations* was published on 8 April 1909 with a preface by Yeats. Yeats and Molly Allgood completed Synge's unfinished final play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, and it was presented by the Abbey players in January 1910 with Allgood in the lead role. Synge died in Dublin on 24 March 1909. He is buried in Mount Jerome Graveyard, Harolds Cross, Dublin 6.
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.

And that enquiring man John Synge comes next,
That dying chose the living world for text
And never could have rested in the tomb
But that, long travelling, he had come
Towards nightfall upon certain set apart
In a most desolate stony place,
Towards nightfall upon a race
Passionate and simple like his heart.

As Synge had been suffering from Hodgin’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.


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 Glencree* also reflects the similar mood. It runs as under:

*To The Oaks Of Glencree*

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 Jersey 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 Glencree*, 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 all the 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 Glencree*, 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 Hodgins’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 Glencree*, 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 6’. 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.

*(To the Oaks of Glencree)*
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