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Nature of Landscape in J. M. Synge's *In The Shadow of the Glen*

Dr. Vathana Fenn



On Defining Cultural Landscape

Landscapes reflect a society's culture and Cultural Landscape is the common geographers' term for perspective on the location of humans, their resources, significant geographic landmarks, socio-economic status, belief systems, and why they evolved to what

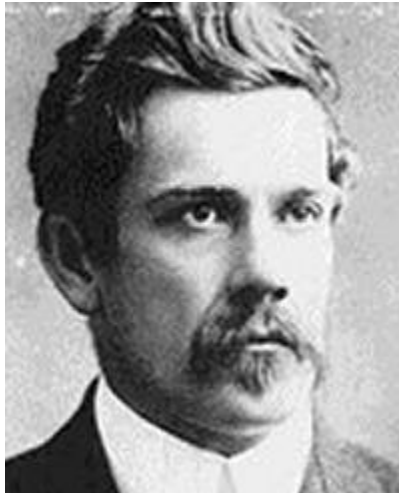
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they are today. The study of landscape has taken root in Irish study even in the earlier days because it is directly related to the Irish identity.



John Millington Synge (1871-1909)

Courtesy: www.tcd.ie

J. M. Synge, no doubt, is one of the greatest playwrights not only of Ireland but also of the entire world who loves to read literature in English. The dominance of nature is found in all his major works and his writing has a lot of intensity and boasts of multiple layers of meaning which the researcher is compelled to dwell into more deeply. Synge in his treatment of nature focuses his attention on man and their inter-connectedness with nature. He merges the force of nature into man's destiny in all his works and the final outcome is an extraordinary blend of man and nature. Human beings affect landscape and at the same time are also affected by it. In this paper the writer has attempted an in-depth study of the play *In the Shadow of the Glen* in which the different layers of landscape is discussed keeping in mind Hans Lorzing's theory of landscape.

What is Landscape? Interdisciplinary Focus

What is landscape? This is a question for which there is no simple answer. The root word for landscape in many of the languages around the world is 'land' which means 'region' or 'territory'. In recent years writers are increasingly aware of the relationship between Literature and Geography or their environment.

Literature and Geography have now become interdisciplinary and the study of landscape is reaching new dimensions day by day. Just as no natural landscape is "universal"

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in the sense of being infinitely or universally extended, unless we picture it as the combination of all the “particular” landscapes, so the literary landscape is filled with individual writers’ highly specific perceptions of themselves and of the world as a whole. In Synge’s works the relation of the physical and geographical landscape to the literary imagination is clear. The bleak landscapes surrounding Nora in *The Shadow of the Glen* then metaphorically allude to the tough surroundings Ireland was confronted with in the early twentieth century.

Neither External nor Objective – Lorzing’s View



Landscapes are no more regarded as external or objective but they are now seen as subjective interpretation of the writer. The writer Han Lorzing explores this idea in his work, *The Nature of Landscape: A Personal Quest*. Lorzing devotes the entire book to the study of landscape and the relationship between human being and landscape and first starts his argument with a definition of his own which is entirely new from all other definitions and it reads like this. “Landscape is a perceptive piece of land, determined by the joint effects of natural forces and human intervention” (36).

Lorzing believes, “that landscape is not just an isolated objective thing in itself. To a large extent, landscapes are created by our perception. Landscape is a product of the human mind” (34). Therefore landscape did not change during the 20th century and only the interpretation of it in the human mind has changed. Lorzing states that “man and nature together determine the face of the landscape, sometimes in close harmony, more often as fierce competitors” (43).

Lorzing is of the view that there is a certain relationship between man and the landscape that surrounds him. Man affects landscape and at the same time is also affected by it. Lorzing says that landscape is also a creation of the mind because, “man perceives the face of the earth and interprets the scenery” (37). He also talks about four levels of interaction between man and landscape. The first level is the layer of intervention.

Layers of Landscape

Here Lorzing feels that man has intervened with the landscape and “altered the environment to match his needs. This is the domain of man-made landscape. To put it in simple words at this level landscape is what we make” (43). The second layer that Lorzing talks about is the layer of knowledge. The writer is of the opinion that people see landscape as a “collection of facts” (46). They have background knowledge of the landscape that they see and that it is mandatory for landscape professionals. In other words at this level “landscape is what we know” (46). The third level that Lorzing explains is the, “Layer of Perception” (47). According to Lorzing this is the basic level where people tend to see landscape directly for what it is without any external influence:

At this level, we tell what we see (or hear, smell or feel, for that matter) in a landscape, unhampered by too much background knowledge. The result of our perception is the visual landscape, which is no more than the direct description of the landscape as we see it before us. This seems to be the straight way towards objectivity, just like the landscape of knowledge at the previous level. We should however keep in that our perception bears a certain degree of subjectivity, as can be demonstrated by the different ways in which painters have portrayed similar landscapes. But for all the objective and subjective connotations that we can think of, at this level there is no better way to put it than landscape is what we see. (47)

The fourth and the final level of interaction is, “the layer of interpretation” (49) Here landscape becomes personal and subjective and so can be termed as “Emotional Landscape”. Lorzing is of the view:

The professional, the casual passer-by and the interested visitor, each in his own way, will have moments when he sees a landscape from his personal perspective. Facts and perception maybe important in our interpretation of

landscapes but when it comes to a deeper understanding, our appreciation is ruled by emotion. At this final level, landscape is what we believe. (49)

Focus of This Paper

This paper presents a study of the landscape of Synge's play *In the Shadow of the Glen* keeping in mind the theory and concept of Han Lorzing. Of the four different landscapes only the last two can be taken into consideration for this study, namely, the layer of perception and the layer of interpretation (visual and emotional landscape respectively).

Irish Identity through Landscape

The study of landscape has taken root in Irish study even in the earlier days because it is directly related to the Irish identity. Studies on the west of Ireland talk about landscape and Irish identity. W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge stand first in bringing out the true beauty of Ireland by their depictions of landscape so pure and beautiful that it brings a sense of pride and belonging to the people of Ireland.

Because of the distinctive colonial and post-colonial history of Ireland it is very difficult to separate Irish identity from the land and its landscapes. In fact the very name Ireland itself is closely related to the meaning of space for it means the "back island". So we can safely say that in Ireland there is nothing without the dominance of landscape.

Glen – "A Small, Narrow and Secluded Valley:

In the Shadow of the Glen is a play which takes its theme from one of the stories of *The Aran Islands*. Synge uses the story of Pat Dirane one of the principal characters in prose work. As its name suggests the whole landscape of the play is set in the glen which means a small, narrow and secluded valley (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/glen?&o=100074&s=t>).

In this play one finds that most of the action takes place inside an old cottage. But the characters speak about the glen throughout the play. So in this play too there is both visual and emotional landscape. Though the entire play takes place within the cottage, the readers are able to visualize the outside world through the detailed description of the characters.

Nora – Daring to Pursue What She Wants

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The principle character, Nora through her words brings out the inner turmoil that she feels even as she describes the landscape. *The Shadow of the Glen* presents a self-autonomous woman of intelligence and flexibility. The female protagonist, Nora Burke, a young wife, is married to Dan Burke, a farmer and herd, not out of love but out of practical considerations. They live alone in a cottage in a glen of County Wicklow. The boring life in the bleak surroundings with her chauvinistic husband in the country, however, can by no means satisfy Nora, who tries every means possible to change her pallid life.

Nora in this play is more aware of her self-identity and more daring to pursue what she wants, which manifests itself in the way she deals with men and landscape. Instead of confining herself to loneliness and misery, Nora spares no efforts to get out of the stifling glen. That's why, to most people's surprise, Nora chooses to go with the tramp at the end when he promises to give her a cozy and secure life in a fantastic landscape.

Tramp, at the door:

Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the grouse, and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing the like of a sick sheep close to your ear. (*Shadow*25)

Assertion of Female Identity

Nora's assertion of female identity can be affirmed from her attitude toward the landscape. Secluded from other people in the glen, Nora tries hard to get in touch with the outside world to change her status quo. Nora's contact with the outside world is symbolized in her encounter with men from far away. In the beginning, we find that the protagonist is literally living in the shadow of the glen where there is loneliness and she longs for a greater life than that can be found in the desolate glen. When she talks to Michael Dara about her loneliness, she says:

I do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was at that time, Michael Dara for what good is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting out from a door the like of that door, and seeing

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nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain." (*Shadow* 116)

Seeking a Care-free Life with Nature, Composure and Melody in the Glen

Unable to tolerate the long-term abuse, Nora resorts to the help from outside males. The romantic views suggested by the tramp prove to be alluring to her, for unlike the life with her husband, the new care-free life is coupled with nature, composure, and melody. In a sense, the bare landscape in the glen collaborates with the menacing patriarchal force in depriving Nora of her self-identity as an autonomous being. Nevertheless, Nora's outstanding ability to cope with the unfavorable landscape and to imagine a romantic vista for a better future offers her better chance for survival. She attempts time and again to get out of the stuffy glen by turning to outside help, mostly from men of other places.

Nora Burke is more conscious of her own predicament as a woman from the outset. Reluctant to be confined to the strangling glade in the countryside, she seizes every chance to get in touch with strangers, mostly men, for help. Her choice to be together with the tramp might sound unreasonable for most people, but in a sense it is an expression of her position as a subject free from her husband's control. In the beginning Nora was afraid of the outside world but slowly her perception changes and the landscape of the Glen symbolizes freedom and happiness. She wants to be free from the boredom of normality and she realizes that only the outside world can give her a sense of adventure. But the glen which seemed cold and dark and merciless slowly becomes beautiful and familiar. The Glen finally brings out the image of a harmonious coexistence between human being and nature and this is evident in the words of the tramp when he says:

... We'll be going now I'm telling you, and the time you'll be feeling the cold, and the frost and the great rain, and the sun again and the south wind blowing in the glens, you'll not be sitting upon a wet, ditch the way you're after sitting in the place, making yourself old with looking on each day, and it you passing by. You'll be saying onetime... "It's a grand evening, by the grace of God," and another time, "it's a wild night, God help us, but it'll surely pass surely". ... You'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and

you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and its not from the like of them you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear (*Shadow* 117).

Landscape and Our Emotions

Lorzing explains that landscape always affects our emotions to a certain extent and here also the reader is able to perceive that Nora who was dejected in the beginning becomes hopeful when she realizes the beauty and the potential of the nature that surrounds her. Lorzing opines:

We have seen the landscape through the eyes of the creator, the connoisseur and the observer. But there is more between us and the landscape than just intervention, knowledge and perception. Besides these generally objective ways of dealing with the landscapes, we can be much more subjective in our appreciation. Deep down in our mind is a landscape ruled by our emotions: a landscape in which pieces of information and perception are being reassembled into a new version of reality. (47)

Landscape as a Living Character

Thus, one can say that the landscape of *In the Shadow of the Glen* is also a main character, which is responsible for the development of the protagonist. Nora is finally reconciled with nature because she comes to recognize the beauty of a life in intimacy with it. In this play the writer is thus able to justify her stand that there is the presence of both visual and emotional landscape as the landscape here is perceived as well as interpreted by the main characters of the play.

Lorzing seems to say that art plays a vital role in bringing out the relationship between human beings and landscape. Be it a painting, a poem, novel or a play artists from time immemorial have used landscape as a medium to express their deepest feelings. Landscape has also been used as a metaphor in works of art. Lorzing says:

Studying landscape art, we find that many artists have used landscape to demonstrate their ideas, their emotions and their skills... Here we have a good example of how landscape can be used as a metaphor of widely felt emotions. As we have seen, the notion of the good life on the land has been an alluring source of landscape representations even in the 20th century... as the expressionists showed us, landscape can also be used as a metaphor of the inner self. It is obvious that landscape can be strong vehicle for the artist's emotions. Finally landscape can be a tool to demonstrate the artists' respectful feelings towards nature (111).

Treatment of Landscapes by Writers

The attitude of the writers can be seen in the way they treat landscape in their works. Lorzing feels that there are four different metaphors for different attitudes towards landscape and they are, "the pride in the good land, the quest for a better world, the expression of the inner self and the respect for nature" (112). In the plays of Synge the readers are able to find all these four different metaphors which showcase his different attitudes towards nature. Synge in his plays has magnificently portrayed the ever present tension between human beings and the natural elements.

Synge and Landscape

Synge seems fitting well with Lorzing's view which says, "Coexistence of human beings and nature in landscapes maybe peaceful or hostile: it is essential for the appearance of our landscapes as well as our appreciation of them" (59). Synge's plays are very suitable for landscape study mainly because of its language. Synge uses the peasant dialect which is filled with allusions to nature. The characters bring the landscape to the mind's eye of the readers by their vivid descriptions and minute observations of the many moods of the nature which surrounds them.

We see that Synge's works imitate reality as the readers are able to learn about the nature, culture, language of the people of Ireland just by reading Synge's plays.

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