

Blissful blindness and Soul Consciousness: A Study of J.M.Synge's *The Well of the Saints*

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John Millington Synge's dramaturgy is a stage where his innovative art and his love for life in its wild realities co-exist. *The Well of the Saints* (composed in 1902-03), first performed in February 4, 1905, explores Synge's artistic and philosophic attitude towards life and its vitality. The central idea of the play *The Well of the Saints*, is the restoration of blindness and the plot was derived from the Burgundian writer Andrieu de la Vigne's fifteenth-century farce *Moralite de L' Aveugle et du Boiteux (Morality play of the Blind Man and the Cripple)*. The local colour of the play was provided by Synge's adventures with the people of the Aran Islands and in the Wicklow hills, the well of the play being based on one of Aranmor, near the Teampall an Ceatrair Alainn, the Church of the Four Beautiful Persons.¹

The play originally called *When the Blind See*, opens at a Wicklow village in the east of Ireland where Martin and Mary Doul, a blind, old, ugly, battered beggar couple is living peacefully a contented life by the way-side, begging for subsistence. In their imaginations, the Douls had created a dream space in which they live with the fantasies of each other's beauty. In Act I, Martin and Mary consider themselves as "so fine looking" (62) and "the finest man and the finest woman of the seven countries of the East" (62). Martin considers that he has "wedded with the beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone" (69) who has "yellow hair" and "soft skin" (70). They live in the world of their own illusions and this illusionary world is founded on the deceitful and heartless mockery of the villagers. Martin and Mary also take great delight in their natural

environment. A Saint uses water from a sacred well to restore the sight of the old blind couple. The protagonists experience profound disillusion when their sight is restored. As their blindness is cured, they face the harsh reality of life through their own ugliness. The Christian metaphors of 'light' and 'dark' are used in a subversive manner in the play. In the words of Mary Burke, when "Martin has been led 'into the light' — which involves being cured of blindness and forced to take a stake in the religio-capitalist order — he labels the world of work, prosperity and propriety as 'dark'" (Burke 47). Similarly when they lost their sight again, they begin to appreciate the wealth of nature with which they were intimately associated once. The holy water's influence lasts only long enough to make the Douls realize the true worth of liberty and self-dignity. They spurned the second attempt of the saint. They refuse to take their assigned place. The recovery from disillusionment is achieved by Martin and Mary Doul when they embrace what Timmy, the smith unsympathetically but accurately describes as 'a wilful blindness' (III, 143).

At the opening of *The Well of the Saints*, blind beggars Mary and Martin share pre-lapsarian contentment, dwelling in an Edenic space. The couple's peace of mind begins to disappear as soon as they are informed of the impending arrival of a wandering Saint. When healed by the saint they lose their sense of intimacy with the movements of the seasons and also are unable to continue believing in their own beauty. Their imaginative vision and marital happiness is lost. They are engulfed by lies and deceit. The disillusionment that comes with sight is two-fold: the first is the inevitable discovery by each of the ugliness of the other; and the worse shock of the loss of liberty and self-esteem is the second. Martin's frustrated attempts to woo Molly Byrne, the village belle, are cruelly laughed at. Since passions, as Du Vair's *The Moral Philosophie of the Stoicks* remarks, 'darken and obscure the eye of reason' (Du Vair 62), Martin is tormented by anger, envy and madness. Having regained his sight, Martin works for Timmy the smith who begins, "killing [Martin] with hard work, and keeping [him] with an empty windy stomach... in the day and in the night" (Synge III 83). When Douls regain their sight they are forced to see the world in all its bleakness and are effectively robbed of their identity and dignity.

The Saint's miraculous work lasts only for a short time and blindness once more descends on the couple. However, an array of disconcerting experiences, repulsive visual memories prompted them to embrace the wilful blindness. The world into which they will now set out is not secured materially, instead the chill of the north wind, a

danger of sudden drowning and eventual death pervade the world. However, they are not intimidated at this bleak prospect. The world they choose is one in which there will be no inhuman torture and mockery and they can be human, beautiful and artistically creative. Most of all, they will be armoured with liberty and dignity. Their zest for an ideal autonomy seemed to demand a thorough rejection of the world. If the saint sees God's benevolence and grandeur by a spiritual light, so Martin is successful to visualize in his soul's light and delight "a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and big rivers, and fine hills for taking the plough." He put it thus: "It's wonders enough I seen in a short space, holy father, for the life of one man only" (Synge III 41).

The ordinary life of the community consists of work, gossip, wooing and wedding, a pattern temporarily disrupted and denied by Martin Dou. He is the spokesperson for the author himself. Yeats terms Synge "a drifting silent man full of hidden passion, [who] loved wild islands, because there, set out in the light of day, he saw what lay hidden in himself."² Same is the case with Martin Dou. M. Bourgeois writes,

At the same time the play...beautifully expresses...the oft-quoted tendency in the Celtic temperament to take refuge in a world of dreams away from the foulness of an actuality transfigured, fortunately, by imaginative illusion. (Bourgeois 164)

The play relentlessly ponders on the problem of seeing and loss of insight. It is commonly recognized that just as Shakespeare's Lear finds 'reason in madness' so Gloucester learns to 'see' in his blindness. In fact, Gloucester suggests that eye-sight should not to be equated with the apprehension of reality and truth. Like Gloucester Martin and Mary Douls stumbled when they saw. Their sight deluded them. Milton, the blind "Homeric" poet eulogized blindness in the sonnet on his blindness (no. 17), and in the Invocation to the third book of *Paradise Lost*. In fact, he spiritualizes blindness and proposes that in darkness "the light of the divine countenance does but the more brightly shine."³ Again like Samson in *Samson Agonistes*, the Douls are "with inward eyes illuminated"⁴; their "fiery virtue roused/ From under ashes into sudden flame".⁵

When Martin and Mary join the world of painful and laborious actuality, they become rapidly disillusioned. They are dismayed, they decided to remain blind and retain belief in each other's attractiveness and beautiful mind. The veil of ignorance seemed to have disappeared. As Milton put it,

The very essence of Truth is
 plainnesse and brightnes; the darknes
 and crookednesse is our own...
 If our understanding have a film of
 ignorance over it, or be blear with
 gazing on other false glistening,
 what is that to Truth?⁶

As Martin and Mary Doul lose their sight again, they gain their insight and they realize the ultimate truth. Their sensitive understanding of the sights, sounds and scents of the natural world make them realize the abundant joy inherent in the world. Life in general, according to Nietzsche, was a 'fountain of delight' (Nietzsche 120). Martin and Mary Doul seemed to have internalized this truth. In poems such as 'Ancestral Houses', Yeats compared 'life's own self-delight' to a fountain-an autonomous energy-source. Martin and Mary possess that vitality, energy and vigour for a new life. Martin Doul makes a crucial statement when he says at the very end of the play:

For if it's a right some of you have to be working and sweating the like of
 Timmy the smith, and a right some of you have to be fasting and praying
 and talking holy talk the like of yourself, I'm thinking it's a good right
 ourselves have to be sitting blind, hearing a soft wind turning round the
 little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting our
 souls with the sight of the grey days, and the holy men, and the dirty feet
 is trampling the world. (Synge III 171-73)

It is an outright rejection of the world of work, attachment to material comfort, and conventional social attitudes. As P.J. Matthews put it- *The Well of the Saints* "celebrates the imagination and heroism of the dissident who refuses to be coerced into conformity at the behest of the moral majority"(Matthews 3). The 'dissident' is Synge as well.

Synge here attempts to indict conservative, dogmatic religious organization which causes more harm than to mitigate the sufferings of the common people. *My Youth* is the short autobiographical sketch of J.M.Synge. This is replete with some significant facts which may be held responsible for his indictment of the Christian saint. The

youngest Synge was constantly haunted by the frightful accounts of sin and its consequences, reiterated by his mother, who was the daughter of Dr Robert Trail, a zealous Protestant rector. Synge's mother inculcated a strict religious discipline in the tender mind of John. At the age of fourteen Synge became acquainted with the Darwinian theory. His mind was torn asunder by the conflict of religious principles and the newly gained scientific knowledge. He was admitted to Trinity College, Dublin which enforced orthodox religious studies and paid little attention to new ideas, enquiries and imaginative faculty. Synge's brother Samuel was a missionary and, when at home, aided and abetted their mother in her efforts to bring Synge back to God. All these had created an aversion to dogmatic Christian principles in Synge. Martin Doul represents the resistance of the collective Irish imagination against the parochialism of the invading church. The second time the Saint approaches the Douls in Act III, Martin avowedly rejects the offer of another restoration, replying,

We're not asking our sight, holy father, and let you walk on your own way, and be fasting, or praying, or doing anything that you will, but leave us here in our peace, at the crossing of the roads, for it's best we are this way, and we're not asking to see. (III 139)

It is also, of course, a campaign for liberty of speech and action. Synge is the staunch advocate of that cause, for he had been attacked vehemently for the picture presented in *The Shadow of the Glen* and was told that his play was un-Irish. *The Playboy of the Western World* similarly sparked off hostile criticism.

Martin and Mary Doul had preferred fantasy to reality and chosen rather to remain blind and poor than to join the world of sight and labour. They may be termed as defeatists or people lacking any sense of social responsibility. But it is the inevitable truth that the reality they are required to face is detrimental to their self-esteem, an enemy to their poetry, and an opponent to their sense of the individual richness and they have no other choice than to scorn the restrictions imposed upon them by capitalism. Martin Doul's language in Act II deflates considerably after he has taken the gift of the Saint, regained his sight, and been reduced to hunger and toil. In Act I, we are introduced to a Doul who, sightless but speaks and acts in a more natural, emotional manner. Also Doul's dialogue is replete with a lyrical quality and emotional subtlety that he maintains throughout the first act. When Martin's eyesight is restored, his dialogue is uncertain, unpoetic, and devoid of imagination. However, the poetic,

imaginative quality returns after they lost their sight again. The Saint's miraculous deed destroys ideal beauty and facilitates only toil and hunger. We have to admire them for their courage and strength of mind for refusing the plea for restoration of sight. The universe of the Douls are so filled with poetry, and their attitudes towards the natural world is so radiant and vibrant with the sense of beauty and purity, that we cannot but accept their final decision as correct. They seem to say "And in a wild and sudden dance/ We mocked at time and Fate and Chance." ⁷ As T.S. Eliot opined "Synge wrote plays about characters whose originals in life talked poetically, so that he could make them talk poetry and remain real people."⁸

The figure of the Saint, travelling Ireland, curing blindness and preaching, is also the embodiment of the political reformer. The hostility of Martin towards the Saint can be interpreted as the apathy of the Irish peasants when faced with talk of Home Rule. They rejected the rule of law to embrace liberty. Victims of British imperialism for over six centuries, the Irish peasantry now campaigned for complete freedom. Martin and Mary made a fresh bid for freedom. Through the characters of Martin and Mary Doul, Synge explores that "native culture that had valued expression and freedom over social climbing, avariciousness and close-mouthed conformity" (Burke 47).

Martin and Mary Doul are the emblem of the purity of the imagination, the primitiveness of the dreams of the uncorrupted Irish soul. They are determined to preserve the Irish soul that is free from malice. Synge's portrayal of an Irish people who are exceedingly imaginative springs from his own experience with the folk of the Aran Islands. The characters stand as emblems of an Irish trope: the deliberate, imaginative dreamer who rejects the bleakness of the contemporary world in an attempt to preserve tradition. Such characters exist on the periphery of a society. According to Francis Bickley, Synge sees art as a form of expression "not of life keyed down to the low pitch convenient for those who live in the narrow streets of civilization," (Bickley 21) but of life beautiful, superb and wild in reality that is cherished by the common people. The Douls are delineated as diametrically opposite to the repressive, authoritarian, sluggish and stagnant middle-class life. They exemplify the power of individual fortitude and imagination. Synge celebrated what he saw "as the robustness and spirit of the country people" (Fleming 1). As Yeats said

I am certain that my friend's noble art, so full of passion and heroic beauty, is the victory of a man who in poverty and sickness created from

the delight of expression, and in the contemplation that is born of the minute and delicate arrangement of images, happiness and health of mind. (Yeats 321)

The Douls establish complete harmony and basic oneness, the imperishable gift to mankind, not the ephemeral worldly goals and human attachment. They started their journey from ignorance to wisdom, restlessness to peace and desire to contentment. Life in this text is represented in journey motif. As D. Corkery had stated “*The Well of the Saints* is, therefore, lit from within, and is a strange region, ineffable, unique; to travel in it is to be refreshed” (Corkery 202). Their abundant joy contains an acceptance of what life brings, because they have understood the beauty of what it brings. This is Synge’s attempt to explore the pagan ‘primitiveness’ which he perceived as being the actual guiding force behind everyday life of the islanders. They are closer to truth because they are well connected with nature. An epiphanic realization of the mysteries of the universe dawns upon them.

Synge was assailed by ill-health for most of his life. His fragile health constantly reminds him of his own mortality. His reverence for life derived from his own ill-health. He was curious about the source of individual and cultural vigour and vitality. In this connection a fascinating account of his experiences under ether anaesthesia can be referred here. It was published posthumously, in 1916 in a prose- work by Synge, ‘Under Ether: Personal Experiences During an Operation.’ In it he wrote “I seemed to traverse whole epochs of desolation and bliss. All secrets were open before me....”⁹ Needless to say, this secret is related to life. Synge re-experienced life as if it were a dream. This experience was highlighted upon by an eminent dramatist of Ireland Tom Murphy, who in 1979 directed a production of *The Well of the Saints* at the Abbey Theatre. He also provided a curtain-raiser in a piece entitled *Epitaph Under Ether*, which refers Synge’s work ‘Under Ether: Personal Experiences During an Operation.’

With the illusion created by poetic imagination, the Douls are able to escape much of the unhappiness and tedium which has enveloped them; through it they find the strength to reject sight and society. In choosing blindness they will not have to watch themselves grow old and decay, and in rejecting society they escape from lies and unkindness. As D. Corkery opined “He [Martin Doul] may be taken as the fullest expression of Synge’s very simple and very homogeneous philosophy of life (Corkery

164). The writer at the time was deeply under the influence of the living folk-mind of the unschooled people of Aran. Synge's magnificent independence, love of life and his art went hand in hand. The Aran Island provides the raw material that flowers Synge's dramatic imagination. This is as a result of his experiences in the Aran Island, where he visits and stays with the people and gets obsessed with their ways to life. Himself primitivist to an extent, Synge was reborn and rejuvenated in the Aran islands. He observed the islanders' almost primitive way of living. He heard stories and anecdotes from the shanachie¹⁰ Pat Dirane, who used to help Synge in his study of the Irish language, and his blind guide Old Mourteen. In 'Synge and the Ireland of his Times' Yeats tells us that Synge "loves all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy" (Yeats 326-27). Yeats, in fact, fostered to promote Synge's radical individualism in his defence of his friend. According to Yeats, nothing interested him but the individual man. Synge was 'that rare, that distinguished, that most noble thing, which of all things still of the world is nearest to being sufficient to itself, the pure artist' (Yeats, 323). He refutes the restrictions placed upon the individual by capitalism.

Martin and Mary Doul have come to realize that the most important objective in life is to attain the goal of self-realization, to know their true soul nature and oneness with ever blissful spirit. They exhibit through their insight that the purpose of life is the evolution, through self-effort, to man's limited moral consciousness to soul consciousness or cosmic consciousness and to this end to encourage the establishment of individual identity. They are now free from ignorance, desire, selfish craving which form a vicious circle. They like Synge lifted their consciousness from the senses and matter to the bliss within. This is soul-consciousness, recognition of one's self as eternal, ecstatic bliss. Soul is self-contained. As a result, Martin and Mary Doul are now all-sufficing and self-contented. Synge has this passion for life, the unbridled joy at the exuberance of life that is devoid of the mechanism of harsh realities. In many ways then Synge in this play had a subject after his own heart. As Maurice Bourgeois stated:

Like all who truly express themselves, he [Synge] expressed his country, he expressed mankind; but being a certain type of Irishman, and a certain type of man, he expressed Ireland and mankind only as he saw them, or saw himself in them. His plays are Ireland; they are mankind; above all, they are Synge. (Bourgeois 247)

Notes:

1. The place-names as presented by David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens.
2. See *Essays and Introductions*, W.B. Yeats. London, 1961, p.330.
3. Milton, *A Second Defense of the people of England* (1653).
4. Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. (line 1689);
5. *Samson Agonistes*. (lines 1690-91).
6. Milton's "Of Reformation in England", *Complete Prose* I, 566.
7. Yeats' *The Wanderings of Oisín*.
8. T.S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama*. PP. 19-20.
9. Under ether. Personal experiences during an operation. *Interstate Medical Journal* 23:45-49, 1916]. Anesthesia History Association. Ahahq.org/calendar/March.php & John Millington Synge (1871-1909). Utopian Surgery? www.general-anaesthesia.com/images/john-millington-synge.html
10. Shanachie is the skilled teller of tales or legends especially gaelic ones.

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