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An Analysis of the Effect of Ireland's
Economic and Social Conditions
on her People in the Early
Plays of J. M. Synge

by
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ABSTRACT

In the latter part of the nineteenth century the Irish faced a tragic predicament. The rural Irish were being suffocated by their economic conditions. They were forced to sacrifice their individuality and succumb to the middle class materialism that had been adopted by the small landowners and shopkeepers. John M. Synge captures the tragedy of the Irish situation in his early plays.

In The Shadow of the Glen, Synge describes the impact of this economic dilemma on Irish rural women. Nora, an imaginative and sympathetic human being, has married into an unsatisfying relationship to sustain her economic needs. She searches for a way to satisfy her emotional and physical wants yet her involvement with Michael shows she cannot escape her materialist concerns. The Tramp symbolizes the independence she cannot achieve. For, Nora's fate is to marry a husband who will be unable to fuel her humanity or to go off with the Tramp, whose freedom will merely remind her of her incapacity to reach her potential.

In Riders to the Sea Synge reflects the tragic dilemma facing the Irish in general and the Aran islanders in particular. The islanders feel helplessly trapped between the awesome power of the sea and the destructive

nature of the encroaching civilization. The islanders are unable to prevent the loss of their men who are inevitably drawn from their homes. The women are left destitute on the island, their pain symbolized by the keen.

In The Tinker's Wedding Synge illustrates the overriding impact of Ireland's primitive economic structure on her people. In this play, the priest and tinkers are reduced to a common level of behavior through their enslavement to the marketplace. The priest and the tinkers function as producers, salesmen and consumers in the economic arena. Synge refutes our illusions about the different people who fill these roles in an attempt to show the omnipotence of the economic forces on the Irish.

Synge's early work forms a cogent analysis of the economic dilemma facing the rural Irish. These people can neither protect their individuality nor survive through economic dependence on America, England and the Continent. Synge is unable to accept the solutions proposed by the mythic historians or revolutionaries. Therefore, he is condemned to give a bleak portrait of the Irish future.