

Writing Ireland

Lecture 7: Beginnings of Modern Irish Drama

Contours of a History of Irish Theatre:

- traces of a non-Christian Gaelic theatrical tradition
- Irish theatre in English establishes itself with the rise of English administration in Dublin from the early 17th century onwards
- immense success of Irish dramatists on the London stage, e.g.
 - William Congreve, *The Way of the World* (1700)
 - Oliver Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773)
 - Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Rivals* (1775)
The School for Scandal (1777)
 - Dion Boucicault, *The Corsican Brothers* (1852)
The Colleen Bawn (1860)
Robert Emmett (1884)
 - Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)
 - George Bernard Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island* (1904)
 - Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1953)

The Beginnings of the Irish National Theatre Movement, inaugurated by William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and Edward Martyn in 1897:

We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.

(as printed in Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 1913, in Harrington 2009, 402)

The modern Irish theatre began with *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* of Mr. Yeats and Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon*, in which the old patriotism stirred and wrung its victims; but when the theatre thus established called on Young Ireland to write plays and found a national school of drama, the immediate result was a string of plays of Irish life – and very true to life they were – in which heroines proclaimed that they were sick of Ireland and [be]rated their Nationalist husbands for sacrificing all the realities of life to senseless Fenian maunderings.

(George Bernhard Shaw, "A Note on Irish Nationalism", 1913)

W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902)

CHARACTERS

PETER GILLANE.

MICHAEL GILLANE *his son, going to be married.*

PATRICK GILLANE *a lad of twelve, Michael's brother.*

BRIDGET GILLANE *Peter's wife.*

DELIA CAHEL *engaged to MICHAEL.*

THE POOR OLD WOMAN.

NEIGHBOURS.

[SCENE: *Interior of a cottage close to Killala, in 1798.*

BRIDGET *is standing at a table undoing a parcel.*

PETER *is sitting at one side of the fire, PATRICK at the other.]*

PETER. What is that sound I hear?

PATRICK. I don't hear anything. [*He listens.*] I hear it now. It's like cheering.

[*He goes to the window and looks out.*]

I wonder what they are cheering about. I don't see anybody.

PETER. It might be a hurling match.

PATRICK. There's no hurling to-day. It must be down in the town the cheering is.

BRIDGET. I suppose the boys must be having some sport of their own. Come over here, Peter, and look at Michael's wedding-clothes.

PETER [*shifts his chair to table*]. Those are grand clothes, indeed.

BRIDGET. You hadn't clothes like that when you married me, and no coat to put on of a Sunday any more than any other day.

PETER. That is true, indeed. We never thought a son of our own would be wearing a suit of that sort for his wedding, or have so good a place to bring a wife to.

PATRICK [*who is still at the window*]. There's an old woman coming down the road. I don't know, is it here she's coming?

BRIDGET. It will be a neighbour coming to hear about Michael's wedding. Can you see who it is?

PATRICK. I think it is a stranger, but she's not coming to the house. She's turned into the gap that goes down where Murteen and his sons are shearing sheep.

[*He turns towards BRIDGET.*]

Do you remember what Winny of the Cross Roads was saying the other night about the strange woman that goes through the country whatever time there's war or trouble coming?

BRIDGET. Don't be bothering us about Winny's talk, but go and open the door for your brother. I hear him coming up the path.

PETER. I hope he has brought Delia's fortune with him safe, for fear her people might go back on the bargain and I after making it. Trouble enough I had making it.

[PATRICK *opens the door and MICHAEL comes in.*]

BRIDGET. What kept you, Michael? We were looking out for you this long time.

MICHAEL. I went round by the priest's house to bid him be ready to marry us to-morrow.

BRIDGET. Did he say anything?

MICHAEL. He said it was a very nice match, and that he was never better pleased to marry any two in his parish than myself and Delia Cahel.

PETER. Have you got the fortune, Michael?

MICHAEL. Here it is.

[*He puts bag on table and goes over and leans against the chimney-jamb.*]

BRIDGET, *who has been all this time examining the clothes, pulling the seams and trying the lining of the pockets, etc., puts the clothes on the dresser.*]

PETER [*getting up and taking the bag in his hand and turning out the money.*]

Yes, I made the bargain well for you, Michael. Old John Cahel would sooner have kept a share of this awhile longer. "Let me keep the half of it till the first boy is born," says he. "You will not," says I. "Whether there is or is not a boy, the whole hundred pounds must be in Michael's hands before he brings your daughter in the house." The wife spoke to him then, and he gave in at the end.

BRIDGET. You seem well pleased to be handling the money, Peter.

PETER. Indeed, I wish I had had the luck to get a hundred pounds, or twenty pounds itself, with the wife I married.

BRIDGET. Well, if I didn't bring much I didn't get much. What had you the day I married you but a flock of hens and you feeding them, and a few lambs and you driving them to the market at Ballina?

[*She is vexed and bangs a jug on the dresser.*]

If I brought no fortune, I worked it out in my bones, laying down the baby, Michael that is standing there now, on a stook of straw, while I dug the potatoes, and never asking big dresses or anything but to be working.

PETER. That is true, indeed. [*He pats her arm.*]

BRIDGET. Leave me alone now till I ready the house for the woman that is to come into it.

PETER. You are the best woman in Ireland, but money is good, too.

[*He begins handling the money again and sits down.*]

I never thought to see so much money within my four walls. We can do great things now we have it. We can take the ten acres of land we have a chance of since Jamsie Dempsey died, and stock it. We will go to the fair of Ballina to buy the stock. Did Delia ask any of the money for her own use, Michael?

MICHAEL. She did not, indeed. She did not seem to take much notice of it, or to look at it at all.

BRIDGET. That's no wonder. Why would she look at it when she had yourself to look at, a fine, strong young man? It is proud she must be to get you, a good steady boy

that will make use of the money, and not be running through it or spending it on drink like another.

PETER. It's likely Michael himself was not thinking much of the fortune either, but of what sort the girl was to look at.

MICHAEL [*coming over towards the table*]. Well, you would like a nice comely girl to be beside you, and to go walking with you. The fortune only lasts for a while, but the woman will be there always.

[*Cheers.*]

PATRICK [*turning round from the window*]. They are cheering again down in the town. Maybe they are landing horses from Enniscrone. They do be cheering when the horses take the water well.

MICHAEL. There are no horses in it. Where would they be going and no fair at hand? Go down to the town, Patrick, and see what is going on.

PATRICK [*opens the door to go out, but stops for a moment on the threshold*].

Will Delia remember, do you think, to bring the greyhound pup she promised me when she would be coming to the house?

MICHAEL. She will surely.

[*PATRICK goes out, leaving the door open.*]

PETER. It will be Patrick's turn next to be looking for a fortune, but he won't find it so easy to get it and he with no place of his own.

BRIDGET. I do be thinking sometimes, now things are going so well with us, and the Cahels such a good back to us in the district, and Delia's own uncle a priest, we might be put in the way of making Patrick a priest some day, and he so good at his books.

PETER. Time enough, time enough; you have always your head full of plans, Bridget.

BRIDGET. We will be well able to give him learning, and not to send him trampling the country like a poor scholar that lives on charity.

[*Cheers.*]

MICHAEL. They're not done cheering yet.

[*He goes over to the door and stands there for a moment, putting up his hand to shade his eyes.*]

BRIDGET. Do you see anything?

MICHAEL. I see an old woman coming up the path.

BRIDGET. Who is it, I wonder. It must be the strange woman Patrick saw awhile ago.

MICHAEL. I don't think it's one of the neighbours anyway, but she has her cloak over her face.

BRIDGET. It might be some poor woman heard we were making ready for the wedding and came to look for her share.

PETER. I may as well put the money out of sight. There is no use leaving it out for every stranger to look at.

[*He goes over to a large box in the corner, opens it, and puts the bag in and fumbles at the lock.*]

MICHAEL. There she is, father!

[*An Old Woman passes the window slowly; she looks at MICHAEL as she passes.*]

I'd sooner a stranger not to come to the house the night before my wedding.

BRIDGET. Open the door, Michael; don't keep the poor woman waiting.

[*The OLD WOMAN comes in. MICHAEL stands aside to make way for her.*]

OLD WOMAN. God save all here!

PETER. God save you kindly!

OLD WOMAN. You have good shelter here.

PETER. You are welcome to whatever shelter we have.

BRIDGET. Sit down there by the fire and welcome.

OLD WOMAN [*warming her hands*]. There is a hard wind outside.

[MICHAEL *watches her curiously from the door*. PETER *comes over to the table*.]

PETER. Have you travelled far to-day?

OLD WOMAN. I have travelled far, very far; there are few have travelled so far as myself, and there's many a one that doesn't make me welcome. There was one that had strong sons I thought were friends of mine, but they were shearing their sheep, and they wouldn't listen to me.

PETER. It's a pity indeed for any person to have no place of their own.

OLD WOMAN. That's true for you indeed, and it's long I'm on the roads since I first went wandering.

BRIDGET. It is a wonder you are not worn out with so much wandering.

OLD WOMAN. Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart. When the people see me quiet, they think old age has come on me and that all the stir has gone out of me. But when the trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends.

BRIDGET. What was it put you wandering?

OLD WOMAN. Too many strangers in the house.

BRIDGET. Indeed you look as if you'd had your share of trouble.

OLD WOMAN. I have had trouble indeed.

BRIDGET. What was it put the trouble on you?

OLD WOMAN. My land that was taken from me.

PETER. Was it much land they took from you?

OLD WOMAN. My four beautiful green fields.

PETER [*aside to BRIDGET*]. Do you think could she be the widow Casey that was put out of her holding at Kilglass awhile ago?

BRIDGET. She is not. I saw the widow Casey one time at the market in Ballina, a stout fresh woman.

PETER [*to OLD WOMAN*]. Did you hear a noise of cheering, and you coming up the hill?

OLD WOMAN. I thought I heard the noise I used to hear when my friends came to visit me.

[*She begins singing half to herself*.]

I will go cry with the woman,
For yellow-haired Donough is dead,
With a hempen rope for a neckcloth,
And a white cloth on his head, --

MICHAEL [*coming from the door*]. What is that you are singing, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. Singing I am about a man I knew one time, yellow-haired Donough, that was hanged in Galway.

[*She goes on singing, much louder*.]

I am come to cry with you, woman,
My hair is unwound and unbound;

I remember him ploughing his field,
Turning up the red side of the ground,
And building his barn on the hill
With the good mortared stone;
O! we'd have pulled down the gallows
Had it happened in Enniscrone!

MICHAEL. What was it brought him to his death?

OLD WOMAN. He died for love of me: many a man has died for love of me.

PETER [*aside to BRIDGET*]. Her trouble has put her wits astray.

MICHAEL. Is it long since that song was made? Is it long since he got his death?

OLD WOMAN. Not long, not long. But there were others that died for love of me a long time ago.

MICHAEL. Were they neighbours of your own, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. Come here beside me and I'll tell you about them.

[MICHAEL *sits down beside her at the hearth.*]

There was a red man of the O'Donnells from the north, and a man of the O'Sullivans from the south, and there was one Brian that lost his life at Clontarf by the sea, and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die to-morrow.

MICHAEL. Is it in the west that men will die to-morrow?

OLD WOMAN. Come nearer, nearer to me.

BRIDGET. Is she right, do you think? Or is she a woman from beyond the world?

PETER. She doesn't know well what she's talking about, with the want and the trouble she has gone through.

BRIDGET. The poor thing, we should treat her well.

PETER. Give her a drink of milk and a bit of the oaten cake.

BRIDGET. Maybe we should give her something along with that, to bring her on her way. A few pence, or a shilling itself, and we with so much money in the house.

PETER. Indeed I'd not begrudge it to her if we had it to spare, but if we go running through what we have, we'll soon have to break the hundred pounds, and that would be a pity.

BRIDGET. Shame on you, Peter. Give her the shilling, and your blessing with it, or our own luck will go from us.

[PETER *goes to the box and takes out a shilling.*]

BRIDGET [*to the OLD WOMAN*]. Will you have a drink of milk?

OLD WOMAN. It is not food or drink that I want.

PETER [*offering the shilling*]. Here is something for you.

OLD WOMAN. That is not what I want. It is not silver I want.

PETER. What is it you would be asking for?

OLD WOMAN. If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all.

[PETER *goes over to the table, staring at the shilling in his hand in a bewildered way, and stands whispering to BRIDGET.*]

MICHAEL. Have you no one to care you in your age, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. I have not. With all the lovers that brought me their love, I never set out the bed for any.

MICHAEL. Are you lonely going the roads, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. I have my thoughts and I have my hopes.

MICHAEL. What hopes have you to hold to?

OLD WOMAN. The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house.

MICHAEL. What way will you do that, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. I have good friends that will help me. They are gathering to help me now. I am not afraid. If they are put down to-day, they will get the upper hand to-morrow. [*She gets up.*] I must be going to meet my friends. They are coming to help me, and I must be there to welcome them. I must call the neighbours together to welcome them.

MICHAEL. I will go with you.

BRIDGET. It is not her friends you have to go and welcome, Michael; it is the girl coming into the house you have to welcome. You have plenty to do, it is food and drink you have to bring to the house. The woman that is coming home is not coming with empty hands; you would not have an empty house before her. [*To the OLD WOMAN.*] Maybe you don't know, ma'am, that my son is going to be married to-morrow.

OLD WOMAN. It is not a man going to his marriage that I look to for help.

PETER [*to BRIDGET*]. Who is she, do you think, at all?

BRIDGET. You did not tell us your name yet, ma'am.

OLD WOMAN. Some call me the Poor Old Woman, and there are some that call me Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

PETER. I think I knew someone of that name once. Who was it, I wonder? It must have been someone I knew when I was a boy. No, no, I remember, I heard it in a song.

OLD WOMAN [*who is standing in the doorway*]. They are wondering that there were songs made for me; there have been many songs made for me. I heard one on the wind this morning. [*She sings.*]

Do not make a great keening
When the graves have been dug to-morrow.
Do not call the white-scarfed riders
To the burying that shall be to-morrow.
Do not spread food to call strangers
To the wakes that shall be to-morrow;
Do not give money for prayers
For the dead that shall die to-morrow ...

They will have no need of prayers, they will have no need of prayers.

MICHAEL. I do not know what that song means, but tell me something I can do for you.

PETER. Come over to me, Michael.

MICHAEL. Hush, father, listen to her.

OLD WOMAN. It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born, and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that had red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake; and for all that, they will think they are well paid.

[She goes out; her voice is heard outside singing.]

They shall be remembered for ever,
They shall be alive for ever,
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever.

BRIDGET *[to PETER]*. Look at him, Peter; he has the look of a man that has got the touch. *[Raising her voice.]* Look here, Michael, at the wedding-clothes. Such grand clothes as these are. You have a right to fit them on now; it would be a pity to-morrow if they did not fit. The boys would be laughing at you. Take them, Michael, and go into the room and fit them on.

[She puts them on his arm.]

MICHAEL. What wedding are you talking of? What clothes will I be wearing to-morrow?

BRIDGET. These are the clothes you are going to wear when you marry Delia Cahel to-morrow.

MICHAEL. I had forgotten that.

[He looks at the clothes and turns towards the inner room, but stops at the sound of cheering outside.]

PETER. There is the shouting come to our own door. What is it has happened?

[PATRICK and DELIA come in.]

PATRICK. There are ships in the Bay; the French are landing at Killala!

[PETER takes his pipe from his mouth and his hat off, and stands up. The clothes slip from MICHAEL's arm.]

DELIA. Michael! *[He takes no notice.]* Michael! *[He turns towards her.]*

Why do you look at me like a stranger?

[She drops his arm. BRIDGET goes over towards her.]

PATRICK. The boys are all hurrying down the hillsides to join the French.

DELIA. Michael won't be going to join the French.

BRIDGET *[to PETER]*. Tell him not to go, Peter.

PETER. It's no use. He doesn't hear a word we're saying.

BRIDGET. Try and coax him over to the fire.

DELIA. Michael! Michael! You won't leave me! You won't join the French, and we going to be married!

[She puts her arms about him; he turns towards her as if about to yield.]

OLD WOMAN's voice outside.]

They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever.

[MICHAEL breaks away from DELIA and goes out.]

PETER *[to PATRICK, laying a hand on his arm]*. Did you see an old woman going down the path?

PATRICK. I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.

[The end]

Augusta Gregory, *The Rising of the Moon* (1907)

PERSONS

SERGEANT
POLICEMAN B
POLICEMAN X
A RAGGED MAN

[SCENE: *Side of quay in a seaport town. Some posts and chains. A large barrel. Enter three policemen. Moonlight.*]

Summary:

The Sergeant and two Irish policemen, obviously working for the British authorities, are on a man hunt for an escaped political prisoner. The policemen discuss the large reward money they will receive for the criminal's capture and as two of the policemen go off, the Sergeant stays to guard the steps down to the harbor where he thinks a ship is bound to take the rebel to freedom. While he does so the Sergeant meets a poor peasant man who passes the time singing songs of Ireland. The singer engages the Sergeant in conversation which drifts towards the past. The Sergeant begins to think of the fate of the fugitive in comparison to his own. He thinks about the friends of his youth, and the circumstances which could have placed him in the position of hiding from the police in the dark. The Sergeant undergoes a change of heart when the disguised rebel begins to sing a song of the Fenian Movement, composed around 1865, called "The Rising of the Moon". So moved is the sergeant by memories of his own patriotic youth that he allows the prisoner to escape and gives up his chance of the reward and his duty towards the British government.

Adapted from:

<http://www.shvoong.com/humanities/film-and-theater-studies/681-rising-moon/#ixzz1fMXeDVRg>

J.M. Synge, "Riders to the Sea" (1907)

PERSONS:

MAURYA, *an old woman*
BARTLEY, *her son*
CATHLEEN, *her daughter*
NORA, *a younger daughter*
Men and Woman

[SCENE: *An Island off the West of Ireland.*
Cottage kitchen, with nets, oil skins, spinning wheel, some new boards standing by the wall.]

Summary:

AFTER nine days of constant grieving for her missing son, Michael, who, she feels certain, has been drowned, old Maurya has fallen into a fitful sleep. Her daughter, Cathleen, is busy with household tasks, when another daughter, Nora, slips quietly into the kitchen with a bundle given her by the young priest. It contains part of the clothes taken from the body of a drowned man far in the north. They have been sent to Maurya's cottage with a view to possible identification.

As Maurya shows signs of waking the girls hide the bundle until sometime when they shall be alone. Maurya's grieving for Michael is now coupled with fear of losing Bartley, her only remaining son. Five sons and a husband she has already lost to the sea. Will that insatiable tyrant insist on taking her sixth? The priest says not. But now Bartley insists that he will cross to the mainland this very day, in spite of winds and high seas, to dispose of a horse at the fair.

In a fit of pique at this only remaining son for not listening to her pleas, Maurya lets him go without her blessing. The girls persuade her to intercept him with the lunch they had forgotten to give him and so to make opportunity for that blessing a mother should have given.

While Maurya is gone the girls open the package. The clothes are, indeed, Michael's. Their only comfort is the thought that his body has been given a good Christian burial there in the north where it was washed up. At this point Maurya returns terrified with a vision she had had of Michael riding on the led horse behind Bartley. Now she is sure Bartley is doomed. When the girls show her Michael's clothes her only response is that the good white boards she had bought for his coffin would serve for Bartley instead.

Even as she speaks, the neighboring women troop in, their voices raised in the "keen," that monotonous Irish chant of grief. Men follow bringing the body of Bartley who has been knocked off a cliff into the surf by the horse he was leading. The play closes on the note of Maurya's fatalistic submission. She can sleep now with no

worry but that of starvation. "They're all gone now and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me... No man at all can be living forever and we must be satisfied."

Source: www.theatrehistory.com/irish/synge002.html

Symbolically charged naturalistic drama

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Opera in one act by Ralph Vaughan Williams
(1927, first production 1937)

Film (dir. Brian Desmond Hurst, 1935)

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Source:

John Millington Synge, *The Aran Islands* (1907)

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The Aran Island Myth

Robert Flaherty, *Man of Aran* (1934)

New Soundtrack by British Sea Power (2009, cf. Reinfandt 2010)

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