



## What does W.B. Yeats mean when he talks about a ‘National Theatre’? Compare his ideas with at least one other play by another writer.

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As a writer central to the establishment and prominence of literary culture in Ireland since its independence, it has been stated that W. B. Yeats ‘remains unchallenged as the dominant figure in Irish culture of the twentieth century and after’.<sup>1</sup> Yeats’ influential role in creating a ‘People’s Theatre’<sup>2</sup> for Ireland, a theatre which reflected Irish national values above the imperial conventions of English theatre, saw the formulation of the National Theatre Society. For Yeats, the society would showcase plays with the ‘imitation of nothing English’,<sup>3</sup> to separate Ireland’s cultural roots from its colonial dependence. With dramatists such as John M. Synge, Yeats envisioned theatre that would feature individual lives within Irish communities, facing realities specific to Ireland’s political and social climate. In his essay, ‘Samhain: An Irish National Theatre’, Yeats commented on what he deemed a ‘National Theatre’:<sup>4</sup>

A good Nationalist is, I suppose, one who is ready to give up a great deal that he may preserve to his country whatever part of her possessions he is best befitted to guard, and that theatre where the capricious spirit that bloweth as it listeth has for a moment found a dwelling-place, has a good right to call itself National Theatre (p. 35).

Therefore the Nationalist would give expression to the collective national spirit that encapsulated early twentieth-century ideals. However, Yeats’ concept of National Theatre did not reflect generalised Irish communities; Yeats stressed the importance of the playwright drawing upon their personal experience to expose a national identity and the national concerns bound to their historical moment. Synge’s tragedy *Riders to the Sea* was influenced by National Theatre, in that Yeats urged that Synge live with individuals on the Aran Islands to produce a play displaying the everyday struggles of the Islanders. I will explore whether Synge’s aim of a National Theatre is fully realised in personal terms, however, or whether Synge as an Anglo-Irish writer poses stereotypical characters to create awareness to the pre-modernised Aran community for an English audience. I will compare Synge’s text with the tragedy *Death of a Salesman* by American playwright Arthur Miller, who unlike Synge, worked upon his own personal life to reflect on the national consequences of America’s ascendancy as a post-war superpower. Miller’s tragic play follows the fate of car salesman

<sup>1</sup> W. J. McCormack, ‘Yeats’s Politics since 1943: Approaches and Reproaches’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 35, Irish Writing since 1950 (2005), pp. 131-45.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘An Introduction for my Plays,’ in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 244.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘Samhain: An Irish National Theatre’, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume VIII*, ed. by Mary FitzGerald and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2003). Further reference to the text is indicated by page number.

Willy Loman, bound to the pressures of capitalist expectations on the family institution in a developing urban environment. The play depicts the plight of a traditional idealist caught in the competitive national vision of the 'American Dream', stipulating a material way of life to work one's way up to success. Similarly to Yeats' dialectic approach between the personal and the national, Miller argues: 'literature has a job that has to do with the way we live, the way we organize ourselves. That is why I find it inescapable that I should be involved in thinking about politics and thinking about society'.<sup>5</sup> However, in expressing the experience of strained familial relationships in an increasingly impersonal state, Miller can be seen to go against national values of the American Dream and the nation's dominating capitalist system. Yet ultimately I suggest that through tragedy, both Miller and Synge aim to communicate a National Theatre through individual experience, foregrounding both their particular national concerns and the continually relevant universal issues of relationships, isolation and loss.

In his writings on Yeats' National Theatre, Michael Valdez Moses states that '[t]hrough nationalism itself might be said to be a distinctively modern ideology, Yeats hoped to cultivate an independent Irish nation on nominally pre-modern or non-modern grounds'.<sup>6</sup> Moses notes that tragedy was a key genre for Yeats to invoke individual events on a national level; the historical dramatic form of tragedy was drawn upon as a basis to recapture tradition and culture from Irish folklore and implement them into his contemporary society. Staging performances influenced by traditional tragedy, the National Theatre Society promoted an emerging Irish national identity above English culture as a modernising force. It is clear that Yeats had a profound impact over Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, as a tragedy drawing upon native Irish culture and traditions of the Catholic Gaelic-Irish islanders, the protagonist Maurya experiencing the loss of the last of her sons at sea. The play became one of the defining literary features of Ireland's Revival, leading D. H. Lawrence to comment that '*Riders to the Sea* is about the genuinest bit of dramatic tragedy, English, since Shakespeare, I should say'.<sup>7</sup> Lawrence refers to the play in English terms, and this brings to light the central conflict regarding the play's political and cultural stance: Is *Riders to the Sea* a true instance of Irish National Theatre? Yeats understood the play to conform to his idea of National Theatre, voicing that '[Synge] told me that he had learned Irish at Trinity College, so I urged him to go to the Aran Islands and find a life that had never been expressed in literature, instead of a life where all had been expressed'.<sup>8</sup> The Aran Islands are situated off the west coast of Ireland and have been associated with ancient Irish culture outside of Synge's anglicised domain, a place that would have reflected individual micro events for a national audience.

Synge, in observing and documenting the lives of the Aran community, translated the personal lives of individuals for a national vision of revived expression, 'inventing nothing, and changing nothing that [was] essential'.<sup>9</sup> An account from his observations considers the hardships faced by a peasant family struggling to survive in the remote and distanced island of Inishmaan:

Later in the evening, when I was sitting in one of the cottages, the sister of the dead man came in through the rain with her infant and there was a long talk about the rumours that had come in. She pieced together all she could remember about his clothes, and what his purse was like, and where he had got

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Miller, 'Seeing Eye to Eye', *Boston Review*, February 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Valdez Moses, 'The Rebirth of Tragedy: "Yeats, Nietzsche, the Irish National Theatre, and the Anti-Modern Cult of Cuchulain"', *Modernism/modernity*, 11:3 (September 2004), pp. 561-79 (p. 562).

<sup>7</sup> D. H. Lawrence, cited by Raymond Williams, 'Introduction', in *D. H. Lawrence: Three Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 7-13 (p. 10).

<sup>8</sup> Yeats, *Autobiographies*, pp. 343-44.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (Boston: J. W. Luce & Company, 1911), p. 3.

it, and the same for his tobacco box, and his stocking. In the end there seemed little doubt that it was her brother. ‘Ah!’ she said, ‘it’s Mike sure enough, and please God they’ll give him a decent burial’.<sup>10</sup>

We find strong parallels to Synge’s account in *Riders to the Sea*. Maurya’s daughter Nora recognises her brother Michael’s stockings after a body is washed up near Donegal: ‘[i]t’s the second one of the third pair I knitted, and I put up three score stitches, and I dropped four of them’.<sup>11</sup> The one-scene play builds in tension throughout with the death of Michael looming over the family, so here the intimate realisation of loss creates a heightened sympathy for the Aran women dependent on men to provide for them. The single scene in the family home provides a glimpse into their lives as if like Synge, we are also documenting individual experience detached from social and political themes. For the audience, the tragic climax arrives with the body of Maurya’s son Bartley being laid on the table. Here the mother’s loss reaches beyond national concerns, as she cries ‘[n]o man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied’ (p. 402). Synge’s depiction of a tragic event closely representative of real life on the island gives voice to the community distinct from the imperialised mainland. The use of a nativised language in which Maurya comments on the wider tragedy of loss imbues it with a value marking tradition in Ireland as central to its national identity. As Yeats envisioned through the genre, the ritualised actions of the women ‘keening softly and swaying themselves with a slow movement’ authenticate pre-modern associations of Irish national identity distanced from modern English practices. Maurya also refers to the ‘dark nights after Samhain’, a pagan festival for Synge to mythologise the community. Although a mythologizing adheres to Yeats’ National Theatre in giving expression to an untainted Irish culture, it has also been argued that Synge does not provide a true impression of Irish life. It is to an extent a contrived version of reality driven by a need to foreground Irish tradition. Yeats in theorising of National Theatre comments on patriotic political motives as the fundamental purpose of literature:

[I]f some external necessity had forced me to write nothing but drama with an obviously patriotic intention, instead of letting my work shape itself under the casual impulses of dreams and daily thoughts, I would have lost, in a short time, the power to write movingly upon any theme (p. 33).

Yeats’ National Theatre then was not founded upon a sole representation of the ‘national spirit’, but the display of personal situations shaping the individual within Irish society. Synge, however, with what Sinead Mattar presumes as ‘the idealization of the primitive’,<sup>12</sup> distances the tragic fate of the characters as they are seemingly unreal to those of Synge’s Ireland. The women are romanticised in their primitivism, creating a generalised view of islanders, or as Synge puts it, ‘a type of the women’s life upon the island’, for an English audience. The middle class Anglo-Irish identity of Synge distinct from the Aran community, caused tension with Catholic nationalists who regarded the romanticised primitivism as similar to British elitism. Yet I argue that Synge highlights the different social climate of Ireland separated from imperial rule and the elitist literary culture of English theatre, and therefore complies with Yeats’ objectives of a National Theatre.

In his essay Yeats stresses that ‘[l]iterature is always personal, always as one man’s vision of the world, one man’s experience, and it can only be popular when men are ready to

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> J. Ellen Gainer, Stanton B. Gamer, Jr., and Martin Puchner, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Drama: Volume 2: The Nineteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 397. Further references to the text are indicated by page number.

<sup>12</sup> Sinead Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), p. 4.

welcome the vision of others' (p. 33). Although Synge's tragedy was forged by observations of others' personal experiences, Miller drew upon his own experiences as an American citizen, with the characters and plot in *Death of a Salesman* shaped by his environment. Miller's conception of tragedy appealed to what Yeats considered a 'good Nationalist', one who preserves whatever necessary for the benefit of his country: 'I think tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing — his sense of personal dignity'.<sup>13</sup> A sense of sacrifice connects Miller's idea of tragedy to National Theatre, and we see that Willy Loman constitutes Yeats' Nationalist by sacrificing himself for his family to live to American ideals. The tragedy exposes the personal desperation of an individual swamped by the state in which identity is cast aside for the competitive capitalist work ethic. Yeats similarly presents the inseparable nature of the individual and society for the playwright as he states,

Literature is, to my mind, the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values, and it is this, not only in the sacred books whose power everyone acknowledges, but by every movement of imagination in song or story or drama that height of intensity and sincerity has made literature at all (p. 34).

Therefore both dramatists saw the importance of presenting to an audience how the individual can impact upon and be impacted by the nation. This intensity in 'movement of imagination' can be felt through the experimental techniques in *Death of a Salesman*, with Willy's transfixion on reliving his past. The fluidity of lighting, sound and movement on stage as Willy switches freely around the different settings in a dream state, blurs the spatial and temporal boundaries of reality. Throughout a flute melody signals the character's departure into his memory, and the change in light conceals areas of the stage as we drift into a visual interaction with Willy's mind. In the opening directions, it is stated that '[w]henver the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines... But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping through a wall onto the forestage' (p. 759). It is not only through the unfolding plot that draws the audience to a sympathetic stance, but through the breaking of boundaries away from realism which reveal Willy's fleeting identity oscillating between hope and despair, the real and imagined. As with *Riders to the Sea*, characters look to wider issues involving national concerns. Willy's wife Linda marks Miller's essential social comment on American ideals as she appeals to her sons about the state of her husband: 'he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog' (p. 782). Linda's plea does indeed 'touch the heart'<sup>14</sup> of the spectator without its only objective being political or patriotic. Her desperation for a man being worn down by the American Dream as the very thing he needs to survive shows her love for Willy beyond a materiality endorsed by society, and so exemplifies Miller's concerns surrounding American life on a national level.

In the same instance, Miller can be said to go against conventions of National Theatre. The play departs from traditional tragedy in that it does not provide answers for the problems provoked by the national system or Willy's flawed character. Willy's identity built upon old values of 'respect, and comradeship, and gratitude', is incompatible with the new 'cut and dried' America with 'no chance for bringing friendship to bear — or personality' (p. 794). His struggle in establishing an identity based on this national identity is realised by the strained relationship with his son Biff, who, unlike Willy, understands that he is 'not bringing

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Miller, 'Tragedy and the Common Man', *The New York Times* (27 February 1949).

<sup>14</sup> Yeats, 'National Theatre', p. 33.

home any prizes any more' (p. 821). Unlike tragedies where characters realise their flaw prior to their downfall, Willy cannot comprehend his flawed mind-set and holds onto past principles that will not suffice in the unforgiving nation. Here Miller does not celebrate national identity as Yeats strived to achieve; he presents a social critique on the individual being crushed by the collective national identity of America.

For Yeats, only through personal expression could theatre confront national issues, working from seemingly individual concerns that could translate to larger statements addressing western society. *Riders to the Sea* invokes an awareness of Irish national identity through the documentary naturalism portraying an isolated event in the Aran community. Through a tragedy following the breakdown of a family impacted upon by their environment, it is clear that the narrative experiences of the individual are bound to Irish national identity, and we see Synge's aim of separating Ireland from English imperialism through this dramatic form. However, in aiming to foreground a National Theatre, Synge has been criticised for exploiting the Aran community for a national gain, and in idealising characters has not complied with Yeats' endeavour 'to describe that relation as it is, not as we would have it be' (p. 34). In the same light as Synge, Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is grounded upon the playwright's nationalist identity. Yet the protagonist's fate sets the play against a National Theatre, in the sense that Miller foregrounds the nation's problematic social system for the individual. With focus on the personal and the consequences of individual action through the exploration of Willy's turn towards self-destruction, Miller questions the national identity of America underpinned by devalued individuals. Both unconventional tragedies speak to their specific national events in time, and yet place importance on an expression of the individual, leading to an understanding of human nature sought through Yeats' National Theatre.

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