

Classic Poetry Series

**John Millington Synge**  
**- poems -**

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# John Millington Synge(16 April 1871 - 24 March 1909)

Edmund John Millington Synge was an Irish playwright, poet, prose writer, travel writer and collector of folklore. He was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival and was one of the cofounders of the Abbey Theatre. He is best known for his play *The Playboy of the Western World*, which caused riots in Dublin during its opening run at the Abbey Theatre.

Although he came from an Anglo-Irish background, Synge's writings are mainly concerned with the world of the Roman Catholic peasants of rural Ireland and with what he saw as the essential paganism of their world view.

Synge suffered from Hodgkin's disease, a form of cancer at the time untreatable. He died just weeks short of his 38th birthday and was at the time trying to complete his last play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

## **Early life**

Synge was born in Newtown Villas, Rathfarnham, County Dublin on 16 April 1871. He was the youngest son in a family of eight children. His parents were part of the Protestant middle and upper class: his family on his father's side were landed gentry from Glanmore Castle, County Wicklow and his maternal grandfather, Robert Traill, had been a Church of Ireland rector in Schull, County Cork and a member of the Schull Relief Committee during the Great Irish Famine (1845–1849). Rathfarnham was then a rural part of the county, and during his childhood he was passionately interested in ornithology. His earliest poems are somewhat Wordsworthian in tone: his first 'literary composition' was a nature diary he made in collaboration with Florence Ross when they were both children.

His grandfather, John Hatch Synge, was an admirer of the educationalist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and founded an experimental school on the family estate. His father, also named John Hatch Synge, was a barrister but contracted smallpox and died in 1872 at the age of 49. Synge's mother, who had a private income from lands in County Galway, moved the family to the house next door to her mother in Rathgar, Dublin. Synge, although often ill, had a happy childhood here, and developed an interest in ornithology along the banks of the River Dodder in the grounds of the nearby Rathfarnham Castle, and during family holidays at the seaside resort of Greystones, Wicklow, and the family estate at Glanmore.

Synge was educated privately at schools in Dublin and Bray, and later studied piano, flute, violin, music theory and counterpoint at the Royal Irish Academy of

Music. He traveled to Europe to study music, but changed his mind and decided to focus on literature. He proved to be a talented student and won a scholarship in counterpoint in 1891. The family moved to the suburb of Kingstown (now Dún Laoghaire) in 1888, and Synge entered Trinity College, Dublin the following year, where he graduated with a BA in 1892. While at college, he studied Irish and Hebrew, as well as continuing his music studies and playing with the Academy orchestra in the Antient Concert Rooms.

He joined the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club and read Charles Darwin. Synge wrote:

When I was about fourteen I obtained a book of Darwin's .... My studies showed me the force of what I read, [and] the more I put it from me the more it rushed back with new instances and power ... Soon afterwards I turned my attention to works of Christian evidence, reading them at first with pleasure, soon with doubt, and at last in some cases with derision.

He then continued, "Soon after I had relinquished the kingdom of God I began to take up a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland. My politics went round ... to a temperate Nationalism." He later developed an interest in Irish antiquities and the Aran Islands, and became a member of the Irish League for a year. He later quit the Irish League because, as he told Maud Gonne, "my theory of regeneration for Ireland differs from yours ... I wish to work on my own for the cause of Ireland, and I shall never be able to do so if I get mixed up with a revolutionary and semi-military movement." In 1893, he published his first known work, a Wordsworth-influenced poem, in *Kottabos: A College Miscellany*. His reading of Darwin coincided with a crisis of faith and Synge abandoned the Protestant religion of his upbringing around this time.

**Emerging writer**

After graduating, Synge decided that he wanted to be a professional musician and went to Germany to study music. He stayed at Coblenz during 1893 and moved to Würzburg in the January of the following year. Partly because he was shy about performing in public, and partly because of self-doubt on his ability, Synge decided to abandon music and pursue his literary interests. He returned to Ireland in June 1894, and moved to Paris the following January to study literature and languages at the Sorbonne.

During summer holidays with his family in Dublin, he met and fell in love with Cherrie Matheson, a friend of his cousin and a member of the Plymouth Brethren. He proposed to her in 1895 and again the next year, but she turned him down on

both occasions because of their differing religious viewpoints. This rejection affected Synge greatly and reinforced his determination to spend as much time as possible outside Ireland.

In 1896 he visited Italy to study the language for a time before returning to Paris. Later that year he met [W. B. Yeats](http://www.poemhunter.com/william-butler-yeats), who encouraged Synge to live for a while in the Aran Islands and then return to Dublin and devote himself to creative work. That year he joined with Yeats, Augusta, Lady Gregory, and [George William Russell](http://www.poemhunter.com/george-william-russel) to form the Irish National Theatre Society, which later would establish the Abbey Theatre. He also wrote an amount of literary criticism for *Gonne's Irlande Libre* and other journals as well as unpublished poems and prose in a decadent, fin de siècle style. These writings were eventually gathered together in the 1960s for his *Collected Works*. He also attended lectures at the Sorbonne by the noted Celtic scholar Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville.

### **Aran Islands and first plays**

Synge suffered his first attack of Hodgkin's disease in 1897 and also had an enlarged gland removed from his neck. The following year, he spent the summer on the Aran Islands. He spent the next five summers on the islands, collecting stories and folklore and perfecting his Irish, while continuing to live in Paris for most of the rest of the year. He also visited Brittany regularly. During this period, Synge wrote his first play, *When the Moon has Set*. He sent it to Lady Gregory for the Irish Literary Theatre in 1900, but she rejected it and the play was not published until it appeared in the *Collected Works*.

His first account of life on the islands was published in the *New Ireland Review* in 1898 and his book-length journal, *The Aran Islands*, was completed in 1901 and published in 1907 with illustrations by Jack Butler Yeats. Synge considered the work "my first serious piece of work". When Lady Gregory read the book's manuscript, she advised Synge to remove any direct naming of the place and adding more folk stories to it, but he refused to because he wanted to create something more realistic. The book is a slow-paced reflection of life on the islands and reflects Synge's belief that beneath the Catholicism of the islanders it was possible to detect a substratum of the older pagan beliefs of their ancestors. His experiences on Aran were to form the basis for many of the plays of Irish peasant and fishing community life that Synge went on to write.

In 1903, Synge left Paris and moved to London. He had written two one-act plays, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen* the previous year. These

met with Lady Gregory's approval and *The Shadow of the Glen* was performed at the Molesworth Hall in October 1903. *Riders to the Sea* was performed at the same venue in February the following year. *The Shadow of the Glen*, under the title *In the Shadow of the Glen*, formed part of the bill for the opening run of the Abbey Theatre from 27 December 1904 to 3 January 1905. Both plays were based on stories Synge had collected on the Aran Islands, and Synge relied on props from the Aran Islands to help set the stage. He also relied on Hiberno-English, the English dialect of Ireland, in order to reinforce its usefulness as a language; parts of this stemmed from his belief that Gaelic as a language could not survive.

*The Shadow of the Glen* was based on a story of an unfaithful wife and it was attacked in print by Irish nationalist leader Arthur Griffith as "a slur on Irish womanhood". Years later, Synge would write, "When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen* some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen." This encouraged more critical attacks that alleged that Synge described Irish women in an unfair manner. *Riders to the Sea* was also attacked by nationalists, this time Patrick Pearse, who decried it because of the author's attitude to God and religion. Furthermore, Synge's audience felt that he did a disservice to Irish nationalism for not idealizing his characters. However, later critics would attack Synge for idealizing the Irish peasantry too much. Despite these attacks, the plays are now part of the canon of English language theatre. A third one-act play, *The Tinker's Wedding* was drafted around this time, but Synge initially made no attempt to have it performed, largely because of a scene where a priest is tied up in a sack, which, as he wrote to the publisher Elkin Mathews in 1905, would probably upset "a good many of our Dublin friends".

When the Abbey was set up, Synge was appointed literary advisor to the theatre and soon became one of the directors of the company, along with Yeats and Lady Gregory. However, he differed from Yeats and Lady Gregory in what he believed the Irish theatre should be, as he wrote to Stephen MacKenna:

I do not believe in the possibility of 'a purely fantastic, unmodern, ideal, breezy, spring-dayish, Cuchulainoid National Theatre'... no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are never fantastic, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulainoid.

His next play, *The Well of the Saints* was staged at the theatre in 1905, again to nationalist disapproval, and again in 1906 at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. The

critic Joseph Holloway claimed the play combined "lyric and dirt".

### <b>Playboy riots and after</b>

The play widely regarded as Synge's masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*, was first performed in the Abbey on 26 January 1907. The comedy centers on the story of apparent patricide and attracted a wide hostile reaction from the Irish public. The *Freeman's Journal* described it as "an unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men, and worse still upon Irish girlhood". Egged on by nationalists, including Arthur Griffith, who believed that the theatre was insufficiently politically active and described it as "a vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform", and with the pretext of a perceived slight on the virtue of Irish womanhood in the line "... a drift of chosen females, standing in their shift ..." At the time a shift was known as a symbol representing Kitty O'Shea and adultery. However, George Watson explained the real problem with the play when he says, "this heady mixture of English stereotypical images of Irish violence, of Irish resentment of those images, and of Synge's stress on violence, which for him is almost synonymous with vitality, is, far more than the word 'shift', what made *The Playboy* so explosive." A significant portion of the crowd rioted, causing the third act of the play to be acted out in dumbshow.

Yeats returned from Scotland to address the crowd on the second night, and decided to call in the police. Press opinion soon turned against the rioters and the protests petered out. Yeats later referred to this incident in a speech to the Abbey audience in 1926 on the fourth night of Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, when he declared: "You have disgraced yourselves again. Is this to be an ever-recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius? Synge first and then O'Casey?"

Although writing of *The Tinker's Wedding* begun at the same time as *Riders to the Sea* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, it took Synge five years to complete, and was finished in 1907. '*Riders to the Sea*' was performed in the Racquet Court theatre in Galway 4–8 January 1907 and not performed again until 1909, and only then in London. The first critic to respond to the play was Daniel Corkery, who said, "One is sorry Synge ever wrote so poor a thing, and one fails to understand why it ever should have been staged anywhere." This claim was popularly held by critics for many decades after. That same year, Synge became engaged to the Abbey actress Maire O'Neill (formerly known as Molly Allgood). He died at the Elpis Nursing Home in Dublin. His *Poems and Translations* was published by the Cuala Press on 8 April with a preface by Yeats. Yeats and Molly Allgood completed Synge's unfinished final play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, and it

was presented by the Abbey players in January 1910 with Allgood in the lead role. Synge died in Dublin on 24 March 1909. He is buried in Mount Jerome Graveyard, Harolds Cross, Dublin 6.

### <b>Personality</b>

Synge is commonly described as an enigma, a person who is hard to read and understand. John Masefield, Synge's acquaintance, said that he "gave one from the first the impression of a strange personality". Not even the members of his own family were close enough to understand him. He was quiet and reserved, and Yeats thought that he was "meditative". However, Synge was open when he would write letters to women, and, according to David H. Greene, he acted like "an ordinary human being but not a particularly eloquent one". Not all of his letters were kind, especially his letters to Allgood, an actress that Synge wrote to often. Those letters are filled with condescending remarks and by a man who is, as Greene argues, "not only unattractive but also incompatible with the complex personality of the man who wrote the plays".

Masefield felt that Synge's problems and thoughts about life originated with his poor health. In particular, Masefield claims that "His relish of the savagery made me feel that he was a dying man clutching at life, and clutching most wildly at violent life, as the sick man does". In stanza IV of Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", he summarizes his view that Synge was unhealthy, sick and in pain throughout his career:

And that enquiring man John Synge comes next,  
That dying chose the living world for text  
And never could have rested in the tomb  
But that, long travelling, he had come  
Towards nightfall upon certain set apart  
In a most desolate stony place,  
Towards nightfall upon a race  
Passionate and simple like his heart.

### <b>Legacy</b>

Synge's plays helped set the Abbey house style for the following four decades. The stylised realism of his writing was reflected in the training given at the theatre's school of acting, and plays of peasant life were the main staple of the repertoire until the end of the 1950s. Sean O'Casey, the next major dramatist to write for the Abbey, knew Synge's work well and attempted to do for the Dublin working classes what his predecessor had done for the rural poor. However,

O'Casey was not the only playwright that Synge influenced; Brendan Behan, Paul Vincent Carroll, Brinsley MacNamara, and Lennox Robinson were all indebted to Synge.

The critic Vivian Mercier was amongst the first to recognise [Samuel Beckett](http://www.poemhunter.com/samuel-beckett)'s debt to Synge. Beckett was a regular audience member at the Abbey in his youth and particularly admired the plays of Yeats, Synge and O'Casey. Mercier points out parallels between Synge's casts of tramps, beggars and peasants and many of the figures in Beckett's novels and dramatic works

In recent years, Synge's cottage on the Aran Islands has been restored as a tourist attraction. An annual Synge Summer School has been held every summer since 1991 in the village of Rathdrum in Wicklow

Joseph O'Connor has written a novel, *Ghost Light*, loosely based on Synge's relationship with Molly Allgood. It was published on 3 June 2010.

# A Question

I asked if i got sick and died, would you  
With my black funeral go, walking too,  
If you'd stand close to hear them talk or pray  
While I'm let down in that steep bank of clay.

And, No, you said, for if you saw a crew  
Of living idiots pressing round that new  
Oak coffin - they alive, I dead beneath  
That board - you'd rave and rend them with your teeth.

John Millington Synge

# A Translation From Petrarch

(He is Jealous of the Heavens and the Earth)

What a grudge I am bearing the earth that has its arms about her, and is holding that face away from me, where I was finding peace from great sadness.

What a grudge I am bearing the Heavens that are after taking her, and shutting her in with greediness, the Heavens that do push their bolt against so many.

What a grudge I am bearing the blessed saints that have got her sweet company, that I am always seeking; and what a grudge I am bearing against Death, that is standing in her two eyes, and will not call me with a word.

John Millington Synge

# A Wish

May seven tears in every week,  
Touch the hollow of you cheek,  
That I - signed with such a dew -  
For the Lion's share may sue  
Of roses ever curled  
Round the may-pole of the world.

Heavy riddles lie in this,  
Sorrow's sauce for every kiss.

John Millington Synge

# An Epitaph

A silent sinner, nights and days,  
No human heart to him drew nigh,  
Alone he wound his wonted ways,  
Alone and little loved did die.

And autumn Death for him did choose,  
A season dank with mists and rain,  
And took him, while the evening dews  
Were settling o'er the fields again.

John Millington Synge

# Beg-Innish

Bring Kateen-beug and Maurya Jude  
To dance in Beg-Innish,  
And when the lads (they're in Dunquin)  
Have sold their crabs and fish,  
Wave fawny shawls and call them in,  
And call the little girls who spin,  
And seven weavers from Dunquin,  
To dance in Beg-Innish.

I'll play you jigs, and Maurice Kean,  
Where nets are laid to dry,  
I've silken strings would draw a dance  
From girls are lame or shy;  
Four strings I've brought from Spain and France  
To make your long men skip and prance,  
Till stars look out to see the dance  
Where nets are laid to dry.

We'll have no priest or peeler in  
To dance in Beg-Innish;  
But we'll have drink from M'riarty Jim  
Rowed round while gannets fish,  
A keg with porter to the brim,  
That every lad may have his whim,  
Till we up sails with M'riarty Jim  
And sail from Ben-Innish.

John Millington Synge

# Danny

One night a score of Erris men,  
A score I'm told and nine,  
Said, 'We'll get shut of Danny's noise  
Of girls and widows dyin'.

'There's not his like from Binghamstown  
To Boyle and Ballycroy,  
At playing hell on decent girls,  
At beating man and boy.

'He's left two pairs of female twins  
Beyond in Killacreeest,  
And twice in Crossmolina fair  
He's struck the parish priest.

'But we'll come round him in the night  
A mile beyond the Mullet;  
Ten will quench his bloody eyes,  
And ten will choke his gullet.'

It wasn't long till Danny came,  
From Bangor making way,  
And he was damning moon and stars  
And whistling grand and gay.

Till in a gap of hazel glen -  
And not a hare in sight -  
Out lepped the nine-and-twenty lads  
Along his left and right.

Then Danny smashed the nose of Byrne,  
He split the lips on three,  
And bit across the right hand thumb  
Of one Red Shawn Magee.

But seven tripped him up behind,  
And seven kicked before,  
And seven squeezed around his throat  
Till Danny kicked no more.

Then some destroyed him with their heels,  
Some tramped him in the mud,  
Some stole his purse and timber pipe,  
And some washed off his blood.

. . . .

And when you're walking out the way  
From Bangor to Belmullet,  
You'll see a flat cross on a stone  
Where men choked Danny's gullet.

John Millington Synge

# Dread

Beside a chapel I'd a room looked down,  
Where all the women from the farms and town,  
On Holy-days, and Sundays used to pass  
To marriages, and Christenings and to Mass.

Then I sat lonely watching score and score,  
Till I turned jealous of the Lord next door...  
Now by this window, where there's none can see,  
The Lord God's jealous of yourself and me.

John Millington Synge

## In Glencullen

Thrush, linnet, stare and wren,  
Brown lark beside the sun,  
Take thought of kestrel, sparrow-hawk,  
Birdlime and roving gun.  
You great-great-grandchildren  
Of birds I've listened to,  
I think I robbed your ancestors  
When I was young as you.

John Millington Synge

## In Kerry

We heard the thrushes by the shore and sea,  
And saw the golden star's nativity,  
Then round we went the lane by Thomas Flynn,  
Across the church where bones lie out and in;  
And there I asked beneath a lonely cloud  
Of strange delight, with one bird singing loud,  
What change you'd wrought in graveyard, rock and sea,  
This new wild paradise to wake for me. . . .  
Yet knew no more than knew those merry sins  
Had built this stack of thigh-bones, jaws and shins.

John Millington Synge

# In May

In a nook  
that opened south,  
You and I  
Lay mouth to mouth.

A snowy gull  
And sooty daw  
Came and looked  
With many a caw;

'Such,' I said,  
'Are I and You,  
When you've Kissed me  
Black and Blue!'

John Millington Synge

# I'Ve Thirty Months

I've thirty months, and that's my pride,  
Before my age's a double score,  
Though many lively men have died  
At twenty-nine or little more.  
I've left a long and famous set  
Behind some seven years or three,  
But there are millions I'd forget  
Will have their laugh at passing me.

John Millington Synge

# On A Birthday

Friend of Ronsard, Nashe, and Beaumont,  
Lark of Ulster, Meath, and Thomond,  
Heard from Smyrna and Sahara  
To the surf of Connemara,  
Lark of April, June, and May,  
Sing loudly this my Lady-day.

John Millington Synge

# On An Anniversary

[After reading the dates in a book of Lyrics.]

With Fifteen-ninety or Sixteen-sixteen  
We end Cervantes, Marot, Nashe or Green:  
The Sixteen-thirteen till two score and nine,  
Is Crashaw's niche, that honey-lipped divine.  
And so when all my little work is done  
They'll say I came in Eighteen-seventy-one,  
And died in Dublin.... What year will they write  
For my poor passage to the stall of Night?

John Millington Synge

## On An Island

You've plucked a curlew, drawn a hen,  
Washed the shirts of seven men,  
You've stuffed my pillow, stretched my sheet,  
And filled the pan to wash your feet,  
You've cooped the pullets, wound the clock,  
And rinsed the young men's drinking crock;  
And now we'll dance to jigs and reels,  
Nailed boots chasing girl's naked heels,  
Until your father'll start to snore,  
And Jude, now you're married, will stretch on the floor.

John Millington Synge

# Prelude

Still south I went and west and south again,  
Through Wicklow from the morning till the night,  
And far from cities, and the sights of men,  
Lived with the sunshine, and the moon's delight.

I knew the stars, the flowers, and the birds,  
The grey and wintry sides of many glens,  
And did but half remember human words,  
In converse with the mountains, moors, and fens.

John Millington Synge

# Queens

Seven dog-days we let pass  
Naming Queens in Glenmacnass,  
All the rare and royal names  
Wormy sheepskin yet retains,  
Etain, Helen, Maeve, and Fand,  
Golden Deirdre's tender hand,  
Bert, the big-foot, sung by Villon,  
Cassandra, Ronsard found in Lyon.  
Queens of Sheba, Meath and Connaught,  
Coifed with crown, or gaudy bonnet,  
Queens whose finger once did stir men,  
Queens were eaten of fleas and vermin,  
Queens men drew like Monna Lisa,  
Or slew with drugs in Rome and Pisa,  
We named Lucrezia Crivelli,  
And Titian's lady with amber belly,  
Queens acquainted in learned sin,  
Jane of Jewry's slender shin:  
Queens who cut the bogs of Glanna,  
Judith of Scripture, and Gloriana,  
Queens who wasted the East by proxy,  
Or drove the ass-cart, a tinker's doxy,  
Yet these are rotten - I ask their pardon -  
And we've the sun on rock and garden,  
These are rotten, so you're the Queen  
Of all the living, or have been.

John Millington Synge

# The Curse

[To a sister of an enemy of the author's who disapproved of 'The Playboy']

Lord, confound this surly sister,  
Blight her brow with blotch and blister,  
Cramp her larynx, lung, and liver,  
In her guts a galling give her.

Let her live to earn her dinners  
In Mountjoy with seedy sinners:  
Lord, this judgment quickly bring,  
And I'm your servant, J. M. Synge.

John Millington Synge

# The Passing Of The Shee

[After looking at one of A.E.'s pictures.]

Adieu, sweet Angus, Maeve and Fand,  
Ye plumed yet skinny Shee,  
That poets played with hand in hand  
To learn their ecstasy.

We'll search in Red Dan Sally's ditch,  
And drink in Tubber fair,  
Or poach with Red Dan Philly's bitch  
The badger and the hare.

John Millington Synge

# To The Oaks Of Glencree

MY arms are round you, and I lean  
Against you, while the lark  
Sings over us, and golden lights, and green  
Shadows are on your bark.

There'll come a season when you'll stretch  
Black boards to cover me;  
Then in Mount Jerome I will lie, poor wretch,  
With worms eternally.

John Millington Synge