

Anita Nemes:Illusion and Reality
The Theme of Blindness in Synge's The Well of the Saints

Blindness has been a recurring theme of drama since the very beginnings. When blindness appears in a play it is always worthwhile to look for the broader significance of it, something which is more than merely a physical state of a character. In Sophocles's Oedipus Rex, for example, the king's blinding of himself at the end is symbolic because he has been blind to the truth throughout the play. The theme of symbolic and actual blindness appears in Shakespeare as well. As Malcolm Kelsall points out, in King Lear the "imagery of mental blindness (Lear cannot see the truth about his daughters) is picked up in physical action (Gloucester has his eyes put out)" (73). In John Millington Synge's The Well of the Saints blindness is also a dominant motif since the two main characters are blind in most of the play and the implications of their lack of vision go beyond the bare physical defect.

Looked at with a 21st-century mind, blindness as the theme of a play may surpass the boundaries of political correctness in case it touches upon established stereotypes. Writing about blind people ridiculed by their fellow villagers is a sensitive topic. Synge's play itself contains references to common stereotypes, such as the association of physical deformity with wickedness and stupidity, like in Timmy the smith's remark: "Oh, the blind is wicked people, and it's no lie" (Synge, The Well of the Saints 86). The seeing people are in turn similarly stereotyped by the blind beggar, Mary Doul: "for they're a bad lot those that have their sight" (62). But for all such remarks of the characters, Synge's play does not in the first place dramatise the sensitive issue of physical defect. Blindness in the play should rather be interpreted in a symbolic way, through which such themes as illusion and reality, the willing suspension of disbelief, the power of language and the role of religion and society can be explored. In the following paragraphs these issues will be considered in the light of the symbolic "blindness"-motif.

The alternating states of blindness and vision contribute to the symmetrical structure of the play. The beggar couple, Martin and Mary Doul are blind in the first act. They are deceived by their fellow villagers so that they believe that they are beautiful, while in fact, as the stage instruction states, they are old, ugly, "weather-beaten" beggars. At the end of Act I a

Sample Essay

© Anita Nemes, ELTE BTK: seas3.elte.hu/angolpark

Saint arrives who restores their sight with the help of some holy water from “the well of the saints.” Throughout Act II Martin and Mary can see. With the restoration of their sight they are forced to face the world of down-to-earth reality. The setting also changes in this act from the roadside to Timmy’s forge: “[t]he setting and properties — the forge, the broken wheels, the boarded well — mark the couples entry into the hard world of objectivity” (King 116). The Saint’s wonder breaks the couple’s previous world of imagination and the encounter with reality results in despair and “an almost total estrangement between man and wife” (King 117). In Act III the symmetry of the play’s structure becomes complete when the couple lose their sight again and wilfully decide not to have it restored. Thus they willingly return to a world of illusion in which they can imagine for themselves their future beauty as old white-haired and white-bearded people. The setting is also the same as in Act I.

The observation of the play’s structure already poses the problem of blindness and sight, which is reflected in the duality of illusion and reality. At first it may seem that the blind couple are innocent victims of the village people’s deceit, thus the play evokes our pity for Martin and Mary. There are, however, several remarks by the characters which may suggest that the couple themselves have readily accepted the lies told by the villagers and did not make any effort to explore the truth. In Act I, for example, when Timmy is telling Martin about the arrival of the Saint and the wonder that is to happen, he says the following: “That’s the truth, Martin DouL, and you may believe it now, for you’re after believing a power of things weren’t as likely at all” (65). This is a clear indication of the fact that the village people, besides cheating the couple, also gave them hints that they did not know the truth. The following dialogue is also indicative of this:

MARTIN DOUL. It’s the truth she’s saying, and if bell-ringing is a fine life, yet I’m thinking, maybe, it’s better I am wedded with the beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone.

MOLLY BYRNE. [*Scornfully.*] You’re thinking that, God help you; but it’s little you know of her at all.

.....

TIMMY. [*Awkwardly.*] It’s well you know the way she is; for the like of you do have great knowledge in the feeling of your hands. (69)

Timmy the smith’s last remark suggests another possibility of learning the truth for the blind couple, the sense of touch. Other senses could also be involved in the process of cognition. The sense of hearing is touched upon in Martin’s remark at the beginning of Act I:

Sample Essay

© Anita Nemes, ELTE BTK: seas3.elte.hu/angolpark

“for you’ve a queer cracked voice, the Lord have mercy on you, if it’s fine to look on you are itself” (61). Despite all such hints as those mentioned above the couple seem to have no doubt in the lies they were told, hence the surprise they get after their sight is recovered. From now on, it is worth examining two questions: how the blind couple’s imaginary world is created and why.

The medium through which the blind couple’s world of imagination is created is language. Most of Synge’s critics appreciate the use of language in his plays. In his most widely discussed play, The Playboy of the Western World, it is a central theme how language can be exploited to tell lies and construct a forged identity of the hero Christy Mahon, who has killed his tyrannical father. In The Well of the Saints language has a dominant role as well throughout the play. As Mary C. King pointed out, language has a mediating role for the blind couple since they are dependent on it to construct “their vision of objective and subjective ‘reality’” (106). Words compensate them for their lack of vision. It is also remarkable how often it is present in the couple’s, especially in Mary’s, speech that what they actually know or think about their physical appearances is gathered from the village people’s talk: “I’ve heard tell” (61), “for I do look my best, I’ve heard them say, when I’m dressed up with that thing on my head” (67). Mary C. King claims that through the medium of language the blind couple shares in a social interaction with the community, in which the villagers serve as mirrors to the couple “and the image depends at least partly on the mirror” (109).

Another part of the image is perhaps created by the blind beggars’ own imagination of their beauty, contradicting even their actual physical experiences. One example of this is, besides the paradox between Mary’s cracked voice and her imagined beauty, is the scene in which Mary explains how the rough weather makes her skin beautiful: “I’ve heard tell there isn’t anything like the wet south wind does be blowing upon us for keeping a white beautiful skin – the like of my skin – on your neck and on your brows” (61).

In the last act the couple are no longer dependent on the community in creating their fantasy. They consciously create an imaginary beauty for themselves again with the help of words. They build up a new illusion about what King calls their “beauty-that-is-to-come” (124). However, the words referring to lying and talking in their dialogue indicate the verbal character of their imagination:

Sample Essay

© Anita Nemes, ELTE BTK: seas3.elte.hu/angolpark

MARY DOUL. [*Puzzled at joy of his voice.*] If you'd anything but lies to say you'd be talking yourself.

MARTIN DOUL. [*Bursting with excitement.*] I've this to say, Mary DouL. I'll be letting my beard grow in a short while, a beautiful, long, white, silken, streamy beard, you wouldn't see the like of in the eastern world" (93-94)

Besides the possibility to create an illusory world through words, another remarkable characteristic of the play's language is its realism. Joseph Wood Krutch compares Synge to such authors as Homer and Shakespeare in his attitude to literature as being true and beautiful at the same time (95). Synge saw that the way to achieving "Truth" and "Beauty" in literature is to return to the folk roots of literature and to draw one's theme and language from simple people (Krutch 95). During the summers spent on the Aran Islands he studied and recorded the speech of the folk and collected their stories. But Raymond Williams draws attention to the fact that although Synge's language was based on original country speech, it is nevertheless a literary product shaped by its author (142). The beauty and poetic quality of the language is perhaps best illustrated by a passage in which Martin reflects upon the beauties of the world as seen or rather perceived by a blind man:

Ah, it's ourselves had finer sights than the like of them, I'm telling you, when we were sitting a while back hearing the birds and bees humming in every weed of the ditch, or when we'd be smelling the sweet, beautiful smell does be rising in the warm nights, when you do hear the swift flying things racing in the air, till we'd be looking up in our minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and big rivers, and fine hills for taking the plough. (99)

Language in the play also functions as a source of comedy through the semantic ambiguities in the dialogues pointed out by Mary C. King. King argues that in the play there is a divergence between word and referent (108). The comic ambiguities are mainly concerned with Mary's legendary beauty as related by the village folk. She is often likened to the most admired beauty of the village, the fair-haired and white-skinned Molly Byrne, whom Martin takes for his wife when his sight is restored. Thus there are remarks made by the blind Martin in Act I such as Mary was "plaiting her yellow hair" (61), while the reality is strikingly different. Another comic ambiguity in the text is that Mary is called "the beautiful dark woman" (62) which is in contrast with her "yellow hair," but the adjective "dark" also refers to "blind" in other parts of the play.

Sample Essay

© Anita Nemes, ELTE BTK: seas3.elte.hu/angolpark

While it has been examined at some length how the divergence between reality and imagination is created by means of language, it is also worthwhile to reflect upon why this duality is present in the play. An interesting idea is put forward by Christopher Innes, who in the discussion of The Playboy of the Western World claimed that Christy's invention of a story of his own greatness in a way "mirrors the creative act of the comic dramatist" (227). Innes claims that "[l]ike the dramatist, Christy is dependent on his audience's willing suspension of disbelief."

The notion of the willing suspension of disbelief can also be applied to The Well of the Saints. The blind couple, just as the audience of a play performed on stage, subject themselves to this mental state, that is they willingly choose to live in a world of imagination and accept illusory things created by words as truth. In the play, Martin and Mary are both the audience and the playwrights of their own imaginary play, although the village people's talk also contributes to the creation of the fantasy. This is a kind of metatheatrical element, which means theatre about the theatre, as the process of dramatic creation itself becomes dramatised in the play.

The willing suspension of disbelief practised by the blind couple can also be interpreted as a way of self-deception. As has already been mentioned, Martin and Mary are first deceived by their fellow villagers, but since what they hear fits their imagination of their desired beauty they accept the lie without making much effort to question it. In Act I Martin expresses his longing for the recovery of his sight in order to make sure that his imaginary picture of themselves is in fact true: "it'd be a grand thing if we could see ourselves for one hour, or a minute itself, the way we'd know surely we were the finest man and the finest woman of the seven counties of the east" (62). These sentences tell about Martin's conviction of the truth of their illusion and also about their hoping for a final certainty of its reality.

When their sight is restored at the end of Act I, Martin and Mary have to face reality as it is. Their recognition of their actual physical appearances and the deceit they were living in results in immediate disappointment and the rejection of each other, which is worsened by the villagers' ridiculing the poor beggars. As Mary C. King noted, the village people are cruelly mocking the seeing Martin as they play the "ritual game of blind man's buff" while he is trying to identify his wife among the people (114): "Try again, Martin, try again, and you'll be finding her yet" (74).

Sample Essay

© Anita Nemes, ELTE BTK: seas3.elte.hu/angolpark

Act II follows the process at the end of which Martin and Mary decide to return to their world of illusion instead of facing the crude realities of life. The action centres mainly on Martin who is seen working at Timmy's forge. His disillusionment with the life of the seeing people is clear from the beginning: "it's more I got a while since, and I sitting blinded in Grianan, than I get in this place, working hard, and destroying myself, the length of the day" (78). Besides the tyranny of his master, Martin also has to face the scornful rejection by his ideal of beauty, Molly Byrne. After the old man had courted her, the girl rejects him with a proud and self-satisfied statement: "you'll learn one day, maybe, the way a man should speak with a well-reared, civil girl the like of me" (89).

Although the Saint's cure gave the blind couple a chance of integrating into the society of the seeing people, they willingly decide in Act III to return to the state of illusion and blindness. In Raymond Williams's interpretation, the illusion of their own beauty gave Martin and Mary joy and self-respect, while the restoration of their sight revealed their ugliness and brought them near to destruction, so when their sight fades again, they achieve a new illusion of their dignity in old age and "fly in terror from a renewed offer to restore their sight of the real world" (144). The source of their disappointment, however, may also be the society around them into which they are not able and not willing to integrate. Mary's scornful remarks on the community of the seeing ("for they're a bad lot those that have their sight" 62) and Martin's bitter experiences in the "real" world point toward their final resolution.

It is worth reflecting on the beggar couple's choice of blindness instead of seeing reality. Raymond Williams claims that The Well of the Saints is related to Ibsen's The Wild Duck and John Gabriel Borkman in what he calls "the choice between happiness in illusion, and courage in truth" (145). Martin and Mary choose the way of self-deception or the willing suspension of disbelief when they reject the holy water at the end. Blindness in this sense is a symbolic means by which the couple can live an illusory life excluding the unpleasant reality from their imaginary world.

Here a parallel can be drawn between the protagonists of the play and the Irish audience which harshly criticised the play at its first performance. Synge once said that "no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life" (qtd. in Innes, 225), and by the depiction of common people's lives he criticised Irish politics (Innes 229). Thus Synge showed the people of Ireland a mirror image of themselves through which they could face

Sample Essay

© Anita Nemes, ELTE BTK: seas3.elte.hu/angolpark

reality just as the blind couple of the play does when their sight is restored. The rioting Irish audience, however, just like Martin and Mary, turned against this vision of reality. The blind beggars' choice can be interpreted in an idealistic way in the sense that they chose their "happiness in illusion" (Williams 145) and returned to their own created imaginary Eden from the harsh realities of life. In a more pessimistic view, Martin and Mary in the play, like the Irish people of Synge's time, are not courageous enough to face life as it is and rather choose to turn their back on reality. As Marriott remarks, the indignant Dublin audience "were offended by a portrayal of real people: they felt that the author was laughing at them" (196).

As has already been mentioned, the source of the couple's disappointment is not only their own ugliness but also the society around them. The play's view on religion also contributes to this sense of despair. As Innes remarks, Synge's satiric view on religion resulted in the criticism of his plays as "immoral and blasphemous caricatures" (225). The holiness of the Saint in the play, however, seems questionable. Though his intentions may be kind, with the restoration of the couple's sight he only brings about bitterness and despair. The curing of the blind evokes the biblical image of Christ, but the play's Saint is not a saviour of the poor beggars and his wonder does not offer redemption.

Mary C. King claims that the visionary power of the Saint is also questionable as he is frightened to carry his things through the steep rocks and he easily parts from the holy water, giving it to the young girls whom he found worthy enough to carry the sacred thing merely upon superficial judgement by appearances (111-112). Like in the rest of the play, Molly's relation is followed by Mary's outspoken remark:

MOLLY BYRNE. . . . so he looked round then, and gave the water, and his big cloak, and his bell to the two of us, for young girls, says he, are the cleanest holy people you'd see walking the world. [*Mary Doul goes near seat.*]
MARY DOUL. [*Sits down, laughing to herself.*] Well, the Saint's a simple fellow, and it's no lie. (68)

Judgement by appearances joins the Saint to the wordly community of the village people, together with the protagonists, Martin and Mary. In Act I the realisation of each other's ugliness causes the couple's separation, thus they also fall victim to superficial judgement. In Act III, however, Martin and Mary choose each other despite their physical ugliness: "if living people is a bad lot, yet Mary Doul, herself, and she a dirty, wrinkled-looking hag, was better maybe to be sitting along with than no one at all," Martin remarks (91). Thus the couple

Sample Essay

© Anita Nemes, ELTE BTK: seas3.elte.hu/angolpark

seem to turn their back on the world of superficial judgements and find reconciliation in the fantasy of their imagined beauty. The symbolic blindness of the Saint and the villagers is further explored in Act III, when they are not willing to accept or understand the blind couple's choice and try to restore their sight by force:

SAINT. [*To the people.*] Is his mind gone that he's no wish to be cured this day, or to be living or working, or looking on the wonders of the world?
(98)

A point not related to the handling of the theme of blindness but worthwhile to note is the question of genre. Kelsall's claim made in connection with The Playboy of the Western World is valid for this play as well. He claims that Synge's text does not give instructions like "play this as farce, this as tragedy" and therefore "the action is open to a variety of interpretations" (9). It is also not easy to determine exactly the genre of The Well of the Saints. The play contains farcical elements, such as the game of blind man's buff or the scene when Molly dresses up Martin into the Saint's cloak in Act I. The whole theme of ridiculing blind, handicapped people together with religious satire relates the play to a low type of comedy or farce. But the estrangement of Mary and Martin, the alienation of the couple from the rest of the community, and the sense of grief, despair and disillusionment present in the play connect it to tragedy, or tragicomedy as well.

By choosing blind people as the protagonists of his play, Synge demonstrated the duality of illusion and reality present in everyday life. The theme of creative imagination and the willing suspension of disbelief is also present in his works and it offers a way of exploring the process of artistic creation as well. The theme of blindness gives us the possibility of observing the use of language in constructing real or imaginary worlds through this process of social interaction. Thus the significance of blindness in the play goes beyond the depiction of a physical defect and its treatment by society into the realm of the philosophical and psychological questions of perception and of being.

Works Cited

- Innes, Christopher. Modern British Drama 1890-1990. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- Kelsall, Malcolm. Studying Drama: An Introduction. London: Edward Arnold, 1985.
- King, Mary C. The Drama of J. M. Synge. London: Fourth Estate, 1985.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. "Modernism" in Modern Drama: A Definition and an Estimate. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1953.
- Marriott, J. W. Modern Drama. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., [no date provided].
- Synge, John Millington. The Well of the Saints. Plays, Poems and Prose. London: Dent, 1958. 59-103.
- Williams, Raymond. "J. M. Synge." Drama from Ibsen to Brecht. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973. 139-152.