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## BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

John Millington Synge and Irish Mythology – *Deirdre of the Sorrows*

John Millington Synge a Írska mytológia – *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

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I declare that have written this thesis myself and that I have acknowledged all my sources.

V Prahe dňa.....

podpis.....

Chcela by som poďakovať docentovi Pilnému za cenné rady, trpezlivosť a pochopenie.  
Thanks also goes to Tommy Arrigan for his immense help.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>pg. 6</b>
<b>2. Versions of the Deirdre story.....</b>	<b>pg. 9</b>
The Book of Leinster.....	pg. 10
The Glenmasan Manuscript.....	pg. 13
MacCuirtin’s version.....	pg. 14
Douglas Hyde’s version.....	pg. 16
Lady Gregory’s text.....	pg. 18
The Dramatic versions by Russell and Yeats.....	pg. 20
<b>3. Role of Fate</b>	
Definition of Tragedy.....	pg. 24
Fate vs. Free Will.....	pg. 25
Themes and Motives.....	pg. 28
<b>4. Deirdre – a Tragic Heroine?</b>	
What Defines a Hero?.....	pg. 34
The Goddess in Irish Mythology.....	pg. 35
The Character of Deirdre.....	pg. 36
<b>5. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>pg. 45</b>
<b>6. Summary .....</b>	<b>pg. 46</b>
<b>7. Bibliography.....</b>	<b>pg. 48</b>

## 1. Introduction

The Irish National Theater Society was formed in Dublin in 1902, but it was not until its reorganization in 1905 that John Millington Synge and Lady Gregory joined Yeats as co-directors, as well as major playwrights. Synge thus was provided with an opportunity to present his newly acquired talent. In fact, Synge owed Yeats for much more than just this opportunity, for if it was not for Yeats' suggestion Synge would probably have never gone to the Aran Islands. His five visits to the islands turned out to have been the most significant turning point in his career. He became an example of how a new environment can convert a man of mediocre talent, or even a complete failure into a writer of a genius,<sup>1</sup> and it is only natural that Yeats was not shy to claim credit for this transformation. It provided the theater with another playwright who, through his plays, was to represent what was unique about Ireland and by that means raise the Irish consciousness.

The reality, however, was not that simple, because opinion varied with regard to what should be dealt with on stage and how it should be represented. The Irish nationalists expected the staged plays to convey a political message and portray the relationship between Britain and Ireland and the unjust treatment on behalf of Irish people. Even though some of Yeats's work does contain some political references his plans for the theater differed from the nationalist agenda. The company was to produce certain Celtic and Irish plays which would appeal to "an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory and would show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of ancient idealism."<sup>2</sup> In order to stir the imagination and present the idealism, Yeats believed that the setting of drama

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<sup>1</sup> David H. Greene & Edward Stephens, *J. M. Synge: 1871-1909* (New York: MacMillan, 1959) 79.

<sup>2</sup> T.R. Henn, "Introduction," *Playboy of the Western World*, by J. M. Synge (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972) 7-8.

should not be realistic, but solely symbolic, and in that respect Irish mythology presented an ideal source. Then, however, Synge came along and his influence, as Greene and Stephens claim, “turned the dramatic movement into precisely the opposite direction, into realism.”<sup>3</sup>

The Irish mythology, however, was still in line with the intentions of the movement, and that despite the fact that it seemingly contradicted the general idea of “reality”. Ireland was a predominantly rural country, and that was Ireland’s reality. Agriculture and fishing were the main sources of livelihood and an everyday reality for all peasants, and oral story telling was a part of entertainment. And so the remote and symbolic world of Irish legends indirectly became the reality of Synge’s life too. He had a keen interest in the legends and as he later wrote to Lady Gregory, “Cuchulain is still a part of my daily breed.”<sup>4</sup> Maybe that is why critics have tried to detect in his plays some reference to the world of Irish sagas, and as a result mistakenly compared Cuchulain with the main male character from his best known play, *The Playboy of the Western World*. When it came to source of his portrayal of reality, Synge remained faithful to the setting and characters of the peasant world.

The only exception is his final play *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. It was towards the end of his life that he decided to experiment with the by that time notorious legend of Deirdre and the sons of Usnach. At the time, he was still working on *Playboy*, and *Deirdre* thus represented a significant change from the peasant comedy. Nonetheless, his interest in this particular myth had more than just a professional reason. As he wrote to Molly Algood, “My next

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<sup>3</sup> Greene & Stephens, 134.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel Murphy, “Forward,” *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, by Lady Gregory ((Guernsey: Guernsey Press, 1970) 10.

play must be quite different from the *Playboy*. I want to do something quiet and stately and restrained and I want you to act in it.” The fact that his Deirdre would provide a role for Molly simultaneously increased his interest in the female character and indicated his intentions for the protagonist; she would be strong and central. The play consequently turned out to be more than just an experiment and more than just “another Deirdre play.” He eventually spent years re-writing some of the passages but he was never quite able to depart from his acquired technique. The greatest part of his struggle with the play was caused by his attempt to connect two contrasting worlds – the peasant and the heroic. While working on this play, however, disease started to get better of him and he died before he was able to finish. That could be the reason why the result of his effort is not always consistent with the subject matter, and why the play did not meet with any significant success. Nonetheless, what we see in his play is a definite effort to introduce to people a more realistic concept of the tale of Deirdre. Aspects in which this ‘realism’ transformed into his play will be discussed in this thesis.

## 2. Versions of the story of Deirdre

When Synge turned his attention to the saga about Deirdre, the audience was already well acquainted with its older varieties, as well as the modern versions of his fellow writers and dramatists from the “Irish literary revival” movement. All of these present a different focus of the authors on the aspects and motifs depicted in the old legend. It is difficult to determine, which of the versions served as a basis for Synge’s play. Furthermore, many of the versions relied on translations done by others. While in Paris, Synge attended lectures of a well-regarded professional Celticist – Jubainville, who, by rejecting Lady Gregory’s version, pointed out to him the importance of understanding the source in its original language, which in the case of this legend was Irish. Consequently, as Nicholas Grene suggests, during his third visit to the Aran Islands Synge made a literal translation of Andrew MacCuirtin’s eighteenth century version of the story entitled *The Fate of the Children of Usnach*.<sup>5</sup> One would expect that it was therefore this version that Synge relied on most, if it wasn’t for the fact that it was, despite Jubainville’s disapproval, quite ironically Lady Gregory’s “The Sons of Usnach” that he recommended to Molly Algood to read. Furthermore, Daniel Corkery suggests that because of their similar approach to local colour, it could have been Douglas Hyde’s version that Synge mostly used<sup>6</sup>. That, however, does not bring us any closer to establishing which of the basic sources was the one that inspired Synge most. Neither presence nor absence of symbols, technique and characters or similarities and contradictions in the various versions can be considered conclusive enough. It can only be assumed that Synge was familiar not only with the versions by Lady Gregory, Yeats, George Russell and Andrew MacCuirtin, but also the oldest version from *The Book of Leinster* as well as the medieval ones represented by *the*

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Grene, “Deirdre: Unfinished or Unsuccessful?,” *Critical Study of the Plays* (London: MacMillan Press, 1975) 162.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1966) 206.

*Glenmasan Manuscript*. Since critics over the past century have failed to agree on which of these versions was the most likely to have influenced Synge's approach to his play, we are left with nothing but to examine those versions that find an echo in Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

### 2.1. The Book of Leinster

This twelfth-century manuscript contains one of the oldest versions of the story of Deirdre and Naisi. The tales of Ireland are classified into types and the Deirdre story is included among thirteen elopements.<sup>7</sup> The narrative tone is simple and some would even say that it is harsh in tone. The beginning of this legend portrays the straightforward approach to the story-telling tradition:

'Let the girl be slain,' cried the warriors. 'Not so,' said King Conor, 'but bring her to me to-morrow; she shall be brought up as I shall order, and she shall be the woman whom I shall marry.' [...]

"Deirdre was brought up in Conor's house. [...] No one was permitted to enter the house except her tutor, her nurse, Lavarcham, whom they ventured not to keep out, for she was a druidess magician whose incantations they feared."<sup>8</sup>

This lack of emotion and above all the simplicity radiating from the story is equally caused by the simple and typified main characters. Conchobar, referred to as Conor in many English translations of the saga, is reduced to a pathetic stock villain obstructing the love of Deirdre and Naisi by claiming he has right over her. Naisi, on the other hand, is an embodiment of beauty, strength, loyalty and courage – virtues of a prototypical hero from fairy tales and legends. Regarding this scheme of traditional and stereotypical assumption of roles, it is only the character of Deirdre that can attract the attention of a modern reader

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<sup>7</sup> *The Book of Leinster*, vol. 4 (Dublin: 1965) 836.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland* (London: Ernest Renn Ltd, 1907) 303.

for she seemingly contradicts the stereotype ascribed to female characters from legends and tales. She is not the delicate, tender girl who is waiting for a prince to save her from the hands of an evil king. On the contrary, as Declan Kiberd points out, “she is briefly described and emerges as a barbarian woman, rude and passionate in her speech and savage in action.”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, while this characteristic would be uncommon in more recent and international tales, in Irish mythology women often had a significant position within the society and quite commonly possessed features which would usually be attributed to men.

This is the aspect that Synge picked up and focused on. Since his play was initially intended to provide a role for Molly, we can see how he would be interested in this particular portrayal of Deirdre. That is not to say that his Deirdre is an identical copy of the one appearing in *The Book of Leinster*. On the contrary, “the tone of this version is ominous, with repeated insistence on the inevitability of fate and constant prophecies of the tragedy to come,”<sup>10</sup> as Kiberd observes. The dominant position of fate therefore does not leave much space for any analysis of the characters, including Deirdre, and therefore none of the characters could have any dominant position within the tale. They are tools of higher supernatural power. All the important actions happen under ‘geis’ and for that reason there was no need to provide the characters with motives. They all just follow the predetermined course of events. Synge wanted to strengthen the motives and turn the characters into active contributors to their fate. The emphasis of his play was to be on Deirdre, as his title suggests, and his female protagonist was to retain the role of a woman from elopements, who not only initiates the action but compels men to submit to her will. Nevertheless, as

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Declan Kiberd, “Deirdre of the Sorrows,” *Synge and the Irish language* (London: MacMillan Press, 1993) 179.

<sup>10</sup> Kiberd, 179.

portrayal of reality was an essential concept of Synge's works, his female characters do not possess any magical powers, because that way they would seem too remote to the audience who thus would not be able to associate with their struggle. In the Book of Leinster, when Deirdre asks Naisi to escape with her, he is reluctant to go against the king and she is consequently forced to put him under 'geis'. The passage goes:

'You have the bull of the whole province, the king of Ulsterman', said he.  
She replied that she preferred a young bull like him, and when he demurred, she sprang upon him and seizing his two ears, cried: 'These will be two ears of shame and mockery unless you take me away with you'.<sup>11</sup>

In Synge, the situation is more realistic. The lovers similarly do not fall in love immediately. Naisi's approach is pragmatic; he asks: "Wouldn't we do well to wait, Deirdre, and I each twilight meeting you on the sides of the hills?"<sup>12</sup> The only reason why they leave is because they do not have the time Naisi is asking for and Deirdre gets her way by using her charms as her "supernatural power". Even though this situation is realized differently in these two versions, the core remains the same and is well expressed by Corkery's observation that "as in the old saga, she is the huntress; it is she who entices Naisi to her, whatever his own thought may be,"<sup>13</sup> and that stands regardless of the modifications Synge made to the female heroine in his play.

Since the title of the old legend is *The Exile of the Sons of Usnach*, the tale practically ends with the death of the three brothers. After years spent in exile in Alban, due to both treachery and homesickness they return to Emain, where their tragic fate is fulfilled. Deirdre is afterwards forced to live with an enemy for a year. She ends the tragedy by

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Kiberd, 181.

<sup>12</sup> Synge, 230.

<sup>13</sup> Corkery, 223.

ferociously dashing her brains against a rock. Kiberd claims that it was this bleak honesty of this version that struck Synge,<sup>14</sup> but apart from that, Synge did not find this ending fitting with his intentions.

## 2.2. The Glenmasan manuscript

This version from the thirteenth century is considered to be a representative text of the development of the story throughout middle ages. The narrative technique, while maintaining the style of oral storytelling, became richer and more elaborate and symbolism of events and dreams more prominent. The version in this manuscript does not contain the chapters on Deirdre's birth, elopement and the life in exile. It opens up with a description of a feast at Conchobar's household. The scene goes:

The number of Conchobar's household was three hundred three score and five. And they enjoyed themselves there that night until Conchobar raised his loud king's voice on high, and spoke like this: 'I desire to ask of you, warriors,' said Conchobar, 'whether you have ever seen a braver household than yourselves in Ireland or in Scotland or in the great world in any place you have ever know?' [...] 'Do you know anything in the world that you lack?' [and he gives himself an answer] 'One thing you lack, namely, that the three Torches of Valour of the Gael are not with us, to wit, the three sons of Uisnech, Naisi and Ainle and Ardan.'<sup>15</sup>

This passage continues with the King proposing in succession to Conall and Cuchulain that they undertake the task of persuading the exiles to return. They, however, reject the offer and it is Fergus who is not able to read Conchobar's true intentions and falls for the treachery.

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<sup>14</sup> Kiberd, 179.

<sup>15</sup> Glenmasan Manuscript, *The Celtic Review 1* (Edinburgh, 1905) 15.

There are two reasons why this passage of this version is relevant for our understanding of Synge's play. The magnificence of the feast together with constant references to Irish heroes and the colossal size of the kingdom of Ulster create the atmosphere of heroic Ireland. Synge would have none of that, for everything that was distant and incomprehensible to him would have the same effect on the audience. Corkery confirms this by saying that "Synge never aims at local colour or historical colour, which in his case could not be anything except half-digested fragments of archeological lore."<sup>16</sup> Instead, the peasant life on the Aran Islands was the only reality that Synge was successfully able to portray in his works. Consequently *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, except for rather occasional references to kings and queens, emerges as a piece of peasant drama.

Synge's plays about peasants are typical of a small number of characters, which brings us to the second point. In his *Deirdre*, Conchobar is never accompanied by more than a couple of his warriors or servants. The acts originally performed by a number of warriors, are all ascribed to a single character to execute. In both versions it is Fergus who brings the lovers back to Emain, but only in Synge is he the only one who also tries to protect the lovers, and it is he alone who burns down Emain and that way completes the prophecy. This reduction in the number of characters allowed him to keep the focus on the main protagonists and their motives.

### 2.3. MacCuirtin's version

Andrew MacCuirtin's *Oidhe Chloinne Uisnigh*, written in 1740s, is very reflective of the *Glenmasain manuscript*. Even though this was the text that Synge worked with and

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<sup>16</sup> Corkery, 208.

translated into English while on Aran, just as with the version from middle ages we can find hardly any similarities that would connect these two.

Once again, it is full of folklore colour of a heroic tale. The heroes, including Naisi, go out and fight and they have the power to slay hundreds of the enemy. As Corkery points out, “Synge himself was set against sophisticated literature, but for the superhuman, as for the inhuman, he had no feeling.”<sup>17</sup> As the story was developing and modifying in the course of the centuries, we can perceive a certain retreat of the supernatural as well as the superhuman. In MacCuirtin, the heroes still maintain their supernatural abilities, which are reflected in their physical abilities. Women, on the other hand, no longer possess any magical powers. Deirdre moves from savage and wild to a more feminine and sensitive woman, who only uses her charm to win Naisi over. In *the Glenmasan Manuscript*, fate – as supernatural power, reappears in the form of dreams or premonitions. Deirdre tries to stop Naisi from returning to Ireland because of a vision she had at night, “namely, three birds to have come to us from Emain Macha with three sips of honey in their bills; and those three sips they left with us, and they took three sips of our blood away with them,”<sup>18</sup> but Naisi’s homesickness determines their final choice and they return. In MacCuirtin, only Deirdre suspects the treachery, but her warnings to Naisi are futile and he insists on returning. Both these interpretations allow Naisi and Deirdre only passive roles, for while Naisi becomes the object of a treachery, Deirdre is just the secondary victim of this confidence deceit. For Synge, however, treachery was not a sufficient motive. He gave Deirdre the central position in his play, and therefore she was the one to make a decision; a decision based on her free will and personal reason. She says to Naisi:

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<sup>17</sup> Corkery, 206.

<sup>18</sup> Glenmasan, 107.

There are so many ways to wither love as there are stars in a night of Samhain; but there is no way to keep life, or love with it, a short space only...It's for that there's nothing lonesome like a love is watching out the time most lovers do be sleeping...It's for that we're setting out for Emain Macha when the tide turns on the sand.<sup>19</sup>

Instead of fearing death that is prepared for them in Emain, they face it, rather than witnessing the decay of their love brought by age.

In general, apart from the fact that it depicts the changes in the portrayal of the female protagonist, there are not many things that would support any claim that it was this particular text that served as a primary source of Synge's play.

#### 2.4. Douglas Hyde's version

This is a version that Douglas Hyde discovered in the museum of Belfast. His full translation and analysis was subsequently published in *A Literary History of Ireland*. It comprises all the chapters – birth of Deirdre, falling in love and exile – that were mostly left out in the older versions from the middle ages onwards.

Critics have ascribed the greatest significance of this version to the portrayal of Deirdre. Kiberd focuses on how the dominance by Deirdre of the later versions [meaning Hyde's as well] reflects the growing importance of women in post-medieval Irish society, and he goes on to explain that where once the sons of Usnach dominated the tale, it is now the lady that is the focus of attention.<sup>20</sup> This is true for one particular reason; this version no longer contains any incidents of bravery or heroic deeds that would divert the focus from

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<sup>19</sup> Synge, 243.

<sup>20</sup> Kiberd, 192.

Deirdre to Naisi and his brothers. Instead, Deirdre is central throughout the tale, for all the incidents that are not directly related to her are left out. In this version, she is a true princess, a daughter of a high prince, and as such she is perfected and nurtured in every way to soon become fitting for the King. This way, she is still a reflection of the gradual transition of her character from wild and savage to gentle. Synge recognizes this tendency and extends her significance and power in his play. It was not enough for him that she should be the central character, so he also made her the motive force of the play.

While the critics have focused on the female character in this version, the character of Conchobar equally deserves some attention. In all the previous versions, his character was nothing but a stereotypical villain, who would get blamed for the tragic ending. In *Hyde*, we are partially provided with a tender aspect of his figure, which the audience was not familiar with from before. He repudiates the idea of slaying innocent child and explains:

I still submit to the omen of the prophecies and foretelling of the seers, but yet I do not submit to, nor praise, the committing of a base deed, or a deed of treachery, in the hope of quenching the anger of the power of the elements. If it be a fate which it is not possible to avoid, give ye, each of you, death to himself, but do not shed the blood of the innocent infant, for it were not (our) due (to have) prosperity thereafter.<sup>21</sup>

He believes that treachery and murder are not acceptable ways to alter predetermined destiny. One could argue that despite these initial moral claims, he consequently assumes the role of the villain and submits to treachery and deception as a means of achieving his vengeance. While this is true, it has to be pointed out that it was Naisi and Deirdre who betrayed him for their personal benefit prior to his moral failure when they decided to leave for Alban. In this context, the difference between good and evil is no longer as

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<sup>21</sup> Hyde, 305.

apparent as in previous versions and Synge used this fusion of bipolar features to refer to the imperfection of human nature.

### 2.5. Lady Gregory's text

Lady Gregory was the first person from the Abbey theater company to express an interest in the principal Irish stories. As mentioned above, Jubainville disclaimed her book *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, which got published in 1902. Nicholas Grene states that “[Jubainville] was not impressed by the work of a popularizer who had no knowledge of Old Irish and based her retelling of the stories from the Ulster Cycle upon translations done by others.”<sup>22</sup> His opinion however contradicts the fact that after Yeats rejected the offer from Alfred Nutt to retell the stories<sup>23</sup>, it was Lady Gregory who, in fact, undertook the translation of the sagas. Either way, as MacCuirtin's text has shown, Synge himself did not rely on a version written in the original language as much as Jubainville would have wished, and therefore the question of whether it was an original or a translation that Lady Gregory used is irrelevant to us.

In her dedication, she says, “ I left out a good deal I thought you would not care about for one reason or another, but I put nothing of my own that could be helped, only a sentence or so now and again to link the different parts together.”<sup>24</sup> It is therefore hard to establish which of the versions she used. Nonetheless, her version of the Deirdre story, listed under the name “The Fate of the Sons of Usnach,” closely resembles the version from the Glenmasain manuscript; except that it does not begin *in medias res* with the King's claim

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<sup>22</sup> David H. Greene & Edward Stephens, *J. M. Synge: 1871-1909* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1959) 134.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Murphy, “Foreword,” *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, by Lady Gregory (Guernsey: Guernsey Press, 1970) 7.

<sup>24</sup> Lady Gregory, “Dedication,” *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, 1.

that the sons of Usnach are to be brought back to Ireland, but it also includes all the major events which anticipate the climax.

Despite the claimed omissions made by Lady Gregory, the storyline shows that none of them had any impact that would significantly distinguish her text from other medieval ones. The title suggests that she did not follow Hyde's approach. The attention is not primarily centered to Deirdre, as she mentions incidents that Synge, and everyone whose focus was solely on Deirdre, would perceive as marginal. Once again, we encounter heroes like Conall and Cucholain, and witness situations whose part in the story has practically no effect on the outcome of events.

The only aspect present here which critics have recognized to be notably characteristic of the modern versions is Deirdre's lengthy lamentations over her lover's grave:

"[...]That I would live after Naisi let no one think on the earth; I will not go on living after Ainnle and after Ardan.[...]“O young man, digging the new grave, do not make the grave narrow; I will be along with them in the grave, making lamentations and ochones! [...] I am Deirdre without gladness, and I at the end of my life; since it is grief to be without them, I myself will not be long after them.”<sup>25</sup>

These lamentations indicate the following scene, in which Deirdre kills herself because she is not able to live a life without Naisi and death presents the only solution. There was nothing they could have done because they were just pawns in a game of fate. In Synge, however, the characters have to carry a degree of responsibility, and Deirdre arguably

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<sup>25</sup> Lady Gregory, "Fate of the Sons of Usnach," *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, 113-114.

commits suicide because she is not able to live with the consequences of her own decisions.

Lady Gregory's version, in many ways, provides a summary of the older versions. The symbolism of objects, premonitions in the form of dreams, treachery, and not to mention fate; none of those aspects are missing, and Yeats appreciated Lady Gregory's work by saying, "Lady Gregory has done her work of compression and selection at once so firmly and so reverently that I cannot believe that anybody, except now and then for a scientific purpose, will need another text than this."<sup>26</sup>

#### 2.6. The Dramatic versions by Russell and Yeats

Just like Yeats, George Russell ('AE') had a high regard for Lady Gregory's collection of stories. He wrote to her: "I never expect to read a more beautiful book... Your story of Deirdre is extraordinarily lovely, indeed the whole book... made my heart beat with a half painful pleasure. The prose seems wonderfully fitted for the purpose. I feel sure it will be a success."<sup>27</sup> It may therefore seem ironic that he decided to take the risk and make it into a play. His dramatic version, however, did not enjoy success and it haunted Synge that "the saga people might loosen [his] grip on reality,"<sup>28</sup> as they had done in the case of Russell.

That is not to say that Synge's intention was in any way similar to Russell's approach and his portrayal. His treatment of Deirdre was to be unique; and above all realistic. The greatest dissatisfaction with Russell's play was caused by his unrealistic characters. It is the only version in which Deirdre is directly referred to as "goddess." Naisi calls her

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<sup>26</sup> W. B. Yeats, "Preface," *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Murphy, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Grene, 170.

“goddess and enchantress” and Lavarcham describes her as “one of the immortals,” and emphasizes that the prophetic character of Deirdre’s dreams is “the gods desire that utters itself through her heart.”<sup>29</sup> For Synge, she was a goddess only in terms of virtue and incomparable beauty but in his play, the divine and human are strictly divided.

It may be that both Synge and Russell retain the emphasis on fate, but for Synge it is not the only force that determines the ending. Russell compares the characters and their story to a game of chess:

NAISI.

See, here is the chessboard of Conchubar, with which he is wont to divine, playing a lonely game with fate. The pieces are set. We will finish the game, and so pass the time until the feast is ready. The golden pieces are yours and the silver mine.

AINLE (*looking at the board*)

You have given Deirdre the weaker side.

NAISI

Deirdre always plays with more cunning skill.

DEIRDRE.

O fearless one, if he who set the game played with fate, the victory is already fixed, and no skill may avail.<sup>30</sup>

The symbolism of the chessboard indicates the dominant position of fate in his play. It is fixed and therefore the characters have no power to change it. Similar approach is depicted in Yeats’s “Deirdre.” Naisi and Deirdre are similarly playing a game of chess while awaiting the final blow. Neither of the two characters stands out or dominates and the attention is equally divided between the lovers. Like with so many versions before, the

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<sup>29</sup> George Russell, “Deirdre,” *Imaginations and Reveries* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1916) 207.

<sup>30</sup> Russell, 244-245.

story begins *in medias res*. Yeats's innovation was that instead of relying on the audience to be familiar with the full version of the story he used musicians who commence the play by a retrospective summary of the incidents that had been left out. They conclude their lyrical narration by saying:

And Deirdre's tale began. The king was old.  
A month or so before the marriage-day,  
A young man, in the laughing scorn of his youth,  
Naisi, the son of Usna, climbed up there,  
And having wooed, or, as some say, been wooed,  
Carried her off.<sup>31</sup>

The main focus of the play is on the theme of love. The story of the musicians indicates that the relationship of Deirdre and Naisi was equal and their love was mutual and therefore the question about who wooed whom is irrelevant. The death of love symbolizes their physical death, for their love dies with Naisi and Deirdre is unable to live alone after Naisi's gone, and so kills herself. Their love is harmonious all throughout the story. The quarrel caused by two men desiring the same woman is the one that "knows no mending". That is why fate could not be altered, and that is what the chessboard represents.

Synge chose not to include this symbol for not only does it give fate a much too dominant position, but it also points out the harmony between the lovers in the scene where Synge created their much-discussed quarrel, and therefore it simply did not fit in with the themes he tried to convey.

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<sup>31</sup> William Butler Yeats, "Deirdre," *Selected Plays* (London: pan Books, 1979) 88.

This is a brief summary of the texts that for one reason or another are related to Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. We have, however, also established that Synge, despite his keen interest in old Irish myths and sagas, had no intention to provide the audience with the atmosphere of the heroic world. For one, it would divert attention from the reality he strove for, and more importantly, he was not familiar with the historical nexus or the language from the period. The only reality for Synge was the peasant life in Ireland, which he had successfully depicted in his plays. Respectively, it has to be mentioned that there are many aspects present in his previous play *Riders to the Sea* that seemed to have influenced the general outcome of Synge's dramatic version of the Deirdre story. As such, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* "is an uneasy compromise between strikingly different levels, the heroic world of the saga, and the contemporary peasant life,"<sup>32</sup> as Grene puts it.

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<sup>32</sup> Grene, 170.

### 3. Role of Fate

#### 3.1. Definition of Tragedy

As demonstrated in the number of versions in the previous chapter, fate had a prominent position in the story of Deirdre. In order to understand the importance and transformation of the role of fate in the tale, it is necessary to define what the term “tragedy” really stands for first, and consequently when and how it applies to our versions and Synge’s play.

Many people would tend to distinguish tragedy from comedy purely on the basis of the emotions they evoke. Comedy creates laughter and tragedy makes one sad. While true to some extent, this is only one of the aspects that can help determine the genre of a work of art, and as such it is in no way conclusive. Especially in the case of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* in which, as Oscar Mandel points out, “the protagonist sets a theme that is neither joyous nor despairing”<sup>33</sup> when she says, “I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies.”<sup>34</sup> So what characterizes *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and the previous versions as a tragedy? Philosophers in the past century devoted numerous essays to the study of the notion of tragedy. Not all of them agree in their definitions which could be ascribed to both the different approaches of philosophers and the different tendencies in tragedy in particular periods. Tragedy found its origin in Greece. Aristotle’s definition has had a significant influence on the concept of what it represents. His notion of what a tragedy portrays has been summarized as “a reversal of fortune (always from “good” to “bad”) caused by the tragic hero’s ‘hamartia’, which is interpreted by many as a moral error or flaw in character or a mistake of some kind and it is *because of* this flaw that the hero falls.”<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, this definition does not seem to accept the possibility that an external cause (meaning gods, fate

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<sup>33</sup> Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (Washington: University Press of America, 1961) 59.

<sup>34</sup> Synge, 264.

<sup>35</sup> Mandel, 108.

or even society) could partake in this change in fortune. Latter definitions, which have been more widely used by modern critics, therefore serve our purpose better. After all, James Joyce referred to Synge's approach as "un-Aristotelian."<sup>36</sup> It is the more modern definitions that apply to the character of the story of Deirdre. They tell us:

tragedy is always a clash of two powers – necessity without, freedom within; outside, a great rigid, arbitrary law of fate; inside, the undefeated individual will, which can win its spiritual triumph even when all its material surroundings and environment have crumbled into hopeless ruin."<sup>37</sup>

In other words, it is the conflict between the desires of one or more individuals and an external force and it is this conflict that results in the ruin of the protagonists.

### 3.2. Fate vs. Free Will

All of the versions of Deirdre which Synge read focus on the inevitability of the doomed fate. *The Book of Leinster* serves as the best example because, except for Lady Gregory's text, it is the only version that includes the episode in which we directly hear the Druid's prophecy after Deirdre is born. He names her Deirdre (meaning "alarm") because she will bring evil and he gives a lengthy prophecy on the damage her beauty will cause. This initial scene therefore draws all our attention to fate, and the constant prophecies in the following scenes repeatedly remind us of the tragedy to come. Synge retains the emphasis on the inevitability of fate. His play begins *in medias res* and in order to indicate the importance of fate in his play, just like Yeats he uses his characters to retrospectively remind the audience of the predetermined course the events would take. Lavarcham says, "I am in dread so they were right saying she'd bring destruction on the world,"<sup>38</sup> and

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<sup>36</sup> Greene & Stephens, 144.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Mandel, 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> Synge, 216.

Conchubor asks her, “Does she know the great troubles are foretold?”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the knowledge of what is to come pervades the whole story, and is mentioned in every major action. Deirdre wonders, “Do many know what is foretold, that Deirdre will be the ruin of the Sons of Usna, and have a little grave by herself, and a story will be told forever?”<sup>40</sup> This statement appears in Act I, but despite the prophecy Deirdre and Naisi conclude the elopement part by escaping to Alban. Similarly, prior to their return to Ireland, Deirdre tells Lavarcham, “There’s little power in oaths to stop what’s coming, and little power in what I’d do, Levarcham, to change the story of Cochubor and Naisi and the things old men foretold.”<sup>41</sup> This shows how central and important the role of fate is, not only in the play but in all the versions mentioned, and in this respect all the versions, be it plays or stories, correspond.

Nevertheless, we can see a different treatment of fate when we look at the relationship, or else the conflict between fate and the individual’s will and freedom and how it is represented in the different versions. Despite the fact that “Greek tragedy often disowns free will in its practice, and that it trusts to the tragic power of necessity,”<sup>42</sup> Oscar Mandel goes on to distinguish between four different types of necessity. In the first type, a character is manipulated with or against their will by an immediate external force, which would seem to reduce them to just a puppet in the hands of gods. The second kind of necessity only concerns the ending, in which a character will perform an action that would turn out to be fatal for him. Even though the tragic end is predetermined it leaves at least some degree of freedom, because it allows the characters to make their own free decisions that, one way or another, lead to the tragic conclusion. The third necessity is complete

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<sup>39</sup> Synge, 217.

<sup>40</sup> Synge, 228.

<sup>41</sup> Synge, 234.

<sup>42</sup> Mandel, 118.

fatalism when every single step the character makes is prescribed and events, even if they appear to happen naturally, take the prescribed order. The fourth kind is interesting because it is practically the opposite of the first one. While in the first type the power was fully in the hands of gods, the fourth type solely refers to internal necessity, such as motivation, passion or simply character, which bring about the downfall.<sup>43</sup> This is the distinction in theory. Nevertheless, analysis of how the “necessity” is represented in the versions of the Deirdre story shows that the lines between the types are not that clear and that there are aspects in which they often blend together.

All the important actions in *The Book of Leinster* are performed under ‘geis’ and therefore, as Kiberd observes, “there was no need to supply any psychological motivation.”<sup>44</sup> The straightforward narrative does not even attempt to analyse characters. The impact of fate allows them only passive roles and consequently, the story only tells us “how” and the reason “why” seems to be reduced to “because it was meant to be so.” This indicates that the external force of fate is absolute and as such determines not only the ending, but also the course of events. The fact, however, remains that the prophecy was only concerned with the conclusion of the tale, and the characters, even though only one at a time, could be considered to have been provided with some kind of free will. That would theoretically direct us to the second mentioned type, if it was not for the fact that what appears to be free will and freedom of choice could be regarded as a manipulation that comes in the form of dreams, symbols and premonitions. It is true that Deirdre follows her free will when she chooses Naisi over Conchubar, but it is also true that she picks him because Lavarcham draws her attention to him. Similarly, when Naisi makes a decision to return to Ireland, we are made to believe that it was because he was homesick, but his will is once again

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<sup>43</sup> Mandel, 118-119.

<sup>44</sup> Kiberd, 179.

manipulated through Conchubor's promise. We could therefore question whether we can talk about free will at all. The presence of free will is gradually more perceptible in the later versions. Even though fate still reoccurs in the form of dreams and Naisi is still an object of treachery the characters, nonetheless, no longer act under 'geis' which, generally speaking, gives them more psychological freedom.

Synge wanted to develop this aspect in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. In 1909 he wrote to Lady Gregory, "I have done a great deal to Deirdre since I last saw you – chiefly in the way of strengthening motives and recasting general scenario."<sup>45</sup> What he meant by the 'strengthening of motive' was that not only did he give his characters free will, but above all a reason, on the basis of which they make their decision. He introduced the "internal necessity" to the story, but the emphasis on the external power of fate still remains.

### 3.3. Themes and Motives

Synge wanted his characters to be active contributors to their fate and not just the passive pawns from *The Book of Leinster*. The lack of analysis of the characters together with the straightforward narrative mean that this old version "is often clear and simple, but it is a clarity and simplicity which seems very alien, very remote from the way we normally apprehend reality,"<sup>46</sup> as Grene observes. The audience could therefore feel pity for the tragic fate of the lovers, but due to the simple answers which real life does not offer they could not associate with the struggle of the characters. Synge attempted to "breathe life into [the heroic world ] by visualizing figures from the heroic literature of the distant past as the simple and passionate people he had known in the west of Ireland and in the

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted by Kiberd, 186.

<sup>46</sup> Grene, 173.

Wicklow,”<sup>47</sup> Greene and Stephens tell us. The psychological motivation he gave to his characters is not simple, but instead reflects all the complexities, concerns and intentions of an individual that lead to a certain decision or action.

As mentioned before, Deirdre and Naisi do not swoon into love immediately, as it was in the medieval texts. Despite the fact that Naisi is at first reluctant to take such a sudden action, Deirdre eventually persuades him, but mostly for a practical reason. Not only does this young, handsome warrior stand in opposition to the old King, but more importantly, his arrival presents Deirdre with a choice she did not have before. Until then she was shut in a hut, kept out of anyone’s sight and educated to become a queen. Her freedom was limited and her life directed by the King’s orders. When we first encounter the King, Deirdre tells him, “I will not be your mate in Emain when it’s my pleasure to be having freedom on the edges of the hills.”<sup>48</sup> This freedom is, however, only temporary and to be taken away from her despite her objections. Deirdre first asks Lavarcham, “Will you take me from this place, Lavarcham, and keep me safe in the hills?.”<sup>49</sup> But her pleas are futile and Lavarcham refuses to assist. Naisi, therefore, represents as much choice and romance, as the only possible liberation from the gnawing frustration of her constrained life.

Freedom is more important to Deirdre than fear of the prophecy and death. She tells Naisi,

You must not go, Naisi, and leave me to the High King, a man is ageing in his dun, with his crowds around him, and his silver and gold. I will not live to be shut up in Emain, and wouldn’t we do well paying, Naisi, with silence and near death. I’m a long while in the woods with my own self, and I’m little dread of death, and it earned with riches would make the sun red with

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<sup>47</sup> Greene & Stephens, 236.

<sup>48</sup> Synge, 220.

<sup>49</sup> Synge, 222.

envy, and he going up the heavens; and the moon pale and lonesome, and she wasting away. Isn't it a small thing foretold about the ruin of ourselves, Naisi, when all men have age coming and great ruin in the end?<sup>50</sup>

At this point, Deirdre chooses freedom not only because death is an inevitable conclusion to one's life, but if the tragic ending is prescribed, she can at least choose the more enjoyable road, and thus go "with Naisi to Alban and the north to face the troubles are foretold."<sup>51</sup>

When Conchubor sends Fergus to bring the lovers back to Ireland, it was not a sufficient reason for Synge that "Naisi should be tricked and Deirdre should be a secondary victim of this deceit,"<sup>52</sup> as Kiberd suggests. Instead, he has the lovers decide of their own free will to return and face the prophecy in order to avoid a decaying of their love, which they fear would come with an old age. Naisi articulates the fear first when he confides in Fergus:

I'll not tell you a lie. There have been days a while past when I've been throwing a line for salmon or watching for the run of hares, that I've a dread upon me a day's come I'd weary of her voice, and Deirdre's see I'd wearied.<sup>53</sup>

Deirdre overhears their conversation and it is she who makes the decision to return because fear of losing love is greater than the fear of death to come. For her, old age not only implies death itself but also decay of love and she wonders if that is "a game worth playing." Their choice is very constricted and in the end she submits Naisi and his brothers to her reasoning by saying:

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<sup>50</sup> Synge, 230.

<sup>51</sup> Synge, 231.

<sup>52</sup> Kiberd, 187

<sup>53</sup> Synge, 240.

It is my wish....It may be I will not have Naisi growing an old man in Alban with an old woman at his side, and young girls pointing out and saying, 'That is Deirdre and Naisi had great beauty in their youth.' It may be we do well putting a sharp end to the day is brave and glorious, as our fathers put a sharp end to the days of the kings of Ireland.<sup>54</sup>

Just as with freedom before, she now chooses love over death and that is why she decides they are to return to Ireland to face their tragic end.

It is therefore ironic that just before the sons of Usnach are to be killed a quarrel which erupts between the lovers creates the very disharmony that their return was supposed to avoid. Kiberd suggests that "those critics who pronounce this quarrel to be too bitter and harsh have failed to appreciate fully the most tragic moment in the play. The clash had to be violent, if Naisi were to tear himself away from Deirdre."<sup>55</sup> While that might be true to some extent, it is not the main reason why Synge created the quarrel. Naisi may be torn between loyalty to his brothers and his love for Deirde, but Deirdre offers a better explanation when she tells Naisi, "Go to your brothers. For seven years you have been kindly, but the hardness of death has come between us."<sup>56</sup> Synge suggests that nothing, not even the intense love of Deirdre and Naisi, can stand against the reality of death. While they were in Alban thought of death seemed remote, but the moment they encounter it they have to accept that the price for their youth is its passing and that the "external necessity" is stronger than any psychological motivation.

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<sup>54</sup> Synge, 246.

<sup>55</sup> Kiberd, 188.

<sup>56</sup> Synge, 257.

The horror of impending death was always present with Synge, as was his admiration of beauty. It was through his characters, namely Conchubar, that he expressed his own anxieties about death and about his marriage with the twenty-year old Molly. Deirdre and Naisi with their youth and beauty stand in an opposition to the old and lonesome king. Only when the lovers face their death do we get a clear idea of the fears that were Conchubar's everyday reality. The final scene uncovers the real meaning of Conchubar's words from the Act I, when he tells Deirdre, "The like of me has a store of knowledge that's a weight and terror. It's for that we do choose out the like of yourself that are young and glad only."<sup>57</sup> He is not the villain from the medieval texts. Just like Deirdre and Naisi, he is also driven by his free will and personal motivation. The only difference is that he feels the pressure of the impending death all throughout the play. In the end, all of the characters just tried to do their best within an impossible situation. The sorrows are foretold and they do come true as a result of conflicting personal desires and motivations as well as because of the power of fate.

Nicholas Grene summarizes the contrast between the internal and external necessity as following:

In a way, the earlier drafts of the act in which Deirdre was given a quite simple *volte-face* without any explanation, are more convincing than this contrived 'motivation'. The essence of the situation is that Deirdre and Naisi leave Alban because their heroic destiny demands it, not primarily for any internal emotional reasons.<sup>58</sup>

Synge may have managed to portray the complexities of a human struggle and vexation, and touch upon such themes as love and death, and psychological motives. Nevertheless,

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<sup>57</sup> Synge, 219.

<sup>58</sup> Grene, 181.

despite the numerous reason provided in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, what we are left with in the end is still an uncertain answer to the question “why?”. Was it because Deirdre and Naisi had such and such motivation or was it simply because it was destined to happen? The “reason” and “fate” do not collide as they should by the definition of tragedy, but rather coincide. The only clash we see is between the Deirdre and Naisi’s desires and those of Conchobor, and that is what brings about the tragic ending. Synge tried to equalize and approximate the distant heroic world to his contemporaries by having his characters deal with universal and timeless problems, but the result was that by maintaining the importance of the power of fate from the original saga he created a rather unsuccessful and redundant fusion of internal and external necessity.

## 4. Deirdre – a Tragic Heroine?

### 4.1. What Defines a Hero?

We have already touched upon the subject of heroes when we defined tragedy in its relationship to fate. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* shows that it was as much fate as the decisions of the characters that led to their downfall. Fate can be one source of tragedy, but it does not identify the tragic hero. If the impact of fate affects more than one person, can we say they are all tragic heroes? Even though the number of heroes in a tragedy is not limited, we still have to distinguish between a hero and a victim. When we talk about tragedy, the attribute ‘tragic’ applies to everyone who participates in events and is affected by the final tragedy, but can they be called heroes? Oscar Mandel tells us that one of the characteristics of a hero is that he “possess a purpose – drive on an ideal which insists on being gratified.”<sup>59</sup> He pursues this ideal and that is what leads to the fatal *action*. More importantly, he brings the tragedy upon himself by his will or his deeds, or as Aristotle defined it, by his *harmatia*, which is what distinguishes him from a victim whom the fatality reaches simply ‘out of the blue’. In other words, heroes are active contributors to their fate, not just passive recipients. It is, therefore, somewhat ironic that modern criticism would often confuse, or even reject, this distinction, and readers in general would apply the term “hero” to any main protagonist of a book, even if they satisfy the characteristic of a victim.

By this definition, Synge’s Deirdre stands in an opposition to her representation in previous versions of the legend. Any summary of the tale of Deirdre describes her as a tragic heroine but according to definition she appears to be quite the opposite – a token of ill fortune, a secondary victim, but not a heroine. Synge’s Deirdre on the other hand seems

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<sup>59</sup> Mandel, 103.

to fulfill all the requirements of a hero. She initiates every major action and it is her will that brings about the final tragedy. In this respect, she is the author of her own destruction, but is it really that simple? We are prevented from making such a quick assumption when we consider the 'will', 'deed' or 'mistake' that led to the fatal action, and also when we look at the kind of action that heroes typically take, and the emotions their actions evoke in the audience. It was Synge's intention to give his Deirdre the central role and make her strong and purposeful. But does that make her a heroine?

#### 4.2. The Goddess in Irish Mythology

There are other things that define a hero, and even though they are not of the greatest concern to us they are worth mentioning. In Greek mythology a hero was descended from both god and human, and as a result possessed divine powers that distinguished him from other human beings. Early Irish myths and sagas show that gods held an important position within literature. The emphasis in the legends was on the presence of the supernatural powers possessed by gods, and as such unreachable by ordinary human beings. Proinsias MacCana says that "harmony could only be achieved by connecting the two forces, the earthly and divine, as a means of acquiring prosperity for the land."<sup>60</sup> Since the land was considered feminine, due to its ability to reproduce, so the gods securing the fertility of the land were of female gender. MacCana goes on to explain that no hierarchy in society was fixed, as royal legitimacy to office could only be claimed or maintained by a sacred marriage with a goddess. Only after the king was sacralised by bonding with a goddess did the land respond with an increase in fertility, and consequently in the general prosperity of the country. If a king was not able to display qualities worthy of marriage to a goddess, he

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<sup>60</sup> Proinsias MacCana, "Women in Irish Mythology," *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* (Dublin: Blackwater, 1982).

did not acquire the seal of legitimacy over the land because he would not be chosen by the goddess to mate with her. The men were in that respect an object, submitted to the choice of a goddess, who as MacCana puts it, “had the discretion to decide whom she would legitimize by mating with her.”<sup>61</sup> The myth of Deirdre from the Ulster cycle is not concerned with the political symbolism of a king’s marriage with a goddess, just as it would be an exaggeration referring to her as goddess. The fact, however, remains that when we move from the political message, which the theme of mating of a goddess with a king conveys, the basic distinction between the human and divine becomes significantly obscured and the role of goddess and heroine more interconnected. Deidre, as depicted in *The Book of Leinster*, is proof of that, as we can see traces of the supernatural powers which she retains, and uses to put Naisi under the *geis*, or spell, and by those means submits him to her will. Furthermore, just as a goddess from Irish mythology, she claims the right to choose her mate and in this respect, “Deirdre – in common, it might be said, with virtually other heroines of medieval Irish literature - is an adaptation in human terms of the archetypal goddess figure,”<sup>62</sup> as MacCana puts it. Even though we do not know exactly who Deirdre’s parents were, because of her supernatural powers she does fulfill the condition that would make her a mythological heroine.

#### 4.3. The Character of Deirdre

However, if we were to adhere to this definition of a hero we would not be able find many examples in literature outside of mythology. According to Greek tragedy, with regard to his origin a hero was either noble or virtuous by birth. Except for Hyde’s text, none of the versions would suggest that Deirdre was of noble birth, as there are no references to her heritage. The sons of Usnach, on the other hand, are referred to as princes in Hyde, and as

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<sup>61</sup> MacCana, 522.

<sup>62</sup> MacCana, 522.

the king's relatives in the rest. They are, after all, the main focus of the legend in *The Book of Leinster*, the medieval texts and in Lady Gregory's version. Naisi is the one who makes the crucial decision to return to Ireland, and that way he completes his journey as a tragic hero.

Deirdre of the Sorrows changes the perspective. Synge had no intention to touch upon any of the political or historical aspects of the myth. The references to kings and queens are only occasional. He "changed the heroic characters with rare and royal names into western peasants," Greene & Stephens tell us. What Synge attempted was to provide audiences with a completely new treatment of the legend. His innovation aimed at the portrayal of the characters, above all the figure of Deidre, who "steals" the focus from the sons of Usnach. She is neither a princess nor a queen. She is the wild girl from *The Book of Leinster*. As Lavarcham describes her:

She's little call to mind a woman when she has the birds to school her, and the pools in the rivers where she goes bathing in the sun. I'll tell you if you seen her that time, with her white skin, and her red lips, and the blue water and the ferns about her, you'd know, maybe, and you greedy itself, it wasn't for your like she was born at all.<sup>63</sup>

She was brought up and educated to become a queen, but all that against her will. She only assumes the role of a queen when it serves her purpose; as a means of liberating herself from the role that Conchubor prescribed for her. She dresses up royally in order to charm Naisi. She tells Lavarcham:

I will dress like Emer in Dundéalgan, or Maeve in her house in Connaught.  
If Conchubor'll make me a queen, I'll have the right of a queen who is a

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<sup>63</sup> Synge, 216.

master, taking her own choice and making a stir to the edges of the seas...[...] I will not be a child or plaything; I'll put on my robes that are the richest, for I will not be brought down to Emain as Cuchulain brings his horse.[...] <sup>64</sup>

She makes her own choices and refuses to submit to the decisions and choices made by others. She dominates men. Nonetheless, Naisi at first does not want to cross ways with the king. Simultaneously, the knowledge of prophesy restrains him from following Deirdre's wish to escape with her. In the end, however, he submits his choice and belief to those of Deirdre. All the versions that include the elopement scene correspond in the fact that it is Deirdre who initiates the escape. She gets her way and fulfills her desires, and in the end her means of achieving that, whether by spell, charm or rich robes, are not important. She dominates men in the sense that not only does she reject their will but she also submits them to hers.

After the elopement scene Deirdre of the Sorrows and the previous versions part ways in their treatment of the female character. In *The Book of Leinster* Deirdre no longer adheres to the role of the dominant and stronger gender. Instead she passively accepts the turn of events that leads to the execution of the foretold tragedy. Despite her premonitions, she allows Naisi's homesickness for Ireland to lead them to destruction. Naisi, in that respect, really is a tragic hero because he is responsible for their return. It is his 'mistake' in the judgment of the situation, his deed that brings about the downfall of the sons of Usnach. Deirdre, on the other hand, has to suffer because of their mistake, and live with the enemy for a year. That would reduce her to a role of a victim, because her warnings to Naisi are futile, and therefore she does not have any influence on how the final events are going to

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<sup>64</sup> Synge, 223.

develop. That, however, is only true if we accept that it was Naisi's final decision to return that represents 'a hero's mistake'. But what if the crucial 'deed' or 'mistake' happened before then? Was it not Deirdre's decision that eventually led to Conchubor's treachery in the first place? Conchubor himself points out, "it would be shameful if the sons of Uisliu fell in enemy lands by the fault of a woman."<sup>65</sup> This interpretation would make Deirdre a tragic hero and Naisi more of a victim. Furthermore, the audience is likely to pity her more than Naisi because she is forced to live with Conchubar after Naisi's death. That way she is the more tragic character because her purpose caused the destruction of the sons of Usnach, and she is left to live with the consequences. Both Naisi and Deirdre "are characterized by a savage energy and brutal courage at the moment of death,"<sup>66</sup> Kiberd states, which, together with their acceptance of death would qualify them both for the status of heroes. If we, however, adhere strictly to the definition of a hero, the 'mistake' is Deirdre's and that way she is the tragic heroine from the heroic legend.

Synge's approach to his characters is different in the sense that he treats them as ordinary human beings, who instead of showing extraordinary power show signs of weakness. There is no mention of Naisi performing great deeds and slaying hundreds of the enemy, even though he retains qualities such as bravery and loyalty. Similarly, Deirdre acts on the impulse of her personal desires regardless of consequence and environment. She pursues "an ideal that insists on being gratified," but the gratification is concerned with her personal happiness, not any 'greater good'. As Lavarcham points out in the beginning of Act 1:

Who'd check her like was made to have her pleasure only, the way if there  
were no warnings told about her you'd see troubles coming when an old king

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<sup>65</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *The Tain* (Dublin: Oxford University Press, 1970) 8.

<sup>66</sup> Kiberd, 179.

is taking her, and she without a thought but for her beauty and to be straying the hill.<sup>67</sup>

Even though she is locked away from the view of other people, it is the freedom to run around the hills and act of her own will that she claims the right to, and that makes her an individual and independent human being. She believes that if the troubles are foretold she has only a little power to change it. Lavarcham, however, rejects this by saying to her:

Was there little power you had in what you did the night you dressed in your finery and ran Naisi off along with you, in spite of Conchubor and the big nobles did dread the blackness of your luck? It was power enough you had that night to bring distress and anguish.<sup>68</sup>

It is true that she seems to follow her personal desires only, but that is her weakness. As previously discussed, such mistakes and character flaws are characteristic of heroes.

We notice this weakness because Synge's Deirdre shows initiative, and is purposeful and dominant all through the play. As opposed to the tragic heroine of the earliest version, she retains her authority in matters even after escaping from Ulster. She remains not only the active motive of the play, but also the force that determines the course of events. Naisi is the one confined to a passive role, submitted to Deirdre's choices. He is at first reluctant not only to escape, but also eventually to return to Ireland. He does not fall for the treachery, which is proved when he says "We'll have the joy is highest till our age is come, for it isn't Fergus's talk of great deeds that could take us back to Emain."<sup>69</sup> Even though in the end he submits to her will and agrees that "it should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old"<sup>70</sup>, when he is asked the reason why, he simply says, "I have done

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<sup>67</sup> Synge, 213-214.

<sup>68</sup> Synge, 234.

<sup>69</sup> Synge, 242.

<sup>70</sup> Synge, 243.

what Deirdre wishes and has chosen.”<sup>71</sup> Deirdre therefore becomes the psychological force, while men execute the choice she makes.

The physical strength is maintained by men, while Deirdre remains a fragile figure in a need to be protected by them. Even her choice of Naisi as partner and husband is based on his physical disposition; both in terms of strength as well as appearance. Deirdre possesses matchless beauty, and with her “white skin, and her red lips, and the blue water in the ferns about her,”<sup>72</sup> she is the object of every man’s desires. The knowledge of her own beauty provides Deirdre with a choice of partner. She says to Conchubar “a girl born the way I am is more likely to wish for a mate who’d be her likeness....A man with his hair like raven, maybe, and his skin like the snow and his lips like the blood spilt on it.”<sup>73</sup> That is why she chooses Naisi to escape with, which, just as in the case of Deirdre from *The Book of Leinster*, turns out to be the mistake that brings about the downfall.

All the incidents in *Deirdre of the Sorrows* indicate that she is indeed a tragic heroine. She initiates every major action and not for a second would we consider her to be just a victim of the tragic events. The only inconsistency in her portrayal as a dominant woman is caused by her lamentations over Naisi’s grave:

It was my words without pity gave Naisi a death will have no match until the ends of life and time. [*Breaking into a keen*] But who’ll pity Deirdre has lost the lips of Naisi from her neck and from her cheek for ever? Who’ll pity Deirdre has lost the twilight in the woods with Naisi, when beech-trees were silver and copper, and ash-trees were fine gold?,<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Synge, 244.

<sup>72</sup> Synge, 216.

<sup>73</sup> Synge, 218

<sup>74</sup> Synge, 258

It is Deirdre who makes the decision to return, but as opposed to Naisi from *The Book of Leinster*, she is aware of the consequences of the decision and she knows that “this day we’re going west, this day we’re facing death.”<sup>75</sup> It is therefore surprising when she breaks down in self-pity the moment death actually becomes reality. Maurya’s tragedy of losing every man in her life in Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is reminiscent of Deirdre’s loss. Or rather, Deirdre's lamentations when she faces her loss were supposed to mirror Maurya’s, even though Synge failed to attain an adequate portrayal. The fact, however, that Deirdre initiated practically every action in the play, and as such was provided with a choice, makes her a less tragic character than Maurya, who without any possibility to alter the course of actions had to accept their development. Furthermore, Maurya is an example of a victim, and thus her lamentations are understandable. Deirdre too finally accepts death like a heroine because “great joys were her share always,” but her previous lamentations remain a weakness in Synge’s portrayal of the heroine.

It is not only Maurya but also the female character from Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* that appears to be more tragic than his Deirdre. Even though Synge does not touch upon the period of seven years that Deirdre and Naisi spend in exile, it is clear that the ‘mistake’ Deirdre made led to a partial fulfillment of the happiness they aimed for. Nicholas Grene observes that:

Deirdre and Naisi go on to achieve their vision in some sort, whereas the central characters in the comedies are brought only to the possibility of a different richer life. But Synge expresses in all his plays his sense that the odds are against the fulfillment of his central characters’ desire for a life of intensity and distinction. Against them is the weight of inertia represented by

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<sup>75</sup> Synge, 247.

the indifferents; against them, too, is the prudential “wisdom” of Lavarcham or of the Widow Quin. The ideal is still worth pursuing and the characters in the comedies go out hopefully, if not triumphantly. But the hope or the triumph is always threatened, and in *Deirdre* we see its destruction.<sup>76</sup>

Deirdre is a tragic character because of the consequence of her actions, regardless of multiplicity of choices she is presented with. Nevertheless, her fate is less tragic than Maurya’s because of these choices. Maurya has no options or possibilities, which, on one hand might make it easier to accept the end, but on the other hand takes away the freedom to act of her own will and influence actions of the men in her life. Synge restricted Maurya to a passive role, which is the aspect that distinguished his Deirdre from the tragic heroine of the old legend. The irony of how important the choices are is best captured in *The Playboy*’s female character Pegeen Mike, who despite being active and willing to seize her chance to escape from the limitations of her life, turns out to be the most tragic character of all those that Synge has presented to his audience, for as it turns out her ideal was never a realistic one, and as a result her hopes are not only threatened, but completely taken away from her.

Nevertheless, both Pegeen Mike and Maurya are victims. They do not make a ‘mistake,’ as opposed to Deirdre, and therefore even though they might be more tragic than Deirdre, she is not only tragic, but also a heroine.

The analysis of the female protagonist in Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* shows that Deirdre, despite changes made to her character, remains the tragic heroine from *the Book*

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<sup>76</sup> Grene, 167.

*of Leinster*. She initiates the event, or makes the 'mistake', that leads to her and Naisi's destruction. She differs in character from previous versions, such as *the Book of Leinster* or the medieval texts, in that she willingly faces the foretold tragedy, which makes her an active contributor to her destruction.

## 5. Conclusion

Comparison with a number of versions of the story of Deirdre shows that what Synge created was a completely new treatment of the legend. He attempted to introduce 'realism' to the heroic story of kings and queens, and innovated in his portrayal of the characters, who are no longer just one-dimensional and stereotypical characters from tales, but human beings with emotions, reason and weaknesses. By blurring the division between good and evil he successfully touched upon the character of human nature. Deirdre, Naisi and Conchubar are all driven by a need for personal contentment, and do not act only because fate prescribed the course of events. It is their personal motivation that leads to their actions, in the same way as Synge himself had a personal motivation that led him to transform the 'remote and romantic' aspects of the legend into a 'universal and realistic' portrayal of motifs such as love and death.

However, despite the fact that addressing such complex issues was successfully represented in his earlier works, it did not work as well in *Deirdre*. Much of the dissatisfaction with *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was caused by Synge's inability to effectively combine the heroic world of the myth with the reality of peasant Ireland. As a result, it has been referred to as 'unfinished' and 'unsuccessful' by critics like Grene, who remarks that "the story of Deirdre, although it touched some of his deepest feelings, was not ultimately real to him as a whole, and it was not susceptible to translation into the terms of his reality."<sup>77</sup> Even though the result of Synge's effort was unsuccessful, the fact remains that we will never know what his *Deirdre of the Sorrows* would have been like had he lived to finish it to his satisfaction.

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<sup>77</sup> Grene, 182.

## 6. Resumé v slovenčine

Vo svojej bakalárskej práci sa zaoberám vzťahom medzi mytologickým príbehom o Deirdre and hrou Johna Millingtona Syngea *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. Zameriavam sa predovšetkým na aspekty ako postavy, témy a motívy, ktorými sa Syngeova *Deirdre* líši od predchádzajúcich verzií tejto legendy. V prvej časti zmiňujem všetky verzie, ktoré sa odrážajú v Syngeovej hre a tie zahŕňajú verziu z *Book of Leinster*, stredovekú verziu z *Glenmasan Manuscript* a taktiež verzie spisovateľov a dramatikov, ktorí boli Syngeovými súčasníkmi v Abbey Theater. V krátkosti zmiňujem aspekty, v ktorých sa Syngeov prístup buď líši alebo zhoduje s týmito verziami. Druhá kapitola sa venuje postaveniu osudu, jeho zastúpeniu v daných verziách a tomu ako ovplyvňuje ústredné témy a motívy. V poslednej časti mojej práce analyzujem vývoj hlavnej ženskej postavy a jej postavenie ako tragickej hrdinky.

Cieľom mojej práce bolo hlavne poukázať na to, ako zobrazovanie realizmu bolo najpodstatnejšou zložkou hier pre Syngea, a to aj v prípade keď sa zaoberal legendou, ktorá sa zakladá na pravom opaku. Najdôležitejšie pasáže tejto práce sú práve tie, ktoré odhaľujú nezrovnalosti v zobrazení postáv a motívov, pretože poukazujú na to, že Syngeovo zlúčenie hrdinského a dedinského sveta nebolo úspešné. Napriek tomu, že sa mu podarilo zobrazit' určité všeobecne platné záležitosti, jeho postavy sa nejavia ani ako hrdinské ani dedinské, a z toho hľadiska sú pre Syngeových súčasníkov rovnako vzdialené ako ich predošlé verzie.

## Summary in English

This thesis is focused on the relationship between the mythological tale of Deirdre and John Millington Synge's play *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. It concentrates primarily on features, such as characters, themes and motives, which distinguish Synge's Deirdre from the previous versions of the tale. The first part lists all the versions that are echoed in Synge's play, which include the 12th century version from *the Book of Leinster*, the medieval version from *the Glenmasan Manuscript* and the versions by Synge's fellow writers and dramatists from the Abbey Theatre. It briefly outlines similarities and contradictions between the earlier versions and Synge's approach. The second chapter deals with the role of fate, its representation in the different texts, and how it affects the central themes and motives in the tale. The last part of the thesis analyzes female protagonist and questions her role as a heroine.

The aim of this work is primarily to show that portraying realism was essential to Synge, even when dealing with a legend that is comprised of the exact opposite. The most important passages of the thesis are those which uncover the conflicting representations of characters and motives, because they indicate that Synge's fusion of the heroic and peasant world was not successful. Even though he managed to portray some of the great universal issues, Synge's characters turned out to be neither heroic nor peasant, and the essence of his play was just as remote to his contemporaries as that of its predecessors.

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