

A.E.'S Deirdre : Alegend in Three Acts

*** Ahmed El- Nadi**

*** Ph.D. in Modern English Literature.
Associate Professor, English Department, Kuwait University.**

Abstract

The research is about the legend of Deirdre that brings sorrow to everybody about her. This legend has been treated by three different playwrights each in his own way. A.E. treated it as a legend in three acts; Synge covered it into a peasant play while Yeats stressed the mythical aspect in the legend. This paper is confined to A.E.'s handling of the legend. He deals with two prominent themes: the theme of exile and the conflict between private life and public life or the Family and the State. Naisi and Deirdre have gone into exile to Scotland. Naisi cannot ignore his duty towards his motherland. So he convinces Deirdre to return to Ireland and have peace with the olding, Conchubor. The latter deceives them and kills Naisi with the result that Deirdre takes her own life and brings sorrow to Conchubor and ruin to his kingdom.

The technique of A.E. has been examined and it has been found out that A.E. sacrificed the dramatic technique for the sake of the legend.

During the first decade of the twentieth century there appeared in Dublin three plays, dealing, in different ways, with the same tale of love most popular in Irish mythology. They are all about Deirdre and her romantic elopement to Scotland with her lover Naisi and their sufferings at the hands of Conchubor, King of Ulster.

A.E.'s *Deirdre* was first performed at St. Teresa's Hall, Dublin, on April 2, 1902, together with Yeats's **Kathleen ni Houlihan**, yeats's *Deirdre* was first performed in 1907, and Synge's **Deirdre of the sorrows** in 1910 (after his death).

This mythical elopement to Alban has been known as exile and the return to Ireland is a fatal return involving suffering, death, purgation and immortality.

In **Deirdre** Yeats makes use of Red the Branch legends with Cuchulain as the central hero who remains so to yeats in most of his writings. His main concern was to find out a close relationship between poetry and life through the use of myth. He dreamt of a kind of drama that could be poetic, remote and spiritual.

On the other hand, Synge's plays took a different direction: He concentrated on realistic peasant drama, based on his personal experience on the Aran Islands and in Wicklow County. He relied on satire and prose rather than on poetry. Towards the end of his life, he deserted his poverty stricken people and tried his hand at the ancient celtic myth. He was fascinated with the legend of Deirdre. Still he used his simple rich prose as he found it in the speech of peasants, fishermen, tinkers and tramps.

The theme of the Deirdre legend is the flight from intolerable tension which was behind the destruction of peaceful and romantic Irish life.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse A.E.'s **Deirdre** in an attempt to bring to light its aesthetic values and to see how A.E. has succeeded in dramatizing the legend.

II

The Deirdre story of elopement and return is the most appealing to the Irish highly sensitive imagination. We had better sum it up in brief in order to create a solid ground for critical analysis:

Before Deirdre is born the old King Conchubor visits the house of Felim who is the feudal vassal and harper of the king. Conchubor tries to lie with Felim's wife for the night, but he is told that she is expecting a baby at any moment. Cathvah, the Druid, tells the King that the coming baby will be charming; her name will be Deirdre, which means **alarm**. She will disturb the whole of Ireland in general, and the sons of Usna and the home of Ulster (the Ultonians) in particular, who live in the capital of Emain Macha.

Instead of destroying the baby in its cradle, Conchubor takes a fatal decision which eventually destroys him. The baby is to be carried away to a desolate and lonely place on the high hills where his gossip or satirist Lavarcham will bring her up in a refined way far from the corruption of urban life. She grows up beautiful, intelligent, romantic and fond of the natural world about her. When she reaches the ripe age of womanhood, she becomes more charming, more independent and more keen on learning. When Conchubor visits her, he is so taken by her beauty that he decides to make a queen of her and set her on the throne beside him at Emain Macha. At the same time she happens to see three young vigorous and gallant men hunting in the hills. They leave an unforgettable impression upon the young lady who, up till now, has never seen a human being except old Conchubor. Naisi, in particular, captivates her heart at first glance. He is the eldest son of Usna and a fellow of the Red Branch. He and his two brothers Ainnle and Ardan are **curadh** heroes of the king. They are different from the Knights of the Round Table of the Middle Ages and more or less like the body-guard of the Anglo-Saxon King - known as **drigh**.

Deirdre and Naisi fall in love, thus exposing themselves to the King's wrath. Deirdre convinces Naisi of eloping to Alban-Sctoland - while Naisi's brothers act as body-guards to the lovers and they all go into exile for seven years. There they enjoy a full life, and Naisi becomes a great lord among the Scots. But, being Irish, he is so attached to his motherland that he yearns for returning to Kathleen ni Houlihan.

When Conchubor heard of the lovers' elopement he was filled with hatred for Naisi and was starving for Deirdre's love. He knit a plot to bring the lovers back into his palace where he could then have his revenge. Fergus, Ireland's greatest prince, was commissioned to lure the exile home, giving them a false safe-conduct. Fergus was above suspicion as he had no lust for power, or else he could have ruled Ireland instead of Conchubor.

Fergus, accompanied by his two sons, leaves for Alban, hoping that by bringing the Usna brothers back, he would restore the total fellowship of the Red Branch. The exiles, who lived at Loch Etive, had complete confidence in honest Fergus and they were easily convinced to return to the motherland. But the moment they set foot in Ireland, they were taken prisoners. Fergus had to remain behind to share in a feast prepared by another noble - warrior called Barach. He could not refuse the invitation as he was under Geasa ⁽¹⁾ - not to refuse any feast offered him.

So Deirdre and the sons of Usna went Emain (near the modern city Armagh) under the protection of Fergus's two sons.

Lavarcham tries her best to save her beloved Deirdre and so she weaves a lie that Deirdre has withered away and lost her charm. Conchubor sends Trendorn to find out the truth. The lovers were playing chess and Deirdre sees Trendorn's eyes peering at them, tells Naisi who throws at a chessman at Trendorn's eye plucking it out. Trendorn has been fascinated by Deirdre's beauty and reports what he has seen to the King. The King plans an attack on the six young people imprisoned in the fortress. The prisoners show their best as tactful warriors and are about to win a

fierce battle when the King orders Druid Cathvah to practise his charms on the sons of Fergus and Usna - a spell which makes them fell as if they were drowning in a vast sea.

Naisi and his brothers are arrested and killed at once. Deirdre is miserable and keens over their bodies. The moment the enraged king, immersed in his sexual lust, thinks that he has won Deirdre, she stabs herself with Naisi's dagger and falls dead. Fergus comes a little too late to save the victims, but he destroys the capital, Emain Macha and joins the Queen Maeve of Connaght - Conchubor's worst enemy - in a desperate attempt to despatch the tyrant king. The prophecy that Deirdre will bring sorrow and misery to the whole country has been fulfilled.

The Deirdre myth has been handled down in various ways. The different directions the legend takes imply different meanings and represent various symbols. The folk tales have kept the versions alive in both Ireland and Scotland. The fertile imagination of the people has added quite a lot to the original myth throughout the centuries. The early versions make prominent the exile of the sons of Usna, to the extent that this overshadows the role of Deirdre herself. In certain versions we are told that Naisi was unwilling to marry Deirdre and elope with her for fear of the consequences. Deirdre could win Naisi to herself by putting him under **Geasa** and thus forcing him to elope with her. In one of the versions it sounds curious to read that Deirdre got hold of Naisi by jumping on his back and holding him by the ears.

The death of Deirdre has been told in different ways. In one version she dies by tasting Naisi's blood and stabbing herself. It is said that she got a carpenter's knife, stabbed herself and threw the knife into the sea. In the Leinster version she spends a whole tragic year in Conchubor's palace doing all she can to infuriate the king. The king asks her who her worst enemy is, and she answers "Owen" (or Maine) who has murdered the sons of Usna. To have his revenge over her he sends her away to be sexually enjoyed by Owen for a whole year. But on her way to that beast, she throws herself from the carriage, strikes herself on the stones and her brain scatters over the road. There is some roughness and vulgarity in this version and Conchubor is not that bad or evil man. He was a noble and wise king who committed a certain error and who now needed company in his loneliness and old age. Deirdre, the beautiful young lady was ideal to him and he hoped to make her as happy as he could. In addition on the artistic level, Conchubor is supposed to be a tragic hero; so the opponent he is going to fight should be equal to him in force and resistance. Armed with her beauty and insistence on gratifying her heart's desire, Deirdre is that relentless opponent.

Objecting to Lady Gregory's treatment of Deirdre's character in **Cuchulain and Muirithmne** Herbert Howarth (1959 :106) writes:

The Irish needed strength, but the passive, mournful Deirdre held some interior implication which made her a more acceptable national figure than Irania. It was a poet's business to

explore the mysterious, popular significance of Deirdre, as Yeats, A.E. and Synge did. Lady Gregory was insufficient of a poet for that.

The early critics took the same assumption that Deirdre stands as a symbol of fatal beauty, passivity and incapacity of saving herself. Some used to compare her to Helen of Troy, with Cúchulainn as Achilles, Naisi as Paris and Conchubor as Menelaus. Emain Macha stands for Troy, both ending in flames.

They go a step further and bring to the surface this old contact that existed between Ireland and the Mediterranean. There is even the belief that Ireland had an early communication with the Egyptian monasteries and the Greek culture. It is interesting to point out that the most thorough picture of Deirdre is to be found in **Irish Free - State - Official Handbook** for 1932. It describes Ireland as a whole, but certain lines have been assigned to Deirdre:

Deirdre is the Helen of Ireland. But while Helen's beauty was the single outstanding feature about her, Deirdre was in addition a woman of strong and independent culture. Like Helen, Deirdre was wooed by many men. Unlike Helen it was she herself who sought out and chose the man she would marry, forcing him, almost against his will, to elope with her ... Deirdre and Medb are typical of the women of Irish saga literature. Scornful of the weakness of their men folk, they override their scruples and take the initiative when action is called for (1932 : 272)

III

A.E.'s Deirdre is an Irish product, yet it belongs to the conventional drama in plot and form. It can find appeal in any English speaking country. Yeats's version deals with the last few moments of the legend when Deirdre and Naisi are on the brink of death in the Red Branch castle. He uses a chorus, having the function of the ancient Greek chorus which narrates the missing events and comments on the action. The number of characters is cut to a minimum and we have just the four main characters: Fergus, Naoise, Deirdre and Conchubor. The others bear no proper names: A Dark - faced messenger and a Dark - faced Executioner.

Synge's play, like A.E.'s, is divided into three stages; elopement exile and return. Irish mythology is almost entirely absent from Synge's **Deirdre of the Sorrows**. It is a vital play dealing directly with the perils of peasant life in Ireland in a way that reminds us of Synge's other peasant plays.

But the three plays have one theme in common : the tragic destiny of Deirdre and Naisi. These two figures have to struggle, throughout their lives against irreconcilable forces beyond their power. These forces represent the conflict between the

public welfare and the private interest, between duty towards one's country and personal freedom, between allegiance and the heart's desire, It may be said that it is the permanent conflict between the State and the Family.

The theme of exile is most prominent in the Irish legend as dealt with by the various writers. It is the product of the Irish community. Conchubor stands for the State with its rigid laws and stiff regulations which the new generation does not easily accept and tries to resist and crush to pieces. But these young people suffer so much that they find their only solution in escape and self - exile. The time was not on their side: Ireland was suffering from economic depression, sexual inhibition, enthusiastic patriotism, political turmoil and religious fanaticism. Conchubor - the true personification of the State - is believed to be responsible for all these grievances. But his rigidity and austerity are those of a noble personality that aims at social order, virtuous conduct, honourable life, dutiful citizens and harmonious society, But his iron grip on his country has been misunderstood by his own people who consider the Establishment cruel and heartless. They mix between Conchubor's personal and emotional yearning for Deirdre and his rigid and conservative rule of the Irish society. The youth lose confidence in all moral values and do not know with whom they should identify themselves or whom they should serve. Should they show allegiance to Conchubor and the State or should they side with the young lovers in exile? This dilemma of the young generation is still at its peak, though they are inclined towards Deirdre and Naisi who are concrete symbols of Young Ireland.

The Irish lived their own dramas; each individual had a separate role to play in a tragedy of his own. But women are more realistic and more practical than men. It is the women who shoulder the responsibility, who look after the family, who bring men down to earth from their dreams and save them from their religious fanaticism and national hysteria. That explains why women enter the Irish legends as heroines playing an active role in shaping the destinies of human kind.

As the woman plays the leading role, it is she who is the protagonist and designer, rather than a mere mistress. So when the woman finds herself and her lover under a certain oppression, or that their love is in danger, it is she who tries to persuade him to elope and go into exile. This attempt to leave the country is due to two major reasons : it is an escape from authority represented by persons like Conchubor, or from despair and poverty as the case was during the Potato Famine 1845. De Valera's relentless grasp on the people drove a lot of them out of Ireland. We can call it simply emigration for the ordinary people, but for the significant persons it is given the name of exile. But in both cases they cannot keep away for long; they have to come back to Kathleen ni Houlihan (2) .

This explains why the theme of Irish literature very often concentrates on 'the return of the native' . Exile means a crime committed against the motherland. To desert one's country means to cease to serve it - an act of treason and disloyalty. So the conflict was between staying and going This is highly exemplified in the case of Deirdre and Naisi.

In a study of Yeats's Abbey plays Peter Ure goes to the root of this tension which is behind the exile of the best people in the country. To him it is a conflict between.

“the fixed palpable world of human affairs and the world of passion and aspiration, which is beyond reason, system or office. The basic split in the plays is between the institutional world - limited, tame, calculating, interested in the value of fixed character -- and the personal world - exuberant, carefree, wild, affirming the values of intense personality” (Peter, 1963 : 54)

IV

In A.E.'s **Deirdre** we have two opposing forces represented by Conchubor on one hand and Deirdre on the other. Conchubor represents duty, honour, patriotism and self - sacrifice, while Deirdre gains her power from the Sidha or The Ever - Living Ones of the Faery. She believes that if the hero could prove himself and avoid Conchubor's fatal blow, he could be worthy of perfect life offered by Deirdre. A third force is embodied in Naisi himself as he stands for the noble warrior - prince who is a prize for either the king or Deirdre to win.

In making use of the legend for his dramatic purpose A.E. used three episodes : the elopement of Deirdre, the return from Scotland and the slaying of the Sons of Usna. He converted the prose or verse Legend into a play and this required the presence of very few characters and the speeding of the dramatic action.

In Act I we have the unhappy omens associated with Deirdre's birth. This is revealed in the dialogue between Conchubor and Lavarcan. Deirdre dreams of Naisi and soon after that she finds him before her eyes. Immediately after that they elope to Scotland according to Lavarcan's advice. Deirdre is possessed with fear and urges Naisi not to return to Ulla. The birds of Angus which bring love and death are hovering above their heads “dabbled with Crimson”. Naisi's inner conflict is about to tear him into pieces: he wishes to stay beside Deirdre and at the same time he yearns for joining the Red Branch again proving to king Conchubor that he fears him no more.

Act II takes us to Alban where Dierdre and Naisi live in a dun by Loch Etive. They live happily in exile together for three years, then trouble begins. Naisi longs to join the Red Branch again. Deirdre is most unwilling to deprive him of that desire. They see a sail coming from the direction of Ireland which fills Deirdre's heart with fear. While they are talking about their exile and how they have enjoyed paradise on earth, Ainle and Ardan enter to bring the news that the ship has landed. Fergus is heard calling on Naisi, while Deirdre is terribly scared and believes that it is the end. The colour of blood spreads before her eyes and she loses all hope of being rescued. On the other hand, Naisi is sure that Fergus is a good man and he cannot mean them any ill. He hopes for true reconciliation with the king and a happy return from exile. Fergus is accompanied by his two sons : Ilann and Bruinne. They con-

vince Naisi of the good intentions of Conchubor and urge him to return with them to Ireland. They prepare to leave at once leaving Deirdre for a while to say goodbye to Scotland. The beautiful language she uses has often been quoted by poets and men of letters :

Dierdre : Farewell, O home of happy memories . Though
thou art bleak to Naisi, to me thou art bright .
I shall never see thee more, save as shadows we wonder here,
Weeping over what has gone. Farewell, O Gentle
people , who made music for me on the hills. The
Father has struck the last chord on the Harp of
life; and the music I will hear hereafter shall
be only sorrows . O Mother Dana, who breathed up
love through the dim earth to my heart, be with
me where I am going . Soon shall I be close to
thee for comfort, where many a broken heart has lain,
and many a weeping head. (A.E, 1907 : 35).

Act III takes place in the Red Branch fortress at Emain Macha, Conchubor's capital. Conchubor and Lavarcam are expecting the exiles at any moment. Lavarcam tells the king that Deirdre has lost her beauty. This has been soon undone.

The king's Messenger arrives to take Deirdre. It is a sudden ending as the brothers are under Cathvah's Spell. In the end we have the following stage direction:

Deirdre lays her head on Naisi's body. Conchubor enters,
standing in the doorway. Lavarcam takes Deirdre's hand and
drops it (A.E, 1907 : 52)

It is obvious that Deirdre is dead. Deirdre's dream of a life full of beauty and love has been ruined. She has endured the slings and arrows of an indomitable fate.

Number three is a favourite number to the Irishmen, and A.E. makes good use of it in weaving the plot of **Deirdre**. A quick glance at the play reveals this "trinity" which we rarely meet with in other plays: The main characters are three : Conchubor , Deirdre and Naisi; the main episodes are three: Ireland, Alban and Ireland again; we have three brothers : Naisi, Ainle and Ardan; the men who go to Alban to bring back the exiles are three : Fergus and his two sons; the years of stay in Alban are three instead of seven. Three is a sacred number, the same as seven.

The harp of Finn is the central image that unites all the elements of the play. It has three strings: the silver string brings laughter, the bronze sleep, while the iron string brings tears and sorrow. The play opens with Deirdre's bright look on Nature.

Deirdre: Dear fostermother, how the spring is beginning.
The music of the father's harp is awakening the flowers.

Now the winter's sleep is over, and the spring flows from the lips of the harp. Do you not feel the thrill in the wind -- a joy answering the trembling strings? Dear fostermother, the spring and the music are the heart.(A.E, 1907 :9)

But Deirdre is still afraid of the unknown:

Deirdre: He (Conchubor) has placed a burden on my heart.

Oh ! Fostermother, the harp of life is already trembling with sorrow! (1907 : 13)

Again, later on, Lavarcam tries to bring peace to Deirdre's heart:

Lavarcam : Dear golden head, cast sorrow aside
for a time. The Father has not struck the last chords
on the harp of life. The chords of joy have but begun
for thee.

But towards the end of the Act and having enjoyed a life full of love in Alban, the iron string is to be heard, it is closely associated with the doom of Deirdre:

Deirdre : The Father has struck the last - chord on the Harp
of life; and the music I will hear hereafter shall be only sorrow. (A.E, 1907 :36)

So the play develops from birth to maturation to death, or from spring to summer to autumn through these unique images.

Birds have their symbolic significance in the play. We have the birds of Aengus Of which represent love and joy. They flutter above Deirdre's head, and disappear in the final act. In Act II we have a strange phenomenon: the birds drip with blood instead of singing:

Deirdre (in a low broken voice) . Naisi ! (Naisi returns to her side. Ainle and Ardan go out. Deirdre rests one hand on Naisi's shoulders and with the other points upwards), Do you not see them? The bright birds which sang at our flight ! Look how they wheel about us as they sing ! What a heart - rending music! And their plumage , Naisi ! It is all dabbled with crimson; and they shake a ruddy dew from their wings upon us! Your brow is stained with the drops. Let me clear away the stains. They pour over your face and hands. Oh! (1907 :30.31)

In Act III the birds disappear and the clouds themselves gain the colour of the blood:

Deirdre : It was not love made you all blind, but the high gods have deserted us, and the demons draw us into a trap. They have lured us from Alban, and they hover here above us in red clouds - cloud upon cloud - and wait the sacrifice.(1907 : 33)

Naisi is associated with light. There is the flame of the torches on his and his

brothers arms. They are called "The Lights of Valour":

Deirdre: And what doom comes with thee now that such omens
fled before thee? I fear thy coming, warrior. I fear the
lights of Valour be soon extinguished (A. E, 1907: 33)

There is a sharp contrast between the Sons of Usna who are associated with light and Conchubor who hides in the darkness of the forest like a wounded tiger, in addition to the grim world of Emain Macha where he lives.

Naisi represents masculinity : light,sun, eye, consciousness. Life begins with light; for Deirdre life begins with Naisi's arrival. Naisi will grow through the love of Deirdre. He represents Ireland that should be protected and glorified. He represents the manhood of a whole nation. So he must be persuaded to return to his native land or else it would perish.

In **Deirdre** A.E. immortalizes the Gael for their heroism and legendary life:

Naisi: We shall go down in each other's arms; our hearts
shall beat out their love together, and the last of life we
shall know will be our kisses on each other's lips.
(1907 : 50)

Naisi again says:

There was music a while ago. The swans of Lir, with their
slow, sweet fairy singing. There was never a sadder tale
than theirs, They must roam for ages, driven on the Sea
of Moyle, while we shall go hand in hand through the country
of Immortal Youth. (1907 : 51)

A.E. meant to express divine ideas in his drama. He venerated nature. To him it was "the great mother who is the giver of all life, and without whose life ideals become imperative and listless dwellers in the heart" (A.E, 1915 : 3 - 4)

By the Great father he means the Universal Spirit of his belief. He refers to him as "the Divine Power, the Ancestral Self of Eastern Philosophy, from whom we are temporarily divided," (Boyd, 1916: 227).

His emphasis on that metaphysical side in Nature overshadows the dramatic atmosphere in the play. He has deprived his Deirdre of her heroic stature and presented her as a victim to an indomitable power. The outer and inner conflict which leads to the tragic end as well as to the Aristotelian Katharsis is missing in the play. Deirdre is sweet, simple, completely unaware of her beauty and unable to understand the subtle meaning of that strange dreams brought to her by the sidhe. There

is nothing but fear and love in her life. Love is an ennobling trait in her life, but it is also a barrier between her and the Deirdre in the legend. She is miserable in her fear of Conchubor. His name fills her with horror. So she begs Naisi not to mention his name:

Deirdre: Oh, do not speak of him! My heart falls at the thought of him as into a grave; and I know I will die when we meet. (A.E., 1907 : 27)

Her love for Naisi is sublime. His words are very enchanting, she is a mere child in his hands from the first encounter. His passionate words enkindle the fire of love in her heart and open her eyes on a romantic world :

Naisi: I would carry thee to my dun by the sea of Moyle,
O beautiful woman, and set thee there on an ivory throne.
The winter would not chill thee there, nor the summer burn thee,
for I would enfold thee with my love, enchantress, if thou
camest to my world

Deirdre: (taking the hands of Naisi) I will go with thee
where thou goest (leaning her head on Naisi's shoulder) Oh,
fostermother, too truly hast thou spoken ! I know myself
not. My spirit has gone from me to this other heart for
ever. (A.E., 1907 :18)

A little later Deirdre goes on:

- Is it death to thee to love me Naisi? O, fly quickly, and
forget me. But first before thou goest, bend down thy head -
low - rest it on my bosom. Listen to the beating of my heart.
That passionate tumult is for thee! There - I have kissed thee.
I have sweet memories for ever- lasting. Go now, my beloved,
quickly . I fear -- I fear for thee this Stony king (1907 : 20)

Now Deirdre lives through Naisi; she has melted into him to the extent that she thinks they have become one. She cannot understand that he has another love for his motherland:

Deirdre: Are we not enough for each other, for surely to me
thou art hearth and home, and where thou art the dream ends,
and beyond it there is no other dream. (1907 : 29 - 30)
she begs him to stay, forgetting all about the motherland:
Deirdre : Why should we return? Is not the Clan Usna greater
here than even in Eiri?

Ainle: Dear sister, it is the land which gave us birth; which ever
like a mother whispered to us, and its whisper is sweeter than
the promise of beloved lips. Though we are kings here in Alba,
we are exiles, and the heart is afar from its home. (1907 : 29)

Naisi is to clear up his honour and bring his comrades back from exile. Deirdre

has been so absorbed in her love for Naisi that she has become selfish and only possessed with the fear of the evil that is surrounding her and her lover. Naisi in his fury flares up at Deirdre:

- Deirdre ! Deirdre! It is not right for you, beautiful woman, to come with tears between a thousand exiles and their own land! Many battles have I fought, knowing well there would be death and weeping after. If I feared to trust to the word of great kings and warriors, it is not with tears I would be remembered. what would the bards sing of Naisi - without trust! afraid of the outstretched hand ! - frightened by a woman's fears ! - by the gods, before the Clan Usna were so shamed I would shed my blood here with my own hand. (1907 :35)

She Yields utterly to Naisi, begging him to pity her. She is the weak victim of the supernatural world and of the voices that control her:

- O stay - stay your anger! Have pity on me, Naisi , Your words like hot lightnings, sear my heart, Never again will I seek to stay thee. But speak to me with love once more, Naisi. Do not bend your brows on me with anger; for, oh! but a little time remains for us to love! (1907 :35)

She is so immersed in her love that she forgets about the foreboding voices that have controlled her life, and Yields to him completely. They are to go back to Ireland. She is sure that she will meet her death. So when she enters Emain Macha, she controls herself to prove that she is worthy of Naisi:

we are entering a house of death ! Who is it that weeps so?
I too would weep, but the children of Usna are too proud to let
tears be seen in the eyes of their women. (1907 : 42)

When Naisi is slain and falls at her feet, she cannot control herself any more and her courage deserts her. Yet she grows high in stature as she has lost all that is dear to her. Her eyes open on a new self - her real self ; Deirdre is reborn. Both fear and love have left her:

I do not fear Conchubor any more . My spirit is sinking away
from the world. I could not stay after Naisi. After the Lights of
Valour had vanished, how could I remain? The earth has grown dim and
old, fostermother. The gods have gone far away, and the lights from
the mountains, and the Lions of the Flaming Heart are still. O
fostermother, when they heap the cairn over him, let me be beside
him in the narrow grave. I will still be with the noble one . (1907 : 51 - 52).

A.E. 's Deirdre is far from being heroic; there is nothing superhuman about her. She is weak, mild, behaves in the light of the faith in the metaphysical voices and the

invisible powers. She tries to get possession of her lover who is devoted to his motherland. She has her own characteristics: she is loyal; impulsive, self-willed, selfish, courageous and romantic. But her outstanding characteristic is that she is the instrument of destruction. This arouses our pity for the tragic heroine who suffers through a divine gift. On the other hand, Naisi is young, vigorous and reckless. He dares dangers in the face and is ready to die for his honour. He is loyal to his country and is willing to do anything for the sake of Deirdre in defiance to what the Druids say :

I have counted death as nothing battling for the Red Branch;
and I would not, even for Deirdre, war upon my comrades. But
Deirdre I will not leave nor forget for a thousand prophecies made
by Druids in their dotage. If the Red Branch must fall, it
will fall through treachery; but Deirdre I will love, and in my
love is no dishonour, nor any broken pledge. (1907 : 19 - 20)

Conchubor and Lavarcham have not received what they deserve of dramatic treatment, compared to the other characters. Lavarcham is simply wise and self-composed. There is nothing extraordinary about her. On the other hand, Conchubor feels advanced in age, losing much of his vigour, devoting all his energy to the welfare of Ireland. He is mainly concerned with preserving the honour of the Red Branch and with protecting it from the imminent ruin predicted by the Druids. This explains why he decides to keep Deirdre away from any human being. We know that he loves her just through Lavarcham. He does not care much for love as he does for promoting justice and prosperity in his country. He was sincere in pardoning the three brothers, but when Lavarcham deceived him about Deirdre's beauty, he decided to put an end to their lives. His decision was due to the fact that they broke the law by eloping with her:

Conchubor: The death of Naisi was only the fulfilling of the law.
Ulla could not hold together if its ancient laws were set
aside. (1907 : 57)

As a matter of fact, A.E. voices his ideas through Conchubor. He believed that Ireland needed a new spirit, the spirit of the Golden Age to live a glorious life. Nationalism for him was a spiritual force rather than a political movement. This force could join men into a new intellectual fellowship. It eventually would lead to the creation of a national ideal in Ireland. It is this spirit that was first expressed by the ancient bards and pastoral story-tellers.

A.E. reacted against the materialism of his time and tried to rebuild his motherland through the revival of art and spiritualism. In his **Deirdre** there is this interaction between literature and political nationalism. It is an expression of nationalism in the form of national literature. The ideas have been quoted in A.E.'s mysticism. But these ideas have been treated in such a way that they deprived the play of its dramatic flavour. The characters do not sound real, even as characters in a story. Deirdre is always expected to be a fearless heroine that she avowedly is, acting as an in-

strument of justice and posing as a national source of inspiration to the Irish generations. But in A. E. 's play she no longer plays that role. Again Conchubor's character is rather vague. He has a divided personality. On one side he is keen on uniting his country, but on the other he is trying to gain his selfish ends. The other characters do not sound consistent as they are in a way dehumanized figures which have lost their symbolic significance .

Yet Deirdre is usually referred to as the "priestess of tears" who is prepared to sacrifice herself for the sake of her country's spiritual heritage.

A.E. believed that he could serve his country spiritually by reviving the ancient culture which was remote, spiritual and ideal. He also believed in the evolution of man from pure spiritualism to stark materialism. For him the nation itself had lost its glorious past to become the victim of selfish ends. He tried to dig deep into the ancient literature which, for him, was close to the divine origin of man. He hoped that the revival of such culture would bring the Irish closer to their heroic origin. Literature to him could lead to a new and noble civilization. The Celtic literature succeeded in creating heroic models while modern literature failed to do so . He even believed that reading poetry and getting acquainted with heroic literature would give spiritual help to Irish workers. His nationalism was undivided. He was not interested in reviving the Gaelic language, nor did he try to spread any propaganda against the English - as did many of his contemporaries. His **Deirdre** is an attempt to make his people know something about their heroic literature and be inspired to achieve heroic feats. It was also one of the revolts against the Anglicised theatre of the North.

The mystic atmosphere pervades the whole play. Also the geographical element and the magical environments are part of the Celtic Faery literature which overflows with fighting episodes. Heroes resort to the underground where the Sidhe resides. And so we see the first act charged with something forceful and unearthly. Heroes were believed to have strong connections with "the other world" . A.E. made Deirdre derive her power and inspiration from the Faery World. She is the supernatural agent who is endowed with irresistible beauty and fascination, in addition to her heroic nature. This supernatural power she exercised on Naisi himself. So when Naisi approaches Deirdre in Act I, he addresses her:

Gooddess, or enchantress, thy face shone on me at dawn on the mountain. Thy lips called me hither, and I have come.

Deirdre: I call thee dear, Naisi. (1907 : 18)

A.E. makes good use of the prophecy that Deirdre has been born to bring ruin and disaster to the Sons of Usna, Emain Macha, and the Red Branch. She is going to wreck the whole world without meaning to do so. She is the instrument of divine justice. She is a concrete proof that men are unable to create an organic and unified society that can go on by an innate power latent in itself. It is not her own sin that brings that destruction. It is the working of the deities themselves:

Lavarcham: Thou art the light of the Ultonians, Naisi, but

thou art not the star of knowledge. The Druids spoke truly.
Through her, but not through her sin, will come the destruction
of the Red Branch. (1907: 19)

If **Deirdre** has failed as a play, it is because A.E. uses the legend as symbol. He is dealing with memories and dreams which have been purified by being removed from earth to heaven; they are an object of meditation and consequently unfit for literary treatment. That is why some critics considered **Deirdre** a dramatic failure. Stephen Gwynn saw the first production of *Deirdre* and wrote:

I cannot regard *Deirdre* as a good or a successful piece of drama. The author A.E. ranks high in my judgement as a lyrical poet, but even as a lyrical poet, his appeal must necessarily be to the few. Mystic in blood and bone, he stands habitually apart, and moves in ways of thought and emotion where it is difficult to follow him. (Gwynn, 1901: 1050)

Francis Hickley deplores the absence of reality from the characters: *Deirdre* and the rest are too consciously people out of a story... They seem to know exactly what is expected out of them, and do and say it without hesitation. There is no human transition from one mood to another, but a perfect knowledge of what is to come. So the play becomes like a frieze on which a well-known story is portrayed in a succession of attitudes. (Hickley, 1912: 253)

It is obvious that A.E. never meant his characters to be human creatures of flesh and blood, but mere phantoms floating in a dream. He chose the supernatural world for his play which was just a medium to voice out his views. That is why they seem to us like puppets tossed here and there by indomitable fate. *Deirdre* expresses this in the following speech:

Deirdre: But in this holy place there is peace, and the doom that Cathvah the Druid cried cannot fall. And oh, I feel, too, there is One here among us who pushes us silently from the place of life; and we are drifting away - from the world, on a tide which goes down into the darkness. (Hickley, 1912: 34)

But the play cannot be stripped of all its merits. We have to bear in mind that A.E. is a poet who can offer us the most beautiful imagery which he shares with his fellow-poets of Ireland. It is the land of fertile imagination, rich vocabulary, happy phrase and subtle sense of humour. For instance when *Deirdre* catches a glimpse of Naisi in her dream, her imagination enkindles by the beautiful prose, which is very like poetry, when she describes him to Lavarcham:

Deirdre: I cannot make clear to thee my remembrance of two of the hunters - but the tallest of the three - oh, he stood like a flame against the flameless sky, and the whole sapphire of the heavens seemed to live in his fearless eyes! His hair was

darker than the roven's wing; his face dazzling in its fairness...
I looked into his eyes, and he started like one who sees a vision,
and I know, dear foster - mother, he will come here; and he will
love me. Oh, I would die if he did not love me (Hickley, 1912:15)

When Naisi comes under the spell of Cathbad and he feels that he is sinking to the bottom of a fathomless sea, he utters the most exquisite words:

Naisi: Our galley is sinking - and no land in sight! I did not think the end would come so soon. O pale love, take courage. Is death so bitter to you? We shall go down in each other's arms; our hearts shall beat out their love together; and the last of life we shall know will be our kisses on each other's lips. (Ainle and Ardan stagger outside. There is a sound of blows and a low cry). Ainle and Ardan have sunk into the waters! We are alone. Still weeping! My bird, my bird, soon we shall fly together to the bright kingdom in the West, to Hy Brazil, amid the opal seas. (Hickley, 1912:50)

If A.E. did not follow up his practice in writing drama, it suffices that he left his mark on his contemporary playwrights who tried their hand at the same theme or rather the same legend. It was he, among others, who started this "national drama acted by Irish players, and interpreted in the native tradition, far removed from that of the English stage, commercial and otherwise" (Boyd, 1916: 310)

Notes:

1. Ceasa is a Gaelic word for that strong taboo to do or not to do a particular thing.
2. Pet name given to Ireland.

Bibliography :

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| A.E, George W. Russell. | Deirdre : A Drama in Three Acts, Mansel and Co., 1907. |
| | -Imaginations and Reveries , "The Character of Heroic Literature", Dublin, Maunsel and Co., 1915. |
| Boyd, Ernest A. | Ireland's Literary Renaissance , New York: John Lane Co., 1916. |
| Gwynn, Stephen (ed.) | "The Irish Literary Theatre and Its Affinities"
Fortnightly Review LXXVI, 1902. |
| | -Irish Literature and Drama in the English Language .
London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1936 |
| | "Poetry and the Stage". Fortnightly Review XCI 1909. |
| | "The Irish Theatre", Fortnightly Review LXXXI
December, 1902. |
| Herbert Howarth. | The Irish Writers 1880 - 1940 , New York: Hilland Wang, 1959. |
| Hickley, Francis. | "Deirdre" Irish Review 11, (July, 1912) |

Irish Free - State Official Handbook, Dublin: Talbot Press, 1912.

J.M. Synge,
Peter Ure.

Play. O.U.P 1969.

Yeats and playwright: **A Commentary on Character and Design of the Major Plays**, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.

W.B. Yeats.

Collected Plays. Macmillan, London: 1972.
