

The Comedies of J. M. Synge

Dr. Sushil Kumar Mishra

Associate Professor & Former-Head, Department of English, SRM University, Sonepat, (Haryana) India

Abstract

The career of John Millington Synge as a playwright was short. During these half a dozen years of his career as a dramatist, Synge could write strangely enough seven plays. The comedies of Synge outwardly make us rejoice at only their vitality and humor. Actually Synge displays human nature simple and crude, cunning and brutal, greedy, spiteful and changeable. At the same time this human nature is warm in the blood and capable of creativity. Synge's comic characters are comparable to Shakespeare's Falstaff and his associates, who could bring to life common earthly humanity, with a mingled grace of unredeemed flesh and blood before the so-called virtuous and judging world. No one has made so far a comprehensive study of all the four comedies of Synge taken together in the process of the development of Synge as a playwright. Among all four comedies only *The Playboy of the Western World* has received rather overmuch attention.

Key Words: Humor, irony, illusion, disillusion, Jollity, fun and symbols

Introduction:

This article or paper examines each of these four comedies of John Millington Synge and will try to find out which one is Synge's real masterpiece among his comedies. "The Shadow of the Glen" and "The Playboy of the Western World" have received too much importance and applause from British critics. All four comedies of Synge discuss the various theories of comedy as an art form in order to form a backdrop for the examination of Synge's comedies. This paper analyses elaborately each one of the four comedies of J. M. Synge.

In 1901, Synge wrote his first play, *When the Moon Has Set*, a full-length drama which he later condensed into one act. It tells the story of a young, landowning atheist who falls in love with a nun. Warned in advance by a paralleled, unhappy experience of a madwoman, the nun gives up her vows and

marries the man. This play was not worthy to be produced in Ireland at the time for ideological reasons. Two verse plays followed, composed in the spring of 1902. One is a pastoral about the contrast between youth and age; the other is about three Spanish fishermen who settle in Ireland with their wives but then drown.

In the summer of 1902 Synge achieved a new level of accomplishment. Staying at his mother's rented house in Wicklow, he drafted three plays: *Riders to the Sea*, *The Shadow of the Glen*, and *The Tinker's Wedding*. In these plays there is a rich spoken language of the Irish peasant characters who dominate Synge's mature works. In the preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge described how he learned the provincial dialect by listening to

the conversations of his mother's servant girls "from a chink in the floor."

The first of the three plays to be produced was *The Shadow of the Glen*. An ironic comedy set in Wicklow, its plot is based on a story Synge first heard on the Aran Islands and narrated in his book *The Aran Islands*. A tramp seeks shelter in the house of Nora Burke, whom he finds keeping watch over her "dead" husband. When the wife goes out, the husband revives, and reveals to the tramp that he has been faking his death in order to catch Nora at adultery. Nora returns with a young man, Michael Dara, who proposes marriage to her but is actually interested in her land and livestock. Overhearing the proposal, the husband angrily drives Nora out of the house to a life on the road with the tramp. Synge showed the manuscript of the play to Yeats and Lady Gregory, and on October 8, 1903, it became the first play to be staged by the Irish National Theatre Society, a company Yeats and Gregory founded.

The Shadow of the Glen drew a mixed reaction from the audience—the negative response was a result of the play not idealizing Irish life and womanhood. Consequently, two actors in the company resigned from the production. Shortly afterward, however, the play's fortunes improved with a Dublin revival in 1904, a well-received British tour, and translated productions in Berlin and Prague. In his review, Skelton pointed out that "It is in this play that the main themes of Synge's drama are first effectively ... displayed, and the main varieties of his characterization suggested." P. P. Howe, writing in his *J. M. Synge: A Critical Study*, stated, "There is no

one-act play in the language for compression, for humanity, and for perfection of form, to put near *In the Shadow of the Glen*."

Riders to the Sea was less controversial in its time than *The Shadow of the Glen*. A one-act tragedy set on the Aran Islands, *Riders to the Sea* features Maurya, an old woman from a fishing family, who has lost seven of her men folk to the sea—a husband, father-in-law, and five sons. During the course of the play, she loses the remaining male family member, her young son Bartley. The play was favorably reviewed by many Irish critics after its first performance on December 25, 1904. Some British critics also lauded the production when it opened in London two months later. Corkery in his *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* called *Riders to the Sea* "almost perfect." In an essay "The Plays of J. M. Synge" in *Dramatic Values*, C. E. Montague commented, "The play in a few moments thrills whole theatres," and concluded, "Synge has the touch that works in you that change of optics in a minute; ... you tingle with it from the start, ... and you cannot tell why, except that virtue goes out of the artist and into you."

Although Synge did not conceive *Riders to the Sea*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and *The Tinker's Wedding* to be a trilogy, thematic similarities are not hard to find. In *The Writings of J. M. Synge*, Skelton treats the three as a loosely connected trilogy, finding "conflict between folk belief and conventional Christian attitudes. In all three we are shown a woman trapped by circumstances, and in each one we are presented with a different aspect of her

predicament." Skelton later continued, "As we proceed from *Riders to the Sea*, through *In the Shadow of the Glen* to *The Tinker's Wedding*, the age of the central female character diminishes and the psychological complexity of the drama increases."

As Synge was revising *The Tinker's Wedding* in 1903, he was drafting his first three-act play, *The Well of the Saints*. He may have encountered the source for his plot at the Sorbonne, for it comes from a medieval French farce. Synge's play, set on the western mainland of Ireland across from the Arans, depicts a blind married couple, Martin and Mary, who have their sight miraculously restored only to discover that their happiness had been based on illusions. Returning to blindness, they recover the possibility of happiness. Yeats immediately accepted the play for the Abbey Theatre, where it opened on February 4, 1905. Again, local critics disapproved of his ambivalent presentation of Irish characters. In contrast, Howe pointed out "Synge's astonishingly certain sense of the theatre; his command of a dialogue apt and pointed for comedy, and capable at the same time of every effect of increased intensity; the racy clearness of the characterization, and the form and finish and personality of the whole work." Almost sixty years later, Skelton called *The Well of the Saints* "a play with all the light and shade of the human condition. It expresses more distinctly than any other of Synge's plays his belief in individualism, his relish of those that stand up for their right to their vision."

The Playboy of the Western World brought the most violent audience response in the

history of Dublin Theater. Hisses began during the third act and increased to a high volume by curtain time. The plot, featuring an idealization of patricide and an unhappy ending, was one source of audience hostility. The play is the story of Christy Mahon, a hapless but likeable young man who believes he has murdered his tyrannical father and who, for telling the tale, is welcomed as a hero by a group of country people. His romantic yarns make him sought-after by Pegeen. Later, Old Mahon, the father, shows up with a bandaged head, looking for his son. After another murder attempt, the two are ultimately reconciled when Christy turns the tables on his bullying father, who approves of Christy's newfound machismo. They wander off together, leaving the country women disappointed.

The specific line in the play that triggered the loudest disapprobation was Christy's insistence that he wanted only Pegeen Mike, and would not be attracted to "a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself." Both the reference to County Mayo girls as "chosen females" and the mention of an undergarment were thought offensive by many. *Freeman's Journal* called the play an "unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and worse still upon peasant girlhood." Performances that week were fully attended and difficult to hear above the racket. Police had to enforce security, making nightly arrests; Yeats, testifying against the rioters before a magistrate, helped ensure that they were fined. Controversy flared up again during 1909 revival and 1911 North American tour. Resolutions condemning *The Playboy of the*

Western World were passed in County Clare, County Kerry, and Liverpool. Irish critic Thomas O'Hagan, in his *Essays on Catholic Life*, called *The Playboy of the Western World* "a very rioting of the abnormal."

Conclusion:

The Play boy of the Western World is indeed the most popular comedy of Synge but popularity does not always mean excellence. The novels of Somerset Maugham were far more popular than the novels of E.M. Forster, for example. But nobody can say that *Human Bondage* is superior to *A Passage to India*. *The Paradise Lost* was the masterpiece of Milton despite his preference for *The Paradise Regained*. Similarly *The Well of the Saints* would remain the master piece of Synge despite his preference for *The Playboy of the Western World*

References:

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3. *In the Shadow of the Glen* [and] *Riders to the Sea*, Elkin Mathews (London), 1905.
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5. *The Playboy of the Western World* (produced in Dublin at Abbey Theatre, 1907), Maunsel (Dublin), 1907, J. W. Luce (Boston), 1911, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers (New York, NY), 1988, edited and preface by William-Alan Landes, Players Press, 1996, published as *The Playboy of the Western World: And Other Plays*, with an introduction by Edna O'Brien, Signet Classic (New York, NY), 1997, revived for a 100th anniversary production in New York, NY, 2004.
6. *The Tinker's Wedding* (produced in London at His Majesty's Theatre, 1909), Maunsel, 1908, J. W. Luce, 1911.
7. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (produced in Dublin at Abbey Theatre, 1910), John Quinn, 1910.

However, *The Playboy of the Western World* had powerful defenders besides Yeats and Lady Gregory. Howe felt that it "brought to the contemporary stage the most rich and copious store of character since Shakespeare." Charles A. Bennett, in his essay, "The Plays of John M. Synge" in *Yale Review*, lauded the play as "[Synge's] most characteristic work. It is riotous with the quick rush of life, a tempest of the passions with the glare of laughter at its heart." Norman , in an essay in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Playboy of the Western World"*, *A Collection of Critical Essays*, called the play "a dramatic masterpiece," and goes on to analyze it as a depiction of "the undeveloped poet coming to consciousness of himself as a man and as an artist."