

**The Theme of the Play Boy of the Western World****Dr. Sushil Kumar Mishra***Associate Professor and Former Head, Department of English, SRM University, Sonapat, (Haryana) India***Abstract**

The Playboy of the Western World is indeed the most popular comedy of J. M. Synge. It is regarded as Synge's masterpiece. He was an Irish playwright, poet, prose writer, and collector of folklore. But popularity does not mean excellence. The novels of Somerset Maugham were far more popular than the novels of E. M. Foster. But nobody can say that "Human Bondage" is superior to "A passage to India". We have to apply a similar balanced approach when we are sitting on judgement over the comparative values of each of the four plays of Synge. Fashion or temporary vogue has made The Playboy of the Western world more popular than the other plays of Synge during the first half of twentieth century. It was the time of the breaking of images. Shaw's plays became very popular because of that. Works like Strike the Father Dead were applauded by the critics only because of that. The Playboy of the Western World incorporates the idea of Strike the Father Dead. Christopher Mahon believes that he has struck old Mahon, his father dead. It is with this idea that the play starts. Previously a poor spirited lad, shy to the point of stupidity, Christy Mahon expands to the flattery of the village girl and wins promise of marriage from the bold – beauty Pegeen. Christy Mahon carries off the honours at the village sports, but in the hours of his triumph he is deflated by his father's appearance. Mahon, the father is intent on revenge for the blow with which Christy thought he was killed. Pegeen has consented to marry him with the words well. He was one of the co-founders of the Abbey Theatre. He is best known for the play The Playboy of the Western World, which caused riots during its opening run at the Abbey theatre. Synge wrote many well known plays, including "Riders to the Sea", which is often considered to be his strongest literary work. Although he came from an Anglo-Irish background, Synge's writings are mainly concerned with the world of the Roman Catholic peasants of rural Ireland and with what he saw as the essential paganism of their world view. A mysterious traveller, Christy Mahon, arrives in the village believing he has killed his father. He is looked upon as a hero by the locals and falls in love with one of them, Pegeen Mike, who agrees to marry him. But when Christy's murdered father appears on the scene, Christy's fortune takes a downturn with comic and tragic result.

**Key Words:** Irishmen's love for boasting, romantic attention, modernism, metaphors, Irony, poetic and evocative language

**Introduction**

Synge's travels on the Irish west coast inspired his most famous play, The Playboy of the Western World (1907). This morbid comedy deals with the moment of glory of a peasant boy who

becomes a hero in a strange village when he boasts of having just killed his father but who loses the villagers' respect when his father turns up alive. In protest against the play's unsentimental treatment of the Irishmen's love for boasting and their tendency to glamorize ruffians, the

audience rioted at its opening at Dublin's Abbey Theatre. Riots of Irish Americans accompanied its opening in New York (1911). Synge remained associated with the Abbey Theatre, where his plays gradually won acceptance, until his death.

In the seven plays he wrote during his comparatively short career as a dramatist, Synge recorded the colourful and outrageous sayings, flights of fancy, eloquent invective, bawdy witticisms, and earthly phrases of the peasantry from Kerry to Donegal. In the process he created a new, musical dramatic idiom, spoken in English but vitalized by Irish syntax, ways of thought, and imagery.

*The Playboy of the Western World* is a three-act play written by Irish playwright John Millington Synge and first performed at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on 26 January 1907.[1] It is set in Michael James Flaherty's public house in County Mayo (on the west coast of Ireland) during the early 1900s. It tells the story of Christy Mahon, a young man running away from his farm, claiming he killed his father. The locals are more interested in vicariously enjoying his story than in condemning the immorality of his murderous deed, and in fact, Christy's tale captures the romantic attention of the bar-maid Pegeen Mike, the daughter of Flaherty. The play is best known for its use of the poetic, evocative language of Hiberno-English, heavily influenced by the Irish language, as Synge celebrates the lyrical speech of the peasant Irish.

On the west coast of County Mayo [2] Christy Mahon stumbles into Flaherty's tavern. There he claims that he is on the run because he killed his own father. Flaherty praises Christy for his boldness,

and Flaherty's daughter Pegeen, falls in love with Christy, to the dismay of her betrothed, Shawn Keogh. Because of the novelty of Christy's exploits and the skill with which he tells his own story, he becomes something of a town hero. Many other women also become attracted to him, including the Widow Quin, who tries unsuccessfully to seduce Christy at Shawn's behest. Christy also impresses the village women by his victory in a donkey race, using the slowest beast.

Eventually Christy's father, Mahon, who was only wounded, tracks him to the tavern. When the townsfolk realize that Christy's father is alive, everyone, including Pegeen, shuns him as a liar and a coward. To regain Pegeen's love and the respect of the town, Christy attacks his father a second time. This time it seems that Old Mahon really is dead, but instead of praising Christy, the townspeople, led by Pegeen, binds and prepares to hang him to avoid being implicated as accessories to his crime. Christy's life is saved when his father, beaten and bloodied, crawls back to the scene, having improbably survived his son's second attack. As Christy and his father leave to wander the world, Shawn suggests he and Pegeen get married soon, but she spurns him. Pegeen laments betraying and losing Christy: "I've lost the only playboy of the western world."

The play widely regarded as Synge's masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*, was first performed at the Abbey Theatre on 26 January 1907. A comedy about apparent patricide, it attracted a hostile reaction from sections of the Irish public. The Freeman's Journal described it as "an unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men, and worse still upon Irish girlhood". Arthur Griffith, who

believed that the Abbey Theatre was insufficiently politically committed, described the play as "a vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform", and perceived a slight on the virtue of Irish womanhood in the line "... a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts ..."

Yeats summarised his view of Synge in one of the stanzas of his poem "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory":

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

At the top of Act I, Synge presents a picture of a rural, coastal Ireland that aligns quite closely with a romantic, even pastoral notion of peasantry and village life. The first image on stage clearly reflects this pastoral ideal. In a roughshod village pub, notably separated from much 'civilization,' a "wild-looking but fine girl" reads through a list of wedding goods which she expects to receive via fish wagon. The rural remove of the setting is immediately beyond question, and indeed proves important towards understand the characters that inhabit it.

The initial characterizations also conform to this pastoral ideal. Pegeen's sharp tongue and strong will fits well within the folkloric archetype of a peasant girl. Shawn, too, fits the role of her archetypal foil. A weak-willed but good-natured man, he is clearly not the best husband for her,

precisely because he is so inoffensive. The sharpness and humour with which she taunts him establishes a natural, recognizable scene that the audience easily accepts. Similarly, Michael and his cohorts are recognizable as an assembly of colourful but simple, god-fearing folk. Overall, the play is firmly rooted in naturalism at first, mostly owing to Synge's extremely credible use of language, which seems singular and yet conforms to the audience's expectation of uneducated peasantry.

Regardless, the play remains naturalistic until Christy's entrance, at which point this naturalism is replaced by a pronounced theatricality. Here, the archetypal picture of the peasant - as stalwart, loyal, and virtuous - is turned on its head, as Pegeen and company do not chide Christy for his crime, but instead reward him with their deferential appreciation. Christy's seeming willingness to flaunt morality marks him as brave and wise, as an excellent guardian for hearth and home. Not only does Michael offer the boy a job, but he also leaves him alone with his daughter! Further, after they are alone, Pegeen refers to Christy in almost storybook heroic terms, complimenting his dainty feet, noble brow and royal-sounding name.

We see that for the sake of a fine story - in this case, the story of Christy's deed - the characters suspend moral judgment. The link between words and action is of great importance in *The Playboy*, and Christy's own voice, his own powers of speech, grow increasingly confident and poetic as his own aspirations and poetic self-image blossoms in the face of such admiration.

When Christy first enters, he is dirty, frightened and starved half to death. He

seems particularly simple - he does not know the word "larceny" - and can hardly defend himself against the taunts of the locals. However, halfway through the act, his language and power of speech intensify as he describes his father: "he after drinking for weeks, rising up in the red dawn, or before it maybe, and going out into the yard as naked as an ash-tree in the moon of May, and shying clods against the visage of the stars till he'd put the fear of death into the screeching sows" (127).

This passage exemplifies Christy's still-raw terror of his father, depicting "his da" in mythical terms, as an adversary of nature and the universe. It is a remarkable irony that Christy is empowered by confessing so poetically his fear. Part of what made the play so challenging in its own day - and what makes it so unique even now - is that Synge presents a world defined by Church morality, but then reveals himself far more interested in the power of myth and story than in the limitations of that morality.

Most important to this intention are Pegeen's feelings for Christy. In other words, Pegeen identifies Christy's penchant for aspirational "talk" even before he consciously attempts to evoke a mythical figure in the description of his father. And yet this fascination is hardly due to her love of language; instead, it is colored by her consideration of his parricide as valorous. Because he seems to have the courage to flaunt morality, she finds his self-expression through language to be remarkable. Most fascinating of all, as we later learn, the entire parricide exists *only* in language, since Old Mahon remains alive.

In fact, this conflation of words with actions becomes one of the play's major themes. Because Christy comes to believe his own story, he refashions himself, nourishes his self-image until he is the great figure that the village believes him to be. Over and over again, he restates, reinterprets, the village's descriptions. In fact, these descriptions have a power in themselves, obvious when the Widow Quin arrives ready to snatch this boy up without even having laid eyes on him. The power of the story is far greater than the power of the particular individual, which Christy quickly recognizes as the ladies fight over him. They have both forgotten any sense of Catholic decorum, and are instead focused solely on having this vivacious storyteller for themselves. At the end of Act I, Christy revels in this newfound power: Speak it and it shall be. He drifts off to sleep "thinking this night wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by" (131).

One can already recognize the play's unique power by the end of Act I. It is all the more confounding for the easy naturalism of its first few conversations, since that naturalism is so effectively transcended by the end of the Act. Synge's understanding of theatre, as a synthesis of "reality" and "joy," is wonderfully captured here. The world he creates - one limited by morality and geography, where folks are desperate for anything new to catch their attention - is recognizable, while the story he tells - where that morality is far less important than the mythic possibilities of self-definition - is full to the brim with poetic extravagance and theatrical possibility.

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