

# Christy's Resurrection in J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and the "Resurrection" of Ireland

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## I

In the 1890s, when Ireland was reaching close to independence from England through political activities, there occurred a sudden political downfall and the death of the national leader Charles Stewart Parnell because of a scandal with Mrs. Kitty O' Shea, which caused political disillusionment and social mayhem among the general public. Consequently, this brought forth a new phase in Ireland's aspiration for independence, not only through parliamentary politics but by means of artistic expression of drama.

W. B. Yeats, a prominent poet of the "Protestant Ascendancy" class at that time, wanted to create an indigenous poetic drama, collecting materials from Irish myth, legend and folklore. When Yeats founded the Irish Literary Theatre with Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and George Moore in 1899, John Millington Synge, was not among them. However, Yeats had met Synge in Paris three years earlier and advised him to go to live on the Aran Islands for gathering materials to create Irish dramas centred on the Irish people and psyche:

Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people

themselves; express a life that has never found expression.<sup>(1)</sup>

The first visit to the Aran Islands in 1898 was a significant landmark for Synge, and his experiences there in several successive summers gave him true revelation. He collected samples for the characters and the themes for his plays during those periods, and he created remarkable Irish plays using those materials, the culmination of which is *The Playboy of the Western World*.<sup>(2)</sup>

In 1899 while Synge was gathering materials in the Aran Islands, Yeats was contriving to renovate the world of Irish drama where only professional English actors were on Dublin stages. Since no professional Irish players were available in those days, the Irish playwrights had to do with English actors who did not have the indigenous flavour and texture of Irish English accents.

Yeats founded the Irish Literary Society in London in 1891, and the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892. While he was trying to establish a base for the Irish dramatic movement, he happened to find the amateur actors Frank and Willie Fay brothers who were putting on sketches in a Dublin club.

After Yeats's negotiation with them was settled, the Fays and their company joined Yeats's dramatic movement, and went on to present plays in a Dublin concert hall for some years. It was on the 27th of December in 1907 that the Abbey Theatre opened with a double bill: Yeats's Cuchulain play *On Baile's Strand* and Lady Gregory's scandal comedy *Spreading the News*. Thanks to the financial support by a wealthy English woman named Annie Horniman, Yeats was able to secure a proper playhouse for the Irish Dramatic Movement. The opening of the theatre was an epoch-making event for Ireland, not just culturally but also politically.

At first, the relationship between the nationalists and the Abbey Theatre was amicable; when Yeats's *Kathleen ni Houlihan* was staged, it was welcomed enthusiastically as a political propaganda playlet for Irish independence and a symbol of nationalism by patriotic people. The newly established Abbey Theatre encouraged Irish dramatists to write about their own country and their problems.

After this came Synge, who first presented on the stage an unfaithful wife in *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and then depicted young village women admiring a stranger who claimed he had killed his father in *The Playboy*. Nationalists and traditional Irish people, however, became infuriated at his "wrong" presentation of the Irish women in drama.

When *The Playboy* was given its first week of performances at the Abbey Theatre in January of 1907, the performance was shouted down every night by Dublin audience affronted by the violent nature of the play and by its less-than-sympathetic image of Irish people in there. Apart from being a Protestant, Synge was known as a non-believer, which made the play's impression on the audience far worse than it should have. The pious Catholic people felt provoked by a non-religious person of the Protestant Ascendancy class.

In his youth Synge became skeptic about Christianity because of his reading of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* after his own direct experiences in the Wicklow area. Wandering around the local hills and mountains and seeing the birds and animals closely, he eventually abandoned the evangelical faith of his family and ceased going to church. Yet, contrary to the nationalists' understanding, Synge rejected the social and political beliefs of the "Protestant Ascendancy" class, and claimed himself as a nationalist. This transformation is described in his journal:

Soon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the Kingdom of Ireland. My politics went round from a vigorous and unreasoning loyalty to the temperate Nationalism. Everything Irish became sacred . . . and had a charm that was neither quite human nor divine, rather perhaps as if I had fallen in love with a goddess . . .<sup>(3)</sup>

The main objections to Synge's *The Playboy* were on moral and religious grounds. The nationalists claimed that no Irish villagers would shelter, let alone admire and welcome a murderer and no Irish woman would spend the night together with a total stranger who had committed parricide, an unimaginably horrendous crime in Ireland in those days.

Lady Gregory held firm against this bitter criticism of the play by Catholics, though she herself did not like the contents of the play. Elizabeth Coxhead gives us the account of Lady Gregory's basic stance to her contemporary society and Synge's play.

Her courage was the more admirable in that she did not really like *The Playboy of the Western World* herself: a sad but explicable fact. She was a Victorian, and of her time; Synge an Edwardian, and ahead of his. Christy, the Playboy, looks forward to the beatniks and hippies of today. Lady Gregory was very much on the side of youth, and rebellious youth at that; she had, in her quiet way, rebelled against parental conservatism herself. But she wanted the rebellion to be in favour of some fine cause, the liberation of Ireland, or the fighting of a famine, or simply the assertion of the artist as a king among men.<sup>(4)</sup>

Yeats also fought adamantly against his detractors, making a speech at

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the public debate on the Abbey stage defending *The Playboy*. Yeats later called Synge as the greatest dramatic genius of Ireland for his significant contribution to the development of Irish theatre.

William Fay, who played the title role, foresaw troubles; from his experience as an actor on Irish stages he knew that strong violent emotions enacted on the stage would affect the audience's emotions and probably upset them. So the Fay brothers asked Synge to make the heroine Pegeen a little less rough and provocative. Synge, however, stuck to his principle and did not change the violent nature of his play, which inevitably backfired on him. His physical health deteriorated in the face of the audience's hostile reception and critics' bitter comments, though he had readily anticipated both. What actually happened at the Abbey Theatre on the presentation of *The Playboy* is well described by F. L. Lucas.

On the opening night (a Saturday) the audience, though quiet through the first two Acts, burst into hisses and cat-calls half-way through Act III at the words 'all bloody fools' and when it came to the mention of the unmentionable word 'shift'—'a drift of chosen females standing in their shifts itself—the howls rose to pandemonium. Fighting, it is said, broke out in the stalls, and it looked as if the stage would be stormed.<sup>(5)</sup>

On the Monday night a riot was deliberately organized; some forty youths in front of the pit shouted, stamped, and blew trumpets; most of the piece had to be played in dumb-show. And night after night these tumults continued, despite the police.<sup>(6)</sup> . . .

On the last (Saturday) evening, it is reported, there were five hundred police keeping order in the theatre and its neighbourhood—police lining the

walls, police sitting in a row along the centre of the pit.<sup>(7)</sup>

It was Lady Gregory who called the police, and asked her nephew at Trinity College to bring his fellow students to support the play. Ironically, when they sang “God save the King” in the theatre, this inflamed the anger of nationalists and they denounced the Abbey Theatre as an institution financially supported by an English woman to defame the Irish people. It was truly ironic that a play for the Irish people had to be protected from the Irish people by the police, a symbol of English colonialism. To support the nationalists’ cause and out of disgust at Synge’s “infamous” play, the then famous Irish playwright William Boyle, who was known by *The Eloquent Dempsey* and *The Mineral Workers*, withdrew his plays from the Abbey Theatre. Arthur Griffith, who assumed the first presidency when Ireland became independent, called *The Playboy* “a vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform<sup>(8)</sup>”. Weldon Thornton also picks up several points for the typical cause of the protest thus:

The drama was denounced by reviewers for faults ranging from dirty language and libel upon the Irish character, to psychological inconsistency or opacity, and tonal and generic confusion. The putative reasons for the riots were the depiction of the Irish peasants’, especially the women’s apparent worship of this father-killer, and Christy’s phrase about “a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe<sup>(9)</sup>”.

Even three years after Synge’s death, the American tour of the Abbey Players in 1911–12 faced a rough reception in New York where various

vegetables, including potatoes, were thrown onto the stage, and in Philadelphia arrest-warrants were issued for the company for performing an immoral and indecent play.

These hostile reactions were made on the assumption that Synge had presented an improbable situation and false feelings of the Irish people as if he set out to defame them. As for Synge, his stance was simply to present real Irish people on the stage. Synge took the story from a real incident; the story of *The Playboy* was from an anecdote he heard from an old man on his first visit to the Aran Islands. Synge recounted the old man's tale in his journal.

He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related. They hid him in a hole . . . . In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America.

This impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. If a man has killed his father, and is already sick and broken with remorse, they can see no reason why he should be dragged away and killed by the law.<sup>(10)</sup>

According to the Aran people, the man who did something wrong in a sudden fit of temper and had remorse what he had done would be

sufficiently punished by himself, without any need of the physical force of the police or sentences by the law courts. Those symbolic institutions set up by the oppressors were often the cause of the Aran people's sufferings, and they believed that those institutions could do nothing good for him.

Synge, after gleaning the materials in the Aran Islands, went to learn the dialogues in West Kerry, where people still used Elizabethan English idioms. Synge always tried to be faithful to the reality of rural Ireland, and that is why he rejected any attempt at classification of *The Playboy*. After the riots in Dublin Synge expressed his reasons for depicting real Irish country people and their surroundings however contrived it might seem to Dublin people.

In the same way you see—what it seems so impossible to get our Dublin people to see, obvious as it is — that the wildness and, if you will, vices of the Irish peasantry are due, like their extraordinary good points of all kinds, to the richness of their nature—a thing that is priceless beyond words.<sup>(11)</sup>

Now let us see whether his points are justifiable or not, looking closely at the plot of *The Playboy*.

## II

At the beginning of the first act of *The Playboy* Pegeen Mike, “a wild-looking but fine girl, of about twenty<sup>(12)</sup>”, the heroine of the play and daughter of the publican Michael, is alone in a shebeen (pot-house), in a remote depopulated area in the north-west corner of Mayo. She is listing up and reading aloud the orders of clothes and refreshments for her wedding from

Castlebar, the nearby biggest town: "Six yards of stuff for to make a yellow gown. . . . A pair of lace boots . . . . A hat is suited for a wedding day" (p. 176).

There awkwardly enters Shawn Keogh, fat and meek Pegeen's fiancé, wondering if he is allowed in, since there is no one except Pegeen there. Though Shawn does not seem a good selection as husband, Pegeen has a few options because most young men have left the village;

Pegeen: . . . you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits. (p. 177)

Compared with men with physical or mental defects, Shawn Keogh is a far better option. Though Pegeen's ideal person might be a courageous and romantic young man, she has to compromise; Shawn is approved by her father, and endorsed by the local Catholic clergyman Father Reilly, who has an overshadowing presence on the village people, especially on Shawn, though Father Reilly himself never appears on the stage.

After a while Michael brings in his two friends, Philly and Jimmy, and is ready to set off for attending Kate Cassidy's wake. Here the nature of juxtaposition of this play is well shown in the contrast between the preparation for the wedding and for the wake. Similar contrasts will be shown later in the play: safety inside the house and menace outside, and monotonous village life and seemingly adventurous life outside.

When Pegeen reproaches her father at the prospect of her being left alone, Michael, who has heard of a queer fellow in the ditch, suggests that Shawn should keep her company while he and his friends attend Kate Cassidy's wake. Pegeen is scared because Shawn also witnessed 'a kind of

fellow above in the furzy ditch, groaning wicked like a maddening dog' (p. 178). Michael thinks there is nothing wrong with Shawn's keeping company with Pegeen, as they are engaged. However, timid Shawn is terrified of such impropriety. He seems to be a pious Catholic, almost too prudish, and tries to avoid Father Reilly's possible admonishment for having spent overnight with a single woman under the same roof. He answers in horrified confusion:

Shawn: . . . I'm afeard of Father Reilly; and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard I did the like of that?' (p. 179)

Yet his seemingly plausible argument for trying to stay away from Pegeen on the grounds of religion and moral code is not convincing enough; his fear of the shadowy figure in the dark is more the cause of his desire to go home. As Michael and others forcibly urge him to stay, Shawn dashes through the door to run away, leaving his clothes behind in Michael's hand. Shawn is the embodiment of all that is safe and conventional, and he is devoid of imaginative liveliness and vigour.

Only a few minutes after leaving the shebeen, Shawn dashes back there as he sees a "queer dying fellow's beyond looking over the ditch. . . . God help me, he's following me now and if he's heard what I said, he'll be having my life . . ." (p. 180). The appearance of any stranger in such a remote village is in itself a big event, especially when he is about to appear from the dark in a threatening manner. Just then a mud-stained Christy Mahon<sup>(13)</sup> timidly slinks into the door. He is 'a slight young man . . . very tired and frightened and dirty' (p. 180). He seems to be exhausted from a long journey; he might be evicted, or exiled from his native town whatever the

reason might be. Christy asks Michael, "If it often the polis do be coming into this place, master of the house?" (p. 181).

When they sense he is running away from the police, they become very curious about the kind of crime he has committed. They question him one after another whether he stole something, molested a young woman, or was evicted from his land, or violently lifted his arm against bailiffs, land agents, or landlords. Christy does not say yes to any of those questions; when Pegeen taunts him, "You did nothing at all" (p. 183), he finally speaks out the reason for his flight; "I killed my poor father"<sup>(14)</sup> (p. 183).

Quite contrary to Christy's expectation that he would be condemned and harshly treated as a criminal, they regarded him, surprisingly, as if he were a hero and they marveled at the deed; they admired his rebellious courage as if he had rebelled against the oppressive British authority.

According to today's moral and value judgments, a man who kills his father being acclaimed like this, for whatever reason, is unacceptable, and asking him to protect an innocent girl from an unknown danger is implausible, as he himself is a "danger". Pegeen cannot be safe with the criminal. But as Synge wrote in his journal, people in western Ireland believed in the good nature of human beings, and they were convinced that any human being would never kill any other human being unless there was a serious reason for it, or from a sudden burst of emotion which was triggered by some justifiable cause.

Synge explained the reason for the sympathetic treatment of the criminal by the Aran people; the authority is equivalent of the oppressor to the Irish peasants. In Christy's case, eleven days must have had a sedative effect on him, and he is now innocuous in Mayo, having been exiled from his own country; this self-exile is as heavy as death sentence for him. George Bretherton points out in his essay "A Carnival Christy and a Playboy for

All Ages” thus:

Though his initial period of wandering is relatively short-lived, its devastating impact on Christy and all those who sympathized with him in both the play and the audience should not be underestimated, for exile in the minds of most Irish people was equated with death.<sup>(15)</sup>

In this sense there is nothing strange about Michael's asking Christy to stay with Pegeen while he and his friends are out for the wake since Christy is equated as “death, ” and has no power to harm anyone alive. In addition, Michael asks Christy to start working as a pot-boy in his shebeen from the next day. Christy willingly accepts this offer. As the problem of finding Pegeen's chaperon has now been solved, Michael can leave with an easy mind: “. . . . with a man killed his father holding danger from the door” (p. 185). Due to the unexpected turn of events Shawn becomes jealous, being ousted from the premises, though he himself is the one who first declined the chance to stay with Pegeen. Pegeen, on the other hand, is delighted to be able to monopolize a new hero, and sends Shawn off slightly : “Go on, then, to Father Reilly and let him put you in the holy brotherhoods, and leave that lad to me” (p. 186).

Christy seems to Pegeen to fulfill the three prerequisites of a romantic suitor; having an “Earnest”-type<sup>(16)</sup> of a fine quality name Christy, being a man from an unknown county (mysteriously seductive), and being a fugitive from justice (a heroic figure).

When relaxed, Christy gradually becomes talkative and starts to confidently recount his background and his “heroic” deed on his father. Yet, while his confidence is at a high, his self-esteem is shattered out of fear when he hears a knocking at the door. It is not the police but Pegeen's

neighbour the Widow Quin who comes in; she claims that she has been instructed by Father Reilly to take Christy to her own house. Her argument cannot be trusted. If Father Reilly does not approve Christy of being with Pegeen under the same roof during the night, why does he allow her to do the same for Christy? The Widow Quin seems to have a desire to rob this exciting young man of Pegeen. Her motive is immediately detected by Pegeen, and she refuses her "offer". The Widow Quin, a woman of about thirty, is lonely enough to want a man for herself, and pretty enough to be a serious contender to obtain a new bounty Christy.

The scene which follows this has rich comical elements. The verbal battle between the two women is hilarious; both of them try to attract Christy and make him stay overnight with them. Anything sensational is most welcome for the villagers in a rather quiet neighbourhood in Mayo where usually nothing spectacular or exciting happens. Therefore the new arrival of a young man is a source of great excitement to all the girls in the village, including Pegeen and the Widow Quin.

Behind the scenes, Shawn most probably has asked the Widow Quin to get rid of this rival out of Pegeen's house, hopefully to the Widow Quin's where she will surely welcome this fresh newcomer. When asked to decide which place he prefers, he is perplexed as he has never been in a position to choose one woman of the two. But, pushed by Pegeen, Christy timidly says to the Widow Quin, 'God increase you; but I'm potboy in this place, and it's here I liefer stay' (p. 191), and thus opts for Pegeen, who has provided supper and prepared his bed. After both women are gone, he expresses his surprises for the miraculous happenings, "—two fine women fighting for the likes of me—till I'm thinking this night wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by' (p. 192). This final speech by Christy at the end of Act I induces cynical laughter among the audience.

The social background and the local atmosphere Synge unwraps here are at the time of agrarian troubles and suppression from the British military presence in Ireland just after the Boer War. Christy's sudden appearance in a suppressed society gives the villagers a larger-than-life heroic figure, almost illusionary, and what happens in the first act is meant to sow uncertainty and expectation among the audience about what the coming scenes will be like. Synge's dramatic skill is clearly shown here in the first act where all the major characters, except Old Mahon, are introduced.

Act II opens with the next morning; Pegeen has gone somewhere to get the goat's milk. Christy, "looking bright and cheerful" in the same joyous mood, starts to clean Pegeen's boots and counts jugs, cups, glasses and bottles on the dresser as if trying to confirm himself as a newly appointed potboy.

Just after Christy washes his face, he starts to look at himself in the looking-glass in a self-conceited manner. Suddenly four colleens dash into the shebeen with gifts; they are very curious about Christy as they have heard the rumour of his gallant story. They gather round him admiringly and offer eggs, butter, cake and a boiled pullet, one by one. Immediately afterwards, the Widow Quin reappears, and Christy is now surrounded by five young female admirers. They request Christy to retell his story. In order to satisfy their curiosity Christy exaggeratedly describes the scene of the killing of his father.

Christy's self-confidence is inevitably raised high by their compliments and flattery. Realising his story of "parricide" increases their admiration, Christy adds embellishments every time he tells the story; his new version is "I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet' (p. 197).

Enchanted with this hero, they propose to "drink a health to the wonders of the western world" (p. 197), and Christy and the Widow Quin drink with their arms linked. Just then Pegeen comes back with a milk-can and stands aghast at the sight. Pegeen, who thought she had the monopoly on Christy, becomes furious and immediately dismisses those flirtatious five women from her premises, and puts Christy back in his original place by admonishing him with a terrifying account of a hanging reported in the papers. She adds 'with a pack of wild girls the like of them do be walking abroad with the peelers, talking whispers at the fall of night' (p.199). Frightened and dejected, Christy is now ready to take to the road again. However, as after he finishes preparing to go and about to depart, totally dejected, Pegeen finally relents and calls him back saying ". . . I going off stretching out the earth between us, the way I'll not be waking near you another dawn of the year till the two of us do arise to hope or judgment with the saints of God . . ." (p. 201).

While Pegeen is making up with Christy, Shawn runs in accompanied by the Widow Quin. Both of them want to separate Christy from Pegeen: in Shawn's case for his relationship with Pegeen, and in the Widow Quin's case for acquiring Christy for herself. After successfully tricking Pegeen away from Christy on a pretext of the need of her attention to the "mountainy sheep eating cabbages in Jimmy's field" (p. 202), Shawn offers Christy a ticket to the Western States, a new hat, breeches and coat, and stresses that it is not a good match between Pegeen and Christy because of her "devil's own temper" (p. 203).

The Widow Quin persuades Christy into trying on the clothes anyway, at least for the mule race held on that day. After Christy is gone to the adjoining room to try on the clothes, the Widow Quin bargains with desperate Shawn over the rewards for the successful removal of Christy

from Pegeen.

When Christy emerges in Shawn's new smart clothes, he behaves more arrogant than ever, and has apparently decided to stay with Pegeen. After Shawn goes to the racecourse, the Widow Quin is now alone with Christy, who euphorically repeats the story of the blow he dealt his father; this time his version is far more exorbitant than before: "one blow to the breeches belt" (p. 204).

Just as he is about to leave for the racecourse, however, he sees his father Old Mahon approaching to the shebeen; he staggers back and shouts, "Saints of glory! Holy angles from the throne of light! . . . It's the walking spirit of my murdered da!" (p. 205). When the door is pushed open and Old Mahon appears on threshold, Christy darts in behind the door. Old Mahon comes in, and tells the Widow Quin that he is chasing his own son, showing his head wounds. During his talk, he discloses to her that Christy is the useless puny worker and "the laughing joke of every female woman where four baronies meet . . ." (p. 206), and ". . . he was a fool of men, the way from this out he'll know the orphan's lot, with old and young making game of him, and they swearing, raging, kicking at him like a mangy cur" (p. 213).

After Old Mahon has said almost everything he wanted to say, the Widow Quin tells a lie about Christy's whereabouts, and sends him away in the wrong direction. Here, the arrival of Old Mahon adds a new dimension to the development of the plot. The second act ends rather ironically with Christy hailed off to the races by the admiring village girls. But the audience wonder how long Christy will be able to hide away from his father.

In the third Act, Michael is still too drunk after the wake, and Shawn is dispatched to bear him home with the ass-cart, but Michael's two friends are back in the shebeen. They have heard of Christy's feat at the sports,

and marvel at it. Yet, they also wonder what has happened to the dead body of his father and argue over whether Christy will be arrested for his crime. While they are talking, Old Mahon comes in and suddenly interrupts, explaining the injuries to his head: "It was my son hit me. Would you believe that?" (p. 211). The Widow Quin cleverly calms him down with a glass of poteen and says to the others that he is raving mad, totally unconnected with Christy. While Old Mahon is disdaining his son, there arises a great burst of cheering outside. The mule race has started. Four of them mount on the bench to watch the race on the sands through the window. The excitement seems to be over with Christy's victory.

There and then Old Mahon recognises his son by his way of spitting, so he starts to go out to catch him. The Widow Quin cunningly persuades the villagers to stay away because he is not sane, and at the same time she also says to Old Mahon he is now in danger of being treated as a maniac, being pelted with stones and drowned in the sea. Hearing this, Old Mahon decides to leave the shebeen obediently, following the Widow Quin's advice.

Old Mahon's departure is immediately succeeded by Christy's entry, who is triumphant with success. He is treated as a "hero" by the villagers gathering around him. After a while, when the crowd leaves to watch the last sporting event, Christy is now left alone with Pegeen. Having won the race, Christy is now proud of his achievement. Being almost overconfident by her admiration for him, he expresses his love to her.

This love scene is cut short by the return of heavily drunk Michael reeling along, supported by Shawn. Seeing them both, Pegeen declares that she will marry Christy. Appalled by his daughter's sudden and bold declaration without any previous talk with him, Michael tries to stop this undesirable marriage, making Shawn jealous of the possible loss of his fiancée. But Shawn, facing murderous Christy, has no courage, and

demeans himself in the eyes of Michael. Shawn is utterly incapable of changing Pegeen's intention of marrying Christy, and resigns himself: "I'd be afraid to be jealous of a man did slay his da" (p. 221).

Disgusted by this 'quaking blackguard' (p. 222), becoming his son-in-law, Michael accepts the union of Pegeen and Christy. But this blessing atmosphere is completely broken by the third entry of Old Mahon; he rushes in, immediately knocks down Christy, and starts beating him in front of the villagers.

Christy tries to deny his relationship with Old Mahon, but no one is convinced; Pegeen is bitterly disappointed and repudiates this "hero": ". . . he after doing nothing but hitting a soft blow and chasing northward in a sweat of fear. Quit off from this" (p. 223). Pegeen, joined with all the villagers, mocks at him as an imposter for his tall tale: ". . . he an ugly liar was playing off the hero, and the fright of men" (p. 224).

Thus, in a complete reversal of fortune, his glory is miserably gone, and Christy finds himself faced with hostile villagers. Here Christy desperately tries to win back Pegeen's love and admiration; he defiantly takes up the loy, challenges his father, and chases him out when he runs through the door. Christy eventually strikes him again, this time, harder than before, to kill him. Synge's comical treatment of the Oedipal theme is most effective here.

After the deadly deed is done, Christy expects Pegeen's love for him will return: 'I'm thinking, from this out, Pegeen'll be giving me praises, the same as in the hours gone by' (p. 225). Contrary to his expectations, Christy cannot regain the villagers' admiration, nor Pegeen's; her last remark is ". . . there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (p. 227). What was once a "gallous story" (p. 227), a brave act on an unknown person in an unknown distant place, almost a fictitious incident, has now become reality,

a dirty deed performed under her nose. Christy is at first deluded into believing himself a hero, and he has behaved like a hero as he is given the opportunity to play the expected role.

Now that Christy is a murderer, the villagers try to secure him with a rope. The following scene is quite farcical; as they are all drunk after the wake and Shawn is too cowardly, they cannot secure him with the noose around his neck. It is Pegeen who does it, and burns Christy's leg to make him let go of the table leg, as Christy puts up resistance after first biting Shawn in the calf.

The villagers are ready to hand him to the police when Old Mahon makes his last entry on all fours again, still alive. The villagers are frightened by this ghastly sight. Now Old Mahon expresses his contempt for them and tries to leave with his son. But this time their roles seem to be reversed; Christy in charge. He refuses to take orders from his father; Christy goes as a "gallant captain" to Mahon's part as a "heathen slave".

After Pegeen's rejection triggered by her disillusionment, Christy, as if Christ had been resurrected, expresses his gratitude to the villagers and declares heroically:

Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me  
a likely gaffer in the end of all; the way I'll go romancing through a  
romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the Judgment Day.  
(p. 229)

After Christy and Old Mahon are gone, Michael welcomes everything getting back to normal. Yet, Pegeen's bitter lament on the loss of the Playboy reverberates before the curtain falls: "Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World (p. 229).

### III

After we follow the plot of *The Playboy* and the historical facts about Synge and the reactions of the people to this play at the beginning of the twentieth century, we inevitably notice the parallel between the fictional character Christy and Christy's creator Synge himself. Joseph Ronsley points out the similarities between them:

Each starts off in a strange "country" . . . . Each becomes a poet, finding his subject and his idiom among the peasants of western Ireland, and each must accept the paradox that although the substance and inspiration of his art come from those people, he cannot remain an integral part of their lives; his art, his insistence on "the power of a lie" and on yoking together joy and reality, arouse the scorn of his subjects and desired audience. The rejection of *The Playboy* by Dublin and Irish-American audiences is ironically foreshadowed, and perhaps even orchestrated, by the rejection of Christy by Pegeen and the villagers.<sup>(17)</sup>

This analysis endorses Synge's understanding of the power of a lie as a motivation of enhancing our capacity. It is illustrated in the transformation of Christy from a wimp to a hero through a mock-heroic period when he is showered by flattery and compliments for his mistaken identity. Christy is visibly affected by the illusion created by lies about a life he has never experienced; in Christy's case, it is by the unexpected admiration bestowed upon him. Pegeen is also affected by her own illusion; in Pegeen's case, her hero-worship mentality is suddenly awakened by the vision of a "hero" in Christy.

In *The Playboy* the villagers living in a remote area have few opportunities to encounter something or somebody that arouses their curiosity and interest in their monotonous daily life; they are always hankering for creating wondrous myths out of any sort of illusion. If there were heroes among them, those would be inevitably familiar figures. In the case of Christy, he is a total stranger to them; his killing Father is something unheard of and regarded as courageous because they think Christy "should have had good reason for doing the like of that" (p. 183), and he "should be a great terror when his temper's roused" (p. 184).

At the beginning, Christy vacillates between being boastful and frightened, and between fear and joy, depending on Pegeen's admiration or reproval. However, Christy gradually becomes self-assertive and confident, almost overconfident through the reception he is given, especially, that of the Widow Quin and Shawn. His triumph in the country sports event is a typical example of his spiritual development and his increased power and skill owing to self-confidence. Even at the time of his apparent final downfall, Christy sees himself possessing the strength and courage necessary to be a hero, and Pegeen endorses it with her final cry of desperation. Synge seems to have illustrated in *The Playboy* that "the power of a lie" can modify reality. In contrast to Christy, Pegeen's victimization is ironical; she is lost in the fiction she was willing to take part in creating. Weldon Thornton also points out the importance of the power of a lie: "In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy truly is remade by "the power of a lie", and we find Synge presenting a more dynamic relation between idea and reality."<sup>(18)</sup>

From a biographical point of view, Synge's desperate desires and wishful thinking may be seen here. Though physically weak, Synge must have wished to be a "hero" to his love Molly Allgood; for that reason, he

needed her encouragement and admiration to raise him up, possibly even to keep him alive. Sensing his imminent death, Synge must have felt absolute loneliness while he was writing *The Playboy*. It is reflected in this play; Pegeen has to be left alone at the beginning as well as at the end, and the Widow Quin was living alone, and the stranger Christy was miserably hiding alone outside in the dark. Loneliness is emphasized all through in this play. Synge enunciates this by the speeches of Christy's and Pegeen's, and also of the Widow Quin's;

WQ: It's lonesome this hour crossing the hill, and if he [Christy] won't come along with me, I'd have a right maybe to stop this night with yourselves. (pp. 191-92)

Christy: What would any be but odd men and they living lonesome in the world?

Christy: How would a lovely, handsome woman the like of you be lonesome . . . .

Pegeen: It's only lettering on you are to be lonesome, the way you'd get around me now. (p. 200)

Christy: . . . but I was lonesome all times, and born lonesome, I'm thinking, as the moon of dawn. (p. 201)

Christy: . . . and I can say so, working at your side, and I not lonesome from this mortal day. (p. 201)

Though Synge depicted the loneliness of the western Irish people, he found poetry in their speech. In a way, Synge's visualization of the crude

lonely life of the Aran, Wicklow, Mayo and Kerry districts was not just to give a contrast to Dubliners, the people of the Eastern World, whose view of life Synge did not always approve or appreciate. In choosing the country people in Mayo, Synge tried to present the life of country people in the wild west, a place where Synge found poetry in their daily conversation. Synge writes in the Preface to *The Playboy*:

. . . in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. . . On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed . . . .<sup>(19)</sup>

That is Synge's basic idea; he was lonely and his goal in creating drama was for poetic reasons. Synge wrote to the press after the play was bitterly criticized by the public; "*The Playboy* is not a play with a 'purpose' in the modern sense of the word."<sup>(20)</sup> This suggests that he thought Henrik Ibsen's and Bernard Shaw's presentations of their contemporary society are didactically one-sided and narrow-viewed with no poetic quality in their plays. In the Preface to *The Playboy*, he attacked the Norwegian playwright who, he thought, was "dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words,"<sup>(21)</sup> Ann Saddlemyer puts forth her opinion on this: "In the creation of Christy, Synge implies that there is a place for dreams in our lives and that the imagination may yield to us what is joyous and full in reality . . . ."<sup>(22)</sup>

Although he tried to draw country people rather humorously, still true to life, Synge believed that his work would be appreciated; he wrote in the

Preface to *The Tinker's Wedding*, "I do not think that these country people, who have so much humour themselves, will mind being laughed at without malice, as the people in every country have been laughed at in their own comedies"<sup>(23)</sup>. This was too optimistic a view of Synge's; *The Playboy* was taken too seriously by Irish audience, as was *The Tinker's Wedding*. Synge never expected that people would think he was defaming Irish life and Irish people, especially women, through "derogatory" speeches in the more farcical scenes. Ramesh C. Chakraborty writes:

What has animated him to write this play as well as his other plays is his sympathy and passion for the Irish peasant life with its humour and contradictions, its bite and exhilaration. He himself says in his preface to *The Tinker's Wedding*, "In the greater part of Ireland, however, the whole people, from the tinkers to the clergy, have still a life, and view of life, that are rich and genial and humorous. I do not think that these country people, who have so much humour themselves, will mind being laughed at without malice, as the people in every country have been laughed at in their own comedies."<sup>(24)</sup>

Though Synge's intention was not well understood at the time, all of the aesthetic and philosophical essence of his plays is present in *The Playboy*. Weldon Thornton writes:

*The Playboy* entails all the elements of Synge's idea on drama and his aesthetic sense. Though the comic parts look frivolously superficial, Synge's overall treatment of the theme is serious in nature. His agnosticism, mixed with pessimism because of his fatal Hodgkins disease, made him think life ephemeral . . . .<sup>(25)</sup>

Synge's idea of determinism is in the background of *The Playboy* as well as in *Riders to the Sea* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. In Christy's case, he was resurrected through the "passing rite" in a Mayo village, and he has become a fully grown adult in the end. The characters in Synge's plays are doomed, yet they relish life, however ephemeral it might be, and regard the consequence of events as inevitable. Yet, there is a significant difference in the treatment of life and death between Synge's plays and, for example, the plays of the Absurd theatre. In Synge's plays the doomed characters relish life, and regard death as a release, whereas the Absurd theatre treats life and death both as futile and meaningless.

Because of his illness, Synge always associated himself with death; Synge's determinism is always present in the background of his plays. Synge left only seven plays in ten years during which he wrote *The Playboy of the Western World*. This play is now recognized as a comic masterpiece. Ramesh C. Chakraborty emphasizes the importance of Synge's plays as epoch-making events for the development of Irish comedy:

The play is undoubtedly a landmark in the modern revival of comedy. An exquisite realistic picture of Irish peasant life, the play, with its freshness of outlook and spontaneity of expression, has brought Synge immense reputation. It is built on a tale told by the oldest man of Inishmaan and recorded in The Aran Islands.<sup>(26)</sup>

Synge's achievement, though in a short period, left him as equal as W. B. Yeats and Sean O'Casey in the history of Irish dramatic movement. Since the beginning of the twentieth century many Irish dramatists have followed his original style, for example, Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for*

Godot, John. B. Kean in *Sive*, and Martin McDonagh in The Aran Islands Trilogy (*The Cripple of Inishmaan*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, *The Pillowman*). Today Synge's greatness is fully acknowledged and is regarded as the Father of Irish Drama produced at the Abbey Theatre. The year 2009 marks a centenary year since his death, and therefore, I believe, his achievements will be reassessed and the value of his work will be fully proven and acknowledged this year.

#### Notes

- (1) W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1961), p. 299.
- (2) The subsequent references to *The Playboy of the Western World* will be abbreviated to *The Playboy*, except in some quotations where the title is fully written.
- (3) J. M. Synge, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, (ed.) Alan Price, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 13.
- (4) Elizabeth Coxhead, "Synge and Lady Gregory", in S. B. Bushrui (ed.) *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight: A Centenary tribute to John Millington Synge 1871-1909* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks: Colin Smythe, 1972), pp. 155-56.
- (5) F. L. Lucas, *The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats, and Pirandello* (London: Cassell, 1963), pp. 203-04.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- (9) Weldon Thornton, *J. M. Synge and the Western Mind* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks: Colin Smythe, 1979), pp. 134-135
- (10) J. M. Synge, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 95.
- (11) See, Eugene Benson, *J. M. Synge* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 136.
- (12) J. M. Synge, *Synge: The Complete Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1963), p. 176. All quotations from *The Playboy* are from this edition. The page numbers of the subsequent citations will be given in parentheses in the text.
- (13) In the original production Christy Mahon was played by Willie Fay, who was a little man, not that attractive in the role of "Playboy". Recently The Druid Theatre Company headed by Gary Hynes endeavored to produce seven Synge's plays in a day. This emphasis was on the comical aspect of the

- character, mentioning that Christy must be played by the character actor, not the hero-type actor. On the other hand, people like George Moor felt the Playboy should not be an un-heroic type actor as he is supposed to 'go romancing through a romping lifetime'.
- (14) The reason for Christy's fit of rage against Old Mahon was his father's impossible demand to make him get married to a terribly fat old woman, Widow Casey, who suckled him for six weeks when he was a baby. This horrendous, almost incestuous, demand provoked Christy to the mock killing of his father, which is an oedipal pattern. .
- (15) Daniel J. Casey (ed.), *Critical Essays on John Millington Synge* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1994), p. 131.
- (16) Gwendolen's fascination is evoked by John's fictitious name "Earnest" in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde.
- (17) C. L. Innes, "Naked Truth, Fine Clothes and Fine Phrases in Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*", in Joseph Ronsley (ed.) *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), p. 75.
- (18) Weldon Thornton, *J. M. Synge and the Western Mind* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks, Colin Smythe, 1979), p. 127.
- (19) J. M. Synge, *Synge: The Complete Plays*, pp. 174-75.
- (20) *Ibid.* , p. 59.
- (21) *Ibid.* , p. 174.
- (22) Ann Saddlemyer, *J. M. Synge and Modern Comedy* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1968), pp. 24-25.
- (23) J. M. Synge, *Synge: The Complete Plays*, p. 108.
- (24) Ramesh C. Chakraborty, *J. M. Synge: His Dramatic Creed and Craft* (Calcutta, Sarat Book House, 1997), pp. 23-24.
- (25) Weldon Thornton, *J. M. Synge and the Western Mind*, p. 130.
- (26) Ramesh C. Chakraborty, *J. M. Synge: His Dramatic Creed and Craft*, p. 22.