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# UNIT 3 CLOSE ANALYSIS OF

## THE PLAYBOY

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Germ of the play
- 3.3 Title
- 3.4 Actwise Analysis
  - 3.4.1 Act I
  - 3.4.2 Act II
  - 3.4.3 Act III
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Suggested Readings

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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The primary aim of this unit is to help you to pay close attention to the text and analyse it and also see how the dramatist achieves a variety of effects in it.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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How are we to interpret the play? Synge himself said that parts of it were meant to be 'extravagant comedy' but that there was much more in the play that was perfectly serious and that there were "several sides" to it. What are those sides? In order to answer these questions, I suggest that you turn to the text and read the play once again with the help of comments and questions on each Act, and on the play as a whole. These comments and questions draw attention to the function of each Act and the various scenes in it and suggest various points of interest.

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### 3.2 GERM OF THE PLAY

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The germ of the play lay in a story that both Yeats and Synge heard during their respective visits to the Aran Islands. Yeats who visited the Islands two years before Synge did, in 1898 with Arthur Symonds wrote;

An old man on the Aran Islands told me the very tale on which *The Playboy* is founded beginning with the words 'If any gentleman has done a crime we'll hide him. There was a gentleman that killed his father, and I had him in my own house six months till he got away to America.

*(Essays and Introductions, pp. 337-38)*

An account of this incident was also left by antiquarian Thomas Johnson Westropp who had visited Aran twenty years earlier.

Synge heard a similar story on the Inishmaan island one of the Aran Islands, he visited. An old man, the oldest on the island told him.

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—which the old man has shown me—and kept him safe for weeks, though the police came and searched for him, and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of the reward which was offered, the island was

(*Four Plays and the Aran Islands*, p. 216)

Synge then goes on to comment on the attitude of the islanders:

If a man has killed his father and is already sick and broken with remorse, they see no reason why he should be dragged away and killed by the law.

Such a man, they say, will be quiet all the rest of his life, and if you suggest that punishment is needed as an example, they ask, would anyone kill his father if he was able to help it?

The origin of the idea of the play and the attitude of the Island are an important element in our making sense of the play.

Apparently the idea of the play had also been suggested by the case of a man called James Lynchehaun who had assaulted a woman and managed to conceal himself from the police with the help of peasant women. Lynchehaun also eventually escaped to America. But Synge believed that the story in its essence was "possible" given the psychic state of the locality. He also clarified: "If the idea had occurred to me I could and would just as readily have written the thing as it stands today without the Lynchehaun case or the Aran case . . . I used the cases afterwards to contravene critics who said it was impossible."

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### 3.3 TITLE

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Synge's first working titles for the play were "The Murderer: A Farce," "Murder will out or Fool of the Family," and "The Fool of Farnham" until he hit upon the present title.

According to his biographers David Grenne and Edward Stephens, "*Playboy* is possibly the translation of the Gaelic phrase used in hurling or it may be the English word *Playboy*, a hoaxer. It is in this sense that the Widow Quin uses the full title for Christy after discovering that the man he had boasted of killing is still very much alive: "Well, you are the walking Playboy of the Western World and that's the poor man, you had divided to his breeches belt." The term is used more positively also and I am sure you have seen several uses of it in the course of your reading of the play.

The biographers' comment of the phrase "Western world" is also interesting: "The Western World" is a phrase Synge may never have heard an Irish countryman use, though he puts it and its counterpart "eastern world" into the mouths of several of his characters in the play. But he was undoubtedly aware that it occurs frequently in early Irish texts as an epithet for a champion. For example, a tenth century poem reads:

*Where is the chief of the Western world?  
Where the sun of every clash of arms?*

The phrase "Western World" refers to the west part of Ireland where the play is located but could also be taken to refer to the large western word. There is a similar ambiguity about the word *playboy* because the hoaxer becomes a real champion in the end. Apparently the ambiguity weighed with Synge when he made his final choice for the title.

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### 3.4 ACT-WISE ANALYSIS

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#### 3.4.1 Act I

Do look up the meaning of the *Playboy* in your dictionary. According to the Oxford Encyclopaedic English Dictionary, the word means "an irresponsible pleasure seeking man especially a wealthy one." You need to see if the play supports this meaning. The title suggests a comedy.

What kind of comedy do you expect this to be?

Also, what does the phrase the Western world refer to? To Western Ireland or Mayo where the play is located or to the Western world as a whole?

## Act I

1. The key question here is:

What is the principal focus of Act I?

A tentative answer is that the focus is on:

Christy and how he wins the respect and admiration of the people with the story of killing his father with a loy

2. There are two scenes before Christy enters;
- the scene between Pegeen and Shawn Keogh; and
  - the scene when her father Mike James and, his friends join them before going to a Wake

What do these two scenes do?

- (i) The first scene establishes the characters of Pegeen (she is a sharp-tongued woman) and Shawn Keogh (as a timid God-fearing youngman). It also sets *the playful tone* to the play through Pegeen's teasing of her betrothed. Notice that Shawn has struck what he calls a 'bargain' with Pegeen's father suggesting a loveless marriage.

The scene also introduces us to the feeling of the characters towards nature. ("I could hear the cows breathing and sighing in the stillness of the air . . .") on the opening page Find out other examples of this as you read the play.

- (ii) The second scene introduces a bit of horseplay characteristic of farce with Michel James trying to prevent Shawn from escaping. Shawn escapes leaving his coat in Mike's hands.
- (iii) Christy's interrogation is the key scene of this Act.
- (a) Notice that his interrogation takes place in two parts—to uncover the nature of the crime and to find out the instrument used to commit it.

You need to decide which part of the information is true or factual and which is makebelieve.

Example: Read the following exchange between Michael and Christy:

Michael: Did you bury him then?

Christy (*considering*): Aye. I buried him then. Wasn't I digging spuds in the field?

What does the stage direction *considering* suggest about the truthfulness or otherwise of what he is saying?

- (b) The clear suggestion is that Christy is trying to invent a suitable answer. The scene also introduces the theme of imagination and reality here. The crowd's fascination for imaginative reconstruction of Christy's murder of his father is underlined. Notice how Christy's listeners suggest and collaborate in the growth of the story.
- (iv) After the departure of Michael James and his friends, there is a brief exchange between Pegeen and her betrothed Shawn Keogh. What is the point of the exchange? It shows that Pegeen is attracted to Christy.

(v) Pegeen and Christy are left alone together. Notice how Christy's self-discovery under the admiring gaze of his listeners—here Pegeen—continues. There is a reversal of gender roles also. Traditionally, it is a man who woos and pursues the female. Here Pegeen is more active.

(vi) Widow Quin enters.

1. What is the effect of the Widow Quin's knocking on Christy?

The knocking comes while Christy is in the middle of a sentence boasting about his bravery: ("It's time surely, and I a seemly fellow with great strength in me and bravery of . . ."). But he forgets all about his 'bravery' and clings to Pegeen. This is what he says : *Clinging to Pegeen* : "Oh, glory be! it's late for knocking, and this last while I'm in terror of peelers and the walking dead."

2. Recall what Pegeen said about Widow Quin ("a murderer," p. 177). Now she comes as a rival to Pegeen for Christy.

3. Notice that Pegeen dismisses Widow Quin's murder of her husband as "sneaky" when compared to Christy's grand one-stroke "murder" of his father.

### Language

How do you react to the language of the play?

The language is poetic. Notice that all the characters speak the same poetic language.

For a fuller discussion read Section 5.3 on Language. But can you pick out what you consider to be the three most poetic utterances in Act I? Also, in what way is the syntax peculiar?

### Sources of Laughter

#### 1. Comic Reversal

Notice how traditional attitudes are reversed and this reversal is treated comically. A prime example of this reversal is the crowd's admiration and respect for the patricide. He is also provided shelter. This comic reversal frames the play.

2. Notice the use of irony, both conscious and unconscious for comic effect.

#### Example

Read the following dialogue:

PEGEEN *with blank amazement* : "Is it killed your father?"

CHRISTY *subsiding* : "With the help of God I did, surely..." Here the speaker is not aware of the fact that the pious interjection does not fit in with his confession. The result is incongruity and verbal which makes us laugh.

3. Notice that some of the situations are farcical. Michael trying to stop Shawn from escaping is farcical.

4. Pegeen's downgrading of Widow Quin's 'sneaky' murder of her husband in comparison to Christy's one-stroke murder of his father is hilarious.

5. What other sources of comedy does the writer make use of in Act I?

### One final question

Do you think the playwright is satirising the people of Mayo? Or is it all just good humoured fun?

Keep this question in mind as you read the play.

### 3.4.2 Act II

Note: Act I takes place on the evening of an autumn day. This Act takes place the following morning. The key question is :

What is the principal function of this Act?

Read Act II with this question in mind and make your own notes as you read on. Let us study the Act in detail.

- (i) The act begins with the coming of several girls who are drawn by Christy's story of parricide and who make him tell his story again.

The question is:

In what sense does the scene between Christy and the Mayo girls advance the action of the play?

1. The scene provides further evidence of Christy's growing confidence. Notice how he makes his story more spectacular. Particularly note the details that he adds. Also, note the change in the manner of telling his story.
2. Christy also provides a reason for his anger against his father—his father's plan to force him to marry Widow Casey.

**Language** : Choose at least three picturesque phrases/ sentences from this scene.

3. The girls propose a union between Widow Quin and Christy. What is in common between them? They also drink a mock-toast for them.

- (ii) What is the point of the scene between Christy and Pegeen?

The scene brings out (i) Christy's growing feelings for Pegeen. Compare his feelings with what he says at the end of Act I. Notice also that though Pegeen plays with Christy, she is also strangely moved by him.

- (iii) What do we learn from the scene between Christy, and Shawn and Widow Quin?

1. Shawn sees a rival in Christy for the hand of Pegeen but Christy rejects his offers to induce him to quit the scene.
2. Shawn promises Widow Quin many things in lieu of her help to make Christy leave.

- (iv) **Old Mahon's reappearance** : What is the effect of Old Mahon's reappearance on Christy? Old Mahon's appearance again at the height of Christy's boasting is a big setback to him. There is a similar setback in Act I. Can you spot it?

This scene between Widow Quin and Old Mahon (with Christy in hiding) has its parallel with the scenes of Christy's interrogation by the Mayo men in Act I. Notice particularly the way the old man's story is elicited. What is the effect of Old Mahon's story? Christy hides herself while Old Mahon is telling his story of his son Christy.

- (a) **Hiding**

What is the effect of Christy's hiding on the play?

The hiding of a character while others on the stage talk about him is a standard comic device. It makes the scene even more humorous than it would have been otherwise.

(b) Notice also a parallel between the effect on Christy of Old Mahon's appearance and Widow Quin's knocking in Act I.

(c) Extravagance/Fantasy

The cleft caused by Christy's blow on his father's head travels down the latter's anatomy. Look up Christy's speeches for exact details.

After listening to Old Mahon's story, Widow Quin says: "Well, you're the walking playboy of the Western world and that is the poor man you had divided to his breeches belt."

Is Widow Quin praising Christy or is she being ironical?

Of course, she is being ironical. Look for other examples of irony in act II.

(v) The final scene between Widow Quin and Christy takes place on a new footing, with Christy's reputation deflated in Widow Quin's eyes.

Notice it is Christy's turn to seek Widow Quin's help in dismissing Old Mahon and marrying Pegeen. (Who was it who had sought her help earlier? Shawn, of course.)

Language Choose three excerpts that you find particularly fascinating.

### Exercises

1. Read the following :

Susan : "That's a grand story."

Honor : "He tells it lovely."

Write a brief answer illustrating the points made in this exchange between the two girls. Base your answer on Acts I & II.

2. What fresh light does this Act throw on Widow Quin's character?

There are several parallels between Act I & II. What are they?

Hint : Point 1 : Widow Quin interrogates Old Mahon in Act II as the Mayo men had interrogated Christy in Act I.

These parallels bind the two Acts together.

### 3.4.3 Act III

(I)

What purpose is served by the scene involving Jimmy, Philly, Widow Quin and Old Mahon?

1. The long scene has two major points of focus—one, Widow Quin tries to put Old Mahon off the scent of his son and mislead Jimmy and Philly about the father's true identity; two, Jimmy, Philly, Widow Quin and Old Mahon give a running commentary as they watch Christy's triumphs in the mule race below.
2. Notice the stratagem that Widow Quin uses to dismiss the father's suspicions. Does the stratagem succeed? Mark the point of Old Mahon's re-entry, and the timing of it.
3. Notice also in the form of discussion on graveyard and skulls with which the Act opens, which shows Synge's preoccupation with death.
4. Christy's triumph in the games shows yet another surge in his reputation. Notice the earlier surges and setbacks.

(ii)

What is the significance of the scene of Christy's triumphant entry into the public house and his conversation with Pegeen? What is the mood of this scene?

1. It is a scene of real tenderness in which Pegeen and Christy overreach themselves. Notice the poetic language the lovers use. In what way do you feel this is different from the language used by other characters? Notice also that the lovers are conceived in a wholly traditional way—the woman is expected to be beautiful and the man both eloquent and brave and full of worship of his woman.
2. Notice too that love is presented as a transforming experience. Do you agree with this? If you do, find evidence for your reading.

(iii)

What is the function of the scene involving Pegeen, Christy, Michael James, and Shawn?

- (1) Michael James has received the Pope's permission to marry off Pegeen and Shawn.
- (2) Pegeen has changed her mind and switched her loyalties over to Christy; and
- (3) Michael James blesses the new union between Pegeen and Christy.
- (4) There are two other things you should notice.
  - a) This scene looks back to Act II in some respects. Sara's toast as she links the arms of Widow Quin and Christy in mock engagement has its counterpart in the father's blessing on the union between Christy and Pegeen. Think of the other parallels.
  - b) This scene furnishes the second instance when Shawn tries to escape from an inconvenient situation. Earlier in Act I he had escaped being forced to stay the night with Pegeen by running away. This time he escapes being forced to fight with his rival Christy for the hand of Pegeen, with the same results.

### A Final Point

The climax of Christy's apotheosis is reached with the father's blessing of his daughter's union with the young man. A fall is inevitable.

(iv)

What is the effect of Old Mahon's re-entry on the play? What is the mood of the play from this point onwards

Old Mahon's entry upsets everything bringing Christy down once again.

- (a) The play suddenly becomes serious and remains serious till the end. Since this part of the play is crowded with action, it will be good for you to be clear about the sequence of events.
  - (1) Old Mahon re-enters and starts beating Christy.
  - (2) Realising his story to be a lie, Pegeen becomes hostile to Christy.
  - (3) Christy strikes his father again off stage in order to appear a real hero in Pegeen's eyes.
  - (4) The Widow Quin asks Christy to escape in order to save him.
  - (5) Thinking he has killed his father, the crowd led by Pegeen rope him in and pull him down to the floor.

- (6) Christy manages to bite Shawn in the leg.
- (7) Pegeen burns Christy's leg.
- (8) Old Mahon comes back 'alive' whereupon Christy is released.
- (9) Before going away with his father, Christy blesses the Mayo crowd for turning him into 'a likely gaffer. He is a new man with a new confidence.

Read this list and tick mark those events that show a reversal of earlier attitudes.

- (b) Go back to the list of events given here and tick mark the events that bring in the element of the grotesque or gross Rabelaisian humour in the play.
- (c) A comedy usually ends in the marriage of the boy and the girl or at least the promise of it.

Does *The Playboy* end like a traditional comedy?

Well, unlike in most comedies, the boy doesn't get the girl or rather the girl doesn't get the boy. On the contrary, the last line of the play is her cry at her loss of her man. There is no feasting either at the end, though Mike James invites his friend to drinks. There is finally a reconciliation of sorts with Christy invoking "Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here," for they have turned him "into a likely gaffer in the end of all." The lie has turned him into a man but he goes away. Notice also that Pegeen's anger and cruelty come out of her love for Christy, and that the last words that belong to her are a cry of pain.

- (c) Think of the most memorable lines of this Act. List at least two examples.

### 3.5 LET US SUM UP

This commentary and exercises were designed to help you discover the play and its complexity of substance and style, and answer the question what is the play about? And what kind of play is it? As you have seen, it is about a number of things. And it conveys its meaning through various comic devices. This diversity and richness and unusualness have made the play a continuing source of delight for readers. We can now address ourselves to a discussion of the different aspects of the play.

### 3.6 GLOSSARY

**Rabelaisian humour** : joyously coarse or gross humour. The adjective comes from Francois Rabelais (c. 1494-C. 1553), French writer and scholar. Besides ribald humour, the term Rabelaisian can be used for fantastical and exuberant writing.

**Irony**: involves "the perception or awareness of a discrepancy between words and their meaning, between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality. In all cases there may be an element of the absurd and the paradoxical." The two basic kinds of irony are verbal irony and situational irony. For a fuller treatment look up the entry in Cuddon pp. 457-62.

### 3.7 QUESTIONS

1. Write an essay bringing out Christy's role as a master story-teller.
2. Discuss *The Playboy* as a folk play.



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### 3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Yeats, W.B. *Essays and Introductions*. New York : Macmillan, 1961.

Synge, J.M. *Four Plays and The Aran Islands*. Ed. With an introduction by Robin Skelton. London : OUP, 1962.

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