

UNIT 1 BACKGROUND TO *THE PLAYBOY*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Biographical Note on Synge
 - 1.2.1 Synge's Works
 - 1.2.2 The Irish Dramatic Movement
 - 1.2.3 *The Playboy Riots*
 - 1.2.3.1 Dublin
 - 1.2.3.2 US Towns
- 1.3 Modern Comedy
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Glossary
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit aims to provide you with essential background information about the author and his works, the Irish Dramatic Movement and the *Playboy* riots and also on modern comedy so that you could approach the task of close textual analysis with fuller confidence and clearer understanding of the issues involved.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It is not often in dramatic history that a single individual should be responsible for two momentous events. W.B. Yeats was such a person. Though he was not himself a major dramatist, the national theatre in Ireland was first an idea in his mind. He also enabled an Irish genius to find himself. The genius in question was John Millington Synge whom Yeats encouraged to go to the Aran Islands and "express a life that has never found expression." Synge heeded his advice—with momentous results.

A play is essentially a public event as a novel is not. This public nature of the play comes to the fore in the account of *The Playboy* riots. The account also raises the question of censorship and the freedom of the artist to express himself.

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON SYNGE

Synge lived only for 38 years from 1871 to 1909. His short creative life barely lasted 7-8 years during which period he was able to write 6 plays besides an account of his visit to Aran Islands and some poems and translations. Two of his plays *Riders to the Sea* (1903) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907)—one a tragedy on the classical model, the other a dark comedy that provoked a week of riots in Dublin, are among the best plays in twentieth century drama.

In a country where most of the people were dispossessed and Roman Catholic, Synge came from Anglo-Irish Protestant landowning stock. He belonged to what came to be known as the Protestant Ascendancy. But though some of their income did come from land, the Synoges were middle class professional people.

Synge was born on 16 April 1871 at Rathfarnham near Dublin where his father was a barrister and was christened Edmond John millington Synge. A year later his father died leaving a widow to bring up five children. Synge was to cause much distress to his mother on several counts: his loss of religious faith and his becoming an agnostic, his passion for music—piano, violin and flute—which he wanted to adopt as a profession; and his sympathy for the op-

pressed tenants. This last interest found a full outlet when he visited the Islands on the advice of Yeats.

Synge's early education was mostly private until he entered the Trinity College, Dublin, in 1888, which was traditionally the fountainhead of Anglo-Irish culture. It was here that he started learning Irish and Hebrew. He also read a great deal about Irish history and Irish antiquities.

His boyhood was spent among the hills and mountains to the south of Dublin. He had a Wordsworthian love for nature and also an intimate knowledge of natural history. This is reflected in the images and descriptive passages in his plays.

In 1893 Synge went to Germany to study music systematically. But later his interest shifted from music to literature and like several youngmen of his time moved to Paris. In Paris he read widely in European authors and probably thought of becoming a literary journalist. He visited Italy also and learned Italian. During the summers he would return to Ireland where he pursued his interest in the Irish language and Irish antiquities.

It was in Paris in December 1896 that he met W.B. Yeats and later the young revolutionary Maud-Gonne. He joined Maud's Irish League in January 1897 but resigned soon after in April saying that he had his own "theory of regeneration for Ireland" and that he wished to work in his own way for Ireland and that he did not wish to get mixed up with a revolutionary and semi-military movement.

Yeats was only six years older but Synge's encounter with him proved to be a turning point in his life. Here is a longish account of their meeting in Yeats's own words:

Six year ago I was staying in a students' hotel in the Latin quarter, and somebody whose name I cannot recollect introduced me to an Irishman, who, even poorer than myself, had taken a room at the top house. It was J.M. Synge, and I, who thought I knew the name of every Irishman who was working at literature, had never heard of him. He was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, too, and Trinity College does not as a rule produce artistic minds. He told me that he had been living in France and Germany, reading French and German literature, and that he wished to become a writer. He had, however, nothing to show but one or two poems and impressionistic essays, full of that kind of morbidity that has its root in too much brooding over methods of expression, and ways of looking upon life, which come, not out of life but out of literature, images reflected from mirror to mirror. He had wandered among people whose life is as picturesque as the middle ages, playing his fiddle to Italian sailors, and listening to stories in Bavarian woods, but life had cast no light into his writings. He had learned Irish years ago, but had begun to forget it, for the only language that interested him as that conventional language of modern poetry which has begun to make us all weary. . . . I said, "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 Arran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves, express a Life that has never found expression." I had just come from Arran and my imagination was full of those gray islands, where men must reap with knives because of the stones. Because of the stones" (Greene, 70).

Yeats wrote this in his preface to the play *The Well of the Saints* published in 1905.

Thus began his long association with Yeats and later with Lady Gregory and with other members of the Irish Literary Revival, which bore such strange and rich fruit.

The Aran Islands are a group of three rocky islands in the West coast of Ireland where Irish was still spoken in his days and where the older Irish way of life had been preserved.

Before coming to Paris, Yeats with his friend Arthur Symons had been to the Aran Islands in 1896, where they both said they had heard the story upon which Synge later based *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Synge had studied Gaelic (which is a language spoken in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man), which enabled him to master 'the pure but rapid and colloquial language of the island. He had spent his boyhood in Wicklow and this had given him his basic understanding of the Irish peasantry. His Protestant and landed ancestry and his later loss of faith sufficiently distanced him from the people around him so that he was able to view them at once with objectivity and ironic compassion. Synge visited the Island four times, in 1898, 1899, 1900 and 1901 which gave him the material for his plays in terms of incidents, characters and language. But while the visit to Aran was momentous, it did not transform Synge instantaneously into a writer of genius. Several years were to elapse between his first visit to Aran in 1898 and his completing his first successful play in 1902. Moreover, all this while he was writing *The Aran Islands* which was the first book he wrote, though it was published in 1907. So while his transformation into a "playwright" was astonishing it was not sudden. In this period of apprenticeship, Synge was obviously honing his skills in his use of the peasant dialect. He himself said that in "writing out the talk of the people and their stories in this book [*The Aran Islands*], and in a number of articles in the Wicklow peasantry . . . learned to write the peasant dialect and dialogue I use in my plays" (Synge, 24)

Synge was sickly as a boy and later suffered much because of his poor health. This possibly accentuated his morbidity which seems to have been a family characteristic and which is most evident in his poems. But perhaps as a compensation like R.L. Stevenson, "he took a huge delight in all that was superb and wild in reality." He had a malignant tumour—Lymphatic Sarcoma—detected in his neck in 1897, which ultimately cost him his life.

The last love in his life was Molly Allgood, a Catholic shoppgirl turned actress who was fifteen years his junior and who played the role of Pegeen in *The Playboy* when it was first produced. In a letter to her Synge referred to her as his wife but he died before they were married. The end came in Dublin on the morning of 24 March 1909. Yeats recorded: "Synge is dead. In the early morning he said to the nurse, 'it is no use fighting death any longer' and he turned over and died. I called at the hospital this afternoon and asked the assistant matron if he knew he was dying. She answered, 'He may have known it for weeks, but he would not have said so to anyone. He would have no fuss. He was like that.' She added, with emotion in her voice, 'We were devoted to him.'"

1.2.1 Synge's Works

Five of his six plays were published during his lifetime. These were :

1. *The Tinker's Wedding* wr. 1902-1907 pb. 1908.
2. *In the Shadow of the Glen* (one act) pr. 1903; pb. 1904.
3. *Riders to the Sea* (one act) pb. 1903; pr. 1904.
4. *The Well of the Saints* pr. Pb. 1905.
5. *The Playboy of the Western World* pr.pb. 1907.
6. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* pb.pr. posthumously 1910.

Non-dramatic work

The Aran Islands wr. 1902; pb. 1907.

Synge is considered the greatest dramatist of the Irish literary revival. His 6 plays provide evidence of his versatility. He tried plays of varied lengths from one act to full length plays. His four comedies include knockabout farce and also moments of high seriousness and one of them trembles on the verge of tragedy. He also excelled himself in writing tragedies, a folk tragedy which is arguably the finest one act tragedy in literature and the other a heroic tragedy based on an Irish love legend.

A major theme in his plays is the yawning gap between romantic dreams and the harsh reality. He writes principally of Irish folk life, of peasants, tramps and tinkers, viewing them with unsentimental compassion. Synge is also acutely conscious of the mutability of all things particularly of the passing away of beauty and of the dread of old age and death. Another important element in his plays is the relationship between man and the natural world.

Synge expressed his vision of Irish folk life in prose that was intensely poetic and used a peasant dialect which was English in form but Irish in thought and feeling. His style is marked by vigour, ironic humour and dramatic pathos.

The shadow of the Glen (1903)

The play based on a story heard by Synge in the Aran Island is about a young woman Nora Burke who leaves her cantankerous old husband Dan with a tramp who offers a romantic life to her. Her husband suspecting her of infidelity gives out as though he was dead in order to trap her. The trap succeeds for the woman has invited her young man to the house. At this point the wronged husband springs up out of the bed and turns his wife out. The lover beats a hasty retreat; it is the tramp who comes forward to rescue her. The play ends with the about-to-be-wronged husband sitting down to drink with his would be betrayer.

The play dramatizes Synge's characteristic themes: the conflict between the reality and man's dreams, his awareness of human mutability and man's intimate relationship with the natural world. It was also the first play to treat the theme of sexual frustration explicitly on the modern Irish stage. Its first production in Dublin evoked protests against its 'unfair' portrayal of Irish women which anticipated the riots that greeted *The Playboy* in 1907.

Riders to the Sea (1903)

Synge's first tragedy in one act modelled on the classical Greek tragedy, draws heavily on his experiences on the Aran Islands. The simple and highly compressed action of the play concern an old woman Maurya of the Island whose lost two sons Michael and Bartley are drowned while trying to cross the stormy sea to Galway as all her other sons have been drowned. The sea is presented as the Islanders' source of sustenance and also their principal natural enemy. The play which takes less than half an hour to perform climaxes into Maurya's lament at the cavalcade of death in the family ending with a prayer for all the living and the dead.

The Tinker's Wedding (1908)

The play is based on an incident that happened in Wicklow and which is recorded in Synge's Wicklow memoirs. It concerns people including tinkers, tramps, etc. who lived on the fringe of society and fascinated Synge. Sara Casey has been living with Michael Byrne, a tinker, for many years but now wants to get married to him properly in a church by a priest. Their efforts to coax the priest into marrying them leads to much knockabout farce in the play. The wedding as the title of the play suggests does not come off because a woman's fear of a lonely and comfortless old age motivates her to foil her son's marriage.

In his introduction to the play, Synge said: "In the greater part of Ireland, . . . the whole people from the tinkers to the clergy have still a life, and view of life, that are rich, genial and humorous. And I do not think that these country people, who have so much humour themselves, will mind being laughed at without malice . . ." However, the characterization of the priest who at one stage is beaten and thrown into a sack ruled out any performance of the play in Ireland.

The well of the Saints (1905)

Synge derived the idea of the plot from an early French farce in which a cripple and a blindman are healed. Synge's beggars are however man and wife, both blind living happily in the illusion of beauty and they are healed by the miraculous holy water of a hallowed well. The cured beggars are however disappointed in their fondest dreams when each discovers that the other is old, weather-beaten and ugly. The play reminiscent of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* underlines man's need for illusions that can sustain him in life. At the end the effect of the miraculous water wears off and blindness is restored to the beggars, and with it a measure of happiness in each other.

The play was not received well by the Dublin audience when it was first produced in 1905.

Deirdre of the Sorrows (1910)

The play which Synge left unfinished and which was published and produced posthumously marked a new departure for Synge. From depicting peasants, tramps and beggars, he turned to an ancient legend of Ireland for his subject. It is the story of the love of an ageing king Conchubar for the young and beautiful Deirdre who elopes with her lover Naisi. When the lovers return after seven long years, Naisi is treacherously murdered and Deirdre then takes her own life. This brings with it the destruction of other city of Emain.

T.R. Henn says that the play was written "in illness, in the course of a prolonged and frustrated love-affair, and in a state of depression to which *The Playboy* riots had contributed." When the play was produced in January 1910, Synge's beloved Molly Allgood played the female lead.

1.2.2 The Irish Dramatic Movement

The Irish Literary Revival or Irish Literary Renaissance was a movement that aimed at reviving the past literary greatness of Ireland. It was believed that the Irish people had a great past and a great body of literature written in their own language—Irish Gaelic. But it was only among the peasants in the West and south of Ireland that the Irish language was used and the native literary tradition existed. Few Irish people knew anything about their literature or their heroic past. The founders of the Literary Revival aimed to revive interest in their literary heritage and also to create an art that was local but not narrowly provincial and that would bring honour to Ireland.

In 1891 "the Great Founder" as Sean O'Casey called him, Yeats founded the Irish Literary Society in London. The following year he and Maude Gonne, John O'Leary and other enthusiasts founded the Irish National Literary Society in Dublin. Its objectives were to publish books and give lectures and hold discussion "upon notable figures in Irish history and notable epochs in the national life, and on problems and difficulties of today."

Synge was at this time busy learning Hebrew and Irish and had not come under Yeats's influence and so was not part of the original society.

The next important date is 1898 when Yeats discussed the possibility of founding an Irish theatre in Dublin with Lady Gregory, her country neighbour Edward Martin and George Moore. The plan was to produce in Dublin every year "certain Celtic and Irish plays which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature."

Dublin was in fact the site of the first licensed English theatre outside London established in 1637. There were also a series of Irish playwrights—Congreve, Farquhar, Steele, Goldsmith Sheridan and later Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw but they all gravitated to London and to its English audiences. The theatrical fare served in Dublin at the close of the nineteenth century consisted of light operas, melodramas and musical shows. The Irish melodramas of Dion Boucicault made use of Irish material but this was done with an eye to export. The result was presentation of what has come to be known as "the stage Irishman" who was a drunkard, clown or excessively sentimental. The Irish Literary Theatre was meant to undo this impression:

We hoped to find, in Ireland, an uncorrupted and imaginative audience, trained to listen by its passion for oratory and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Irish is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.

(From the Prospectus of the *Irish Literary Theatre*)

The Irish Literary Theatre came into being in 1899 and gave its first performances at the Antient Concert Room in Dublin with Yeats's *Countess Cathleen* and Edward Martyn's *the Heather Field* (in Irish Gaelic).

The Irish Literary Theatre and its successor The Irish National Theatre Society continued to work till 1904 when it acquired its own theatre known as Abbey Theatre from its location on the Abbey Street. This acquisition was made possible through the generosity of an English woman Miss Annie Horniman who was primarily interested in advancing Yeats's career. Her association with the Abbey Theatre continued till 1908 when the differences between her and Lady Gregory and others came to a head and she decided not to pour money into the Abbey Theatre any more and found another theatre nearer home in Manchester.

The first performances of the Irish Literary Theatre were given by English professional actors. The idea of a company made up exclusively of Irish actors who could be taught a fresh style of acting free of the mannerism of the English professional stage came with the Fay brothers. Willie Fay and Frank Fay were actors and they believed that they could form such a company provided they had more plays about Irish life. 'A.E.' (George Russell) gave them his play *Deirdre* and Yeats his *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. This led to the founding of the Abbey Theatre Company. The performance of these plays in April 1902 with Maud Gonne in the lead role in Yeats's play proved to be an exciting and inspiring success. The performances led to the formation of the Irish National Theatre Society with Yeats, Maud Gonne and Douglas Hyde as directors. The society was reorganized by Yeats in 1905 when Maud Gonne and Douglas Hyde were replaced as directors by Lady Gregory and Synge.

Synge had met Yeats in 1896 in Paris, and met both Yeats and Lady Gregory in 1898 at the Coole Park where discussions on the Irish Literary Theatre were going on. This second meeting led to his friendship with Yeats and Lady Gregory which proved to be most important in his life.

Synge's first play (when the Moon is set) was rejected by both Yeats and Lady Gregory. But both noticed that the peasant characters who played a minor part in it were more effectively realized than the chief characters. They encouraged him to stick with the peasant and forget all else. As his plays showed, Synge followed this advice with splendid results. The dates of the production of his play and other important details are shown in the chronology of the Irish Dramatic Movement and need not be repeated here.

But a few things need to be stated. As we said earlier, the Irish National Theatre Society was reorganized in 1905 and Synge and Lady Gregory became director in the reorganized Society. Synge was the only director who had made Dublin his home and was to play more active role in the management of the professional theatre. He read the plays submitted to the company by young writers and also helped the Fays to enlist and train new actors.

There was an upheaval in November 1905 when some young actors back from a triumphant tour of Oxford, Cambridge and London, severed their connection with the society because they felt that Yeats was taking the theatre completely away from the nationalistic direction. This is significant because the theatre was spearheaded by people (like Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge) whose origins were not Celtic and whose involvement in the movement was purely emotional.

In 1906 there was considerable discussion on the aims of Irish Dramatic Movement (IDM). There was a suggestion backed by Yeats that the Abbey Theatre should also devote its creative energies to staging classics. Synge was opposed to the idea. He felt that their movement should concentrate on the "creation of a new dramatic literature where the interest is in the novelty and power of the new work rather than in the quality of the execution." Finally Synge was able to win his point and the Abbey Theatre stuck to its original objective.

The Abbey Theatre survived many crises. Miss Horniman withdrew her subsidy. The Fay Brothers also left. Synge died in 1909, and Yeats resigned as a result of a dispute with Lady Gregory. The Abbey Theatre continued to be the centre of the dramatic movement in Ireland. Among distinguished Irish dramatists whose plays were produced at the Abbey were Padraic Colum (1881-1972), St. John Greer Ervine (1883-1971) and Lennox Robinson (1886-1958) and later Sean O'Casey (1880-1964).

- 8 May 1899. Irish Literary Theatre founded; its first offering staged in Dublin: Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field* put up by an English Company at the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin.
- Feb. 1890. George Moore's adaptation of Edward Martyn's *The Tale of a Town* entitled *The Bending of the Bough* plus two shorter pieces *The last Feast of the Fianna* by Alice Milligan and *Maeve* by Edward Martyn were offered.
- Oct. 1901. Douglas Hyde's Gaelic play *The Twisting of the Rope* performed by a company of amateur Irish actors, and Yeats's *Diarmuid and Grania* and *King Lear* by F.R. Benson's company of English professional actors.
- 2,3,4 April 1902. 'A.E.'s *Deirdre* and Yeats's patriotic *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* with Maud Gonne in the title role in the latter, performed by the Fay brothers: the beginning of the Abbey Theatre Company.
1902. Synge wrote *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*; first draft of *The Tinker's Wedding*.
- Oct. 1902. Yeats's farce *The Pot of Broth*, a Gaelic play *Eilix and the Beggar Woman* by P.T. McGinley and plays by Fred Ryan and James Cousins performed.
- Oct-Nov 1902. Last visit to Inishere, one of the Aran Islands.
- 2 May 1903. Five plays—*The Hour-Glass*, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and *The Pot of Broth* by Yeats, Lady Gregory's *Twenty-Five* and Fred Ryan's *The Laying of the Foundations* performed by the Fays in London.
- June 1903. In *The Shadow of the Glen* read out by Lady Gregory to the group in Dublin.
- Sept. 1903. *Riders to the Sea* published in *Samhain* the organ of the Irish Literary Theatre started by Yeats in October 1901; also published was a play in Irish by Douglas Hyde.
- 8 Oct. 1903. *The King's Threshold* by Yeats, *the Shadow of the Glen* and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* by Yeats were staged in Dublin in this order. Synge's play was received with some hissing; the play was criticized by the *The Irish Time* as casting a slur on Irish womanhood.
- Dec. 1903. *Broken Soil* by Padraic Colum performed by the Fays.
- 25 Feb. 1904. *Riders to the Sea* and A.E.'s *Deirdre* performed by the Fays.
- 26 March 1904. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and Yeats's *The King's Threshold*, *Brown Soil* and *The Pot of Broth* performed in London.
- 11 May 1904. Miss Horniman's generous offer of Abbey Theatre accepted.
- 27 Dec. 1904. *The Shadow of Glen* published in *Samhain*. Yeats's *On Ballis Strand* and Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News* (new plays) and *Cathleen-Ni Houlihan* and *In the Shadow of the Glen* presented as the Abbey Theatre's first offering in Dublin.
- 4 Feb. 1905. *The Well of the Saints* presented; copies of the play published by A.H. Bullen were provided for sale in the theatre.
- 20 Jan. 1906. Molly Allgood played Cathleen in a revival of *Riders to the Sea*. She was Synge's last love. Synge plays a more active part in running the Abbey Theatre.

17 April 1906. *In the Shadow of the Glen* revived.

24 Nov, 1906. Yeats's *Deirdre* presented.

8 Jan. 1907. *The Playboy* went into rehearsal with Molly Allgood in the role of Pegeen.

26 Jan. 1907. *The Playboy* presented at the Abbey Theatre.

1907. *The Playboy* published; *The Aran Islands* also published.

Jan. 1908. *The Tinker's Wedding* published; in *the Land* by Padriac Colum presented.

1910. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* with Molly played the leading role performed, 13 Jan. ; play also published.

1.2.3 The Playboy Riots

1.2.3.1 Dublin

Now let us closely examine the issue why *The Playboy* was the centre of fierce controversy when it was first staged in Dublin. Involved here is also the crucial issue of an artist's freedom of thought and expression. Such a controversy is an implicit recognition of the power of theatre to subvert traditional morality.

In order to examine all these issues, we first need to look at the available evidence. Luckily we have eye witness accounts of the riots written by Lady Gregory and John Holloway and others connected with the Irish Dramatic Movement. Synge's plays before *The Playboy* were not all well received in Dublin on first presentation. When his *Shadow of the Glen* was first produced in 1903, some attacks were made on it in the press. The story of a young wife who goes away with a stranger evoked the charge that Synge had borrowed the story from a decadent Roman source, the story of the widow of Ephesus and given it an Irish dress. The play was also attacked as a slur on the Irish womanhood. *The Well of the Saints* was not adversely commented upon but then according to Lady Gregory the audiences for it were quite thin.

There was suspicion of trouble over *The Playboy* even before the play opened on 26 Jan. 1907. While the play was in rehearsal, Joseph Holloway, the Dublin architect and an Abbey Theatre buff wrote in his diary that someone he talked to felt "there is an organized opposition present to his [Synge's] play" . . . According to him, others including Yeats, Lady Gregory and William Fay had their apprehensions. Lady Gregory wanted a few cuts and she also made some but only after the first production. Yeats said plainly that there was far too much "bad language." Synge made a few cuts himself but they did not amount to much. The full story of the reception of *The Playboy* at the Abbey Theatre during the first week is available in *Our Irish Theatre*, (1913), pp. 112-17.

The most objectionable thing in the play was the reference by Christy to the "drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself may be from this place to the eastern world." The feeling was that Synge had slandered Ireland. The above account is quite comprehensive but we shall try to fill in the gaps. What was Synge's own reaction to the play and the disturbance? In a letter to his beloved Molly Allgood who played Pegeen, he said: "I think with a better Mahon and crowd and a few slight cuts the play would be thoroughly sound. . . ." About the row Synge was prophetic.

It is better any day to have the row we had last night, than to have you play fizzling out in half-hearted applause. Now we'll be talked about. We're event in the history of the Irish drama. (Italics added.)

The reaction of the press was generally adverse. Here is an excerpt:

The play is an "unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and worse

still upon Irish peasant girlhood. The *Times* boils with indignation as one recalls the incidents, expressions, ideas of this squalid, offensive production, incongruously styled a comedy in three acts . . . No adequate idea can be given of the barbarous jargon, the elaborate and incessant curtings of these repulsive creatures.

(*The Freeman's Journal*)

The matters were compounded when Synge gave an unfortunate interview published in *The Evening Mail*. He denied that he wrote the play in order to represent Irish life as it is lived " . . . I wrote the play because it pleased me, and it just happens that I knew Irish life best, so I made my method Irish." His play was a comedy, an extravaganza, made to amuse and he did not care a rap how the people take it. "I never bother whether my plots are typically Irish or not, but my methods are typical." Yeats was absent when the play was first presented on Saturday but when he came back on Tuesday the scene was full of fight. He announced that they would go on until the play has been heard sufficiently to be judged on its merits and also that on the following Monday they would hold a debate about the play. (For an eye witness account by John Holloway of what happened on the Tuesday night performance, see Greene, p. 245.)

Yeats' actual words to the audience on the same night deserve to be quoted in full for they beautifully sum up the whole issue of freedom to write and stage and to be read and seen :

We have put this play before you to be heard and to be judged, as every play should be heard and judged. Every man has a right to hear it and condemn it if he pleases, but no man has a right to interfere with another man hearing or playing and judging for himself. The country that condescends either to bully or to permit itself to be bullied soon ceases to have any fine qualities, and I promise you that if there is any small section in this theatre that wish to deny the right of others to hear what they themselves don't want to hear we will play on, and our patience shall last longer than their patience.

The debate on the play was held as announced with everyone in the Dublin literary world present except Synge. Yeats came splendidly to Synge's defence. According to an eye witness, Mary Colum, she never "witnessed a human being fight as Yeats fought that night" (Greene, p. 250). Lady Gregory was happy with their defence of the play—"it was spirited and showed we were not repenting or apologizing" (Green, 251).

Among Synge's leading opponents was Arthur Griffith, editor of *The United Irishman* a weekly that voiced extreme nationalistic opinions. He later founded the organisation *Sinn Féin* to further his political objectives.

He had attacked Synge for borrowing his story for *In The Shadow of the Glen* from *Patronius*. He described *The Playboy* as a "vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform" (Green, 248).

The story of *the Playboy's* first staging in Dublin is interesting but for want of space must come to a stop.

1.2.3.2 US TOURS

When *The Playboy* was taken to the USA, Synge had died and his sweetheart Molly had married and had gone off making it necessary for the Abbey players to look for a substitute for her. Lady Gregory then accompanied the Company on its tour to US that began in September 1911.

The Playboy's controversial reputation had reached America before the company and the reception that it received in America was mixed. It was generally friendly but in some places some priests preached against the Company and a pamphlet denouncing the play was published. In New York a periodical *The Gaelic American* said that the play "must be squelched." The play itself was duly disturbed. Among the things that were taken away were the stink pots, rosaries, potatoes and cigarettes.

In New York the play was seen by the Roosevelts.

In Philadelphia the entire cast was arrested and was tried but the players were rescued by John Quin who demolished the arguments of the witnesses. In Chicago the Mayor was asked to stop the presentation of the play but he refused to oblige.

Curiously not all the objectors were Irish American. One Englishman who was arrested objected to British soldiers being spoken of as "khaki cut throats."

The controversy over *The Playboy* is long over and the play is now a permanent part of repertoire of the Abbey Theatre but the issue of the freedom of thought and expression it raises is alive. As we said before, the controversy also provides another proof of the subversive power of theatre. The power of the written word increases manifold when it is spoken by a character from the stage. Should a play or a book considered obscene or otherwise objectionable by a section of the people be banned? Ours is an age of permissiveness and many themes considered taboo earlier are now routinely presented in books or on the stage. But, paradoxically, ours is also an age of increasing intolerance. Witness the latest example of the violent protests against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The whole issue is embroiled in controversy and it is difficult to adjudicate between the two sides.

So far as *The Playboy* is concerned, what we want you to do is to read the play again and judge for yourself.

1.3 MODERN COMEDY

In modern times the comic form has been exploited in different ways. As a result there is an extraordinary variety of comedy available in the twentieth century.

A most striking characteristic of modern drama is the blurring of the boundaries between the tragic and the comic, the serious and the ludicrous. This blurring is nearly as old as drama itself but it strikes the modern reader with a new force. Such a distinction depends on the existence of generally accepted standards of value within a society. These commonly shared values or norms which provide the dramatist with a basis for communication no longer seem to be valid. Without these values all experience tends to become equally serious or equally ludicrous. As the French dramatist Ionesco said: "It comes to the same thing anyway; comic and tragic are merely two aspects of the same situation, and I have now reached the stage where I find it hard to distinguish one from the other."

One result of the blurring of this distinction has been the use of comic means not to serve comic ends as it was done in earlier times but for serious purposes. The comic has been described by a critic as a transparency through which we see the serious. Laughter is one of the resources of comic theatre but this resource is now also employed for serious purposes.

Here I should like to illustrate the use of comic in serious drama today by giving the example used by the Italian dramatist Pirandello. I quote from J.L. Styan's book *The Dark Comedy*:

Imagine, he [Pirandello in 1908] says, an elderly lady. We are immediately predisposed to be sympathetic. But she is overdressed, her face painted, her hair dyed like a girl's: we find this comic and are ready to laugh. Yet suppose she is aware of the figure she is cutting, and is behaving in this way in order to hold the affection of her husband: we are sobered. The old lady seems pathetic again, and the laugh is 'on us.' The comic may be no laughing matter.

Our response to the lady is complex. We in the audience are first drawn to the lady, then repelled and finally drawn again. This is one way in which the writer uses the comic to control the responses of the audience of modern times. This commingling of comedy and tragedy, laughter with tears is frequent in modern drama particularly in the plays of Chekhov, Synge, Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and Albee. Your study of Beckett should help you to realize this.

This is a good point at which to introduce a new term for a modern comedy that defies the traditional pigeon-holes of tragedy and comedy and that combines laughter with tears. The term is *dark comedy* which is the title of the book from which the above quotation has been cited. The old tragicomedy also continues to be used. Synge himself uses another term *modern comic tragedy* in the sub-title of his book. Terms are often useful as convenient labels, provided we know how we define them and what they stand for. The term *dark comedy* stands for modern comedy that not only amuses and entertains you but also teases and troubles you and can even be painful. Such a play could end by raising questions or by sobering us. A comedy whether old or modern in some way reaffirms its faith in life in spite of all the obstructions in it—and life's capacity to renew itself. But this resurrection is not always achieved through the traditional union of young lovers.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

The protesters against Synge's play have often been dismissed as "philistine fools." But in defence of their attitude, Synge's own ambivalence of aim has been pointed out. He defended the play as an extravagant comedy. On the other hand he had reacted to the hostile reception of *The Well of Saints* with the remark that "the next play I write I will sure annoy them."

Ann Sadlemeyer has adduced several factors that help account for the riots. The downfall of the Irish statesman, Charles Stewart Parnell was within easy recall, the figure of the 'stage Irishman' was still ridiculed on the English stage, there was still considerable prudery regarding dress and sex, and Oscar Wilde's arrest a few years earlier had made Irishmen more sensitive to their country's good name. That being so, it was "not surprising that a nationalist audience should object . . . to the presentation on the stage of their National Theatre, of a self-confessed patricide who is glorified as a hero and encouraged as a lover by an entire community in the West of Ireland."

Part of the fault lay with the original production also, which is said to have been extremely realistic. It has been pointed out that "Pegeen was too sensual, Christy unpleasant-looking, and the bloody head of his father rather horrible." It was only later after Synge's death that the comic aspects started being emphasized.

1.5 GLOSSARY

CELT One of the ancient people speaking Celtic. They originated around 1500 B.C. in S.W. Germany and spread through France to N. Spain and the British Isles and later to other parts of Europe. But in time only Brittany and the West of the British Isles remained Celtic.

GAELIC a branch of the Celtic family of languages comprising Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. How did Synge's meeting with Yeats change the former's career?
2. What place do tinkers, tramps and vagabonds occupy in Synge's plays?
3. Write a paragraph on Synge's role in the Irish Dramatic Movement.
4. Which words or sentences offended the first audiences in Dublin most? Which other remarks could possibly have offended audiences?
5. Go over the play again and the objections of the critics and write an essay giving your own opinion on the issue.
6. Can we call *The Playboy* a dark comedy? If so, in what manner?

1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Green, David H. And E.M. Stephens. *J.M. Synge 1891-1909*. Collier Books, 1959.
- Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1913.
- This is indispensable reading; contains three important chapters entitled "The Fight Over the Playboy," "Synge and "The Playboy in America."
- Styan, J.L. *Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*. Cambridge, England, CUP, 1968.
- Corrigan, Robert W. *Comedy: Meaning and Form*. 2nd edition. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.