

# UNIT 5      *THE PLAYBOY* : A DISCUSSION (CONTD.)

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## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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This final unit continues the discussion of the play initiated in Unit 4 and focuses particularly on language and some other aspects of the play. The Unit also looks at *The Playboy* as a performance text.

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Synge's use of Irish English is accomplished as it is distinctive and accounts for an important part of his reputation. And we need to pay as much attention to it as we have paid to his themes and his use of the comic mode. In this unit besides elaborating on certain other aspects of the play we shall look at the text in theatre, as it is transformed into what Keir Elam has called the performance text.

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## 5.2 SOME OTHER IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THE PLAY

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### 5.2.1 Love interest

As a well-known critic Northrop Frye says, the presiding genius of comedy is Eros. Inevitably love and marriage are a major motif in *The Playboy*.

Marriage actually frames the play. It begins with Pegeen writing out a list of articles of dress that she would need for her marriage with Shawn Keogh and it closes with the latter expressing life, after the departure of Christy, that they would soon be married. Much of the intervening space in the play is occupied by Pegeen's growing admiration and love for the outsider Christy who wins her over with his tale of having murdered his father and with Shawn's attempts to have his rival removed from the scene.

The formula that has become the basis for most comedy is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will. In *The Playboy* this pattern is complicated by the presence of the Widow Quin who initially tries to win Christy over for herself. But when that fails, she agrees to further Christy's prospects with Pegeen. Also the

major obstruction in the union of the lovers is not parental—but of the lovers' own making. Truly enough the turnabout in Pegeen's feelings takes place at the appearance of Old Mahon but the final decision to give up Christy is her own. Christy's desperate attempt to win back Pegeen's favour by 'killing' his father a second time fails. But he reconciles himself to his loss, going away as a sadder, but a wiser, and assuredly a more confident man.

The play proves yet again the truth of what Byron has said about the asymmetrical nature of the love of man and woman: 'Love is of man's life a thing apart/ 'Tis woman's whole existence.' Love is important for Christy but even more important for him is his self-esteem. But for Pegeen love is everything and so she realizes her loss and is inconsolable at the end. Like Shaw, Synge reverses the convention and makes the woman chase the man. That apart, his concept of love is traditional because it is romantic - his lovers are ready to stake everything for it, for the moment. Besides, their love has the elements of uniqueness and fatality that are seen to be essential to romantic love in the West.

Pegeen *radiantly* : "... I'll ... be burning candles from this out to the miracle of God that have brought you from the south to-day."

Christy : "It's miracles, and that's the truth. Me there toiling a long while, and walking a long while, not knowing at all I was drawing all times nearer to this holy day."

Pegeen : "... and I not knowing at all there was the like of you drawing nearer, like the stars of God."

(Act III. P. 219)

Besides, Christy compares Pegeen to 'the Lady Helen of Troy' and to 'an angel's lamp,' comparisons that are entirely in the romantic tradition. Pegeen feels strangely moved and is also strangely awed by this eloquence and can only manage to acknowledge the change that love has wrought in her :

And to think it's me is talking sweetly, Christy Mahon, and I the fright of seven townlands for my biting tongue. Well, the heart's wonder ...

(Act III. P. 219)

Love is highly functional in the play. The flowering of Christy's personality becomes possible through the admiration of women, particularly through the admiration and love of Pegeen.

This great love scene introduced appropriately when Christy is at the peak of his glory is one of the greatest in modern drama, where the language acquires a fresh splendour and an elevated beauty that are rare.

Synge is aware of the extravagance of language to which love leads. Particularly when he makes the Widow Quin remark on his "poetry talk for a girl you'd see itching and scratching, and she with a stale stench of poteen on her from selling in the shop" (Act II, p. 208). But the love scene is truly rapturous while it lasts, without the shadow of undercutting.

## Assignment

What I want you to do now is to look for the several stages through which Pegeen's curiosity passes and develops into love for Christy.

### 5.2.2 Violence

The play moves round violence to father which is a most heinous crime but this violence does not shock as it otherwise should because Synge treats it within the ambit of comic conventions. As a result we not only do not feel outraged but actually laugh at Christy's deed without feeling guilty. The comic intention becomes clear in the first few minutes.

Pegeen *in mock rage* : "Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of the broom?"

Christy *twisting round on her with a sharp cry of horror*: "Don't strike me. I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that"

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

Christy *subsiding*: "With the help of God I did, surely . . ."

This exchange makes the comic intentions of the playwright clear. The coexistence of pious invocation to deity and murder is not only laughable. It is also a clear signal that what we are watching is a comedy. The comic convention delinks violence from pain: "I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all" (Act I, p. 184).

Again, what Pegeen says of the patricide—"That'd be a lad with the sense of Solomon to have for a pot . . ." is absurd but, as Nicholas Grene has pointed out, the very absurdity of the logic makes it impossible to take this seriously.

Synge require his readers to continue to maintain the same attitude as Christy's story snow-balls and as the split caused by his stroke travels down Old Mahon's anatomy. In other words, Christy's violence is treated as mock violence and is acceptable so long as it is part of a story and a fantasy. But Synge shows the people reacting differently when the violence becomes real. The transition from fantasy to reality is always difficult and projecting it on the stage is no easy task. Part of the trouble over the play on its first Dublin production was probably due to this transition. The instrument of murder which Christy used to 'kill' his father—a loy—becomes in the course of the play a comic prop. But when Christy rushes out with a loy to kill his father a second time, the illusion is broken, and the comic prop becomes an instrument of murder. This is one moment in the play when our comic attitude towards violence gets unsettled. The second example of real violence comes when Pegeen forces herself to scorch Christy's feet. Her final wail at the loss of her playboy shows that she did what she did out of frustration. Violence also comes into the play along with the setting. The Irish peasant community of the West among whom the play is set live close to the earth at a primitive level with something savage and untamed in their nature. This latter element is reflected in the psychological make-up of the chief characters, Christy, Pegeen and Widow Quin who are all violent as well as gentle, one quality setting off the other. This also accounts for the many incidents of reported violence in the play relating to the killing of animals, hanging and treatment of mad men. Here is a sampling:

1. Pegeen with scorn: "Where now will you meet the like of Danecn Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, . . ." (Act I)
2. Pegeen: "It's queer joys they have, and who knows the thing they'd do, if it'd make the green stones cry itself to think of you swaying and swigging at the butt of a rope, and you with a fine, stout neck, God bless you! The way you'd be a half an hour, in great anguish, getting your death," (Act II)
3. Widow Quin: "If you are a wonder itself, you'd best be hasty, for them lads caught a maniac one time and pelted the poor creature till he ran out, raving and foaming, and was drowned in the sea," (Act III)

The picture that emerges is no doubt harsh but these, incidents are taken only half seriously because they are said in a comic context. Also because of this background Pegeen's violent behaviour at the end seems entirely credible.

Is Synge satirizing the Irish peasant's tendency to condone violence?

This does not seem to be my feeling. What Synge seems to be doing is to express the innate human tendency to worship a hero and also to vocalize the deeply unconscious tendency to rebel against tradition and parental authority. That the play's 'message' found a local application in 1907 in Ireland is I think more or less incidental.

### 5.2.3 The Ending

The ending of the play has evoked sharp comments. This is particularly so in regard to the burning of Christy's feet by Pegeen.

At least two questions are important here :

1. Is it a satisfying ending?
2. Is Pegeen's sudden turnabout and burning of Christy's legs in character?

Two contemporaries of Synge were not quite satisfied with the ending. Padriac Colum (1881-1972), an Irish dramatist who was a younger contemporary of Synge disapproved of "the girl putting a redhot coal on Christy" and felt that Pegeen would have "stood by her man when he was attacked by a crowd." George Moore who otherwise admired the play found the burning "quite intolerable" and unacceptable. Actor Willie Fay who along with his brother Frank Fay was part of the Abbey Theatre also pleaded with Synge to take out the "torture scene" saying that "while a note of comedy was admirable for heightening tragedy, the converse was not true."

Chief among those who defended the burning was Yeats who held that "an artist need but make his characters self-consistent."

Synge himself was not quite satisfied with the ending and admitted to Molly Allgood that "the third act wants pulling together." In the end he left it as it was.

The burning however distasteful it may have been to some people is entirely in character. As Yeats was quick to recognize, violence was a part of the life of the community Synge was portraying in the play. In his *Aran Islands* he said that "although these people are kindly towards each other and their children, they have no sympathy for the suffering of animals, and little sympathy for pain when the person who feels it is not in danger." Pegeen who embodies the fickleness of the mob is deeply frustrated and disillusioned at the sudden discovery of what she considers Christy's truth. So it should not surprise us when she makes a sudden turnabout and takes recourse to the grotesque action and tries to scorch the legs of her erstwhile lover.

Synge's notebooks show him having tried to work out a satisfactory ending by means of several permutations and combinations. "Pegeen hesitates between Christy and Shawn. Marries Shawn, marries Old Man, goes out with Christy." Or again : "Pegeen scoffs Christy and the Widow Quin takes him into her care." There are several other pairings off that he gave thought to. Finally he settled for Christy's triumphant exit leaving a disconsolate Pegeen behind. This unromantic yet ambiguous ending is more in keeping with the ambiguous spirit of the play.

The ending may be violative of the comic spirit. But the literary categories have to expand or be redefined to fit a play that ends on a note at once of triumph and defeat. A different term like tragi-comedy or dark comedy would account for the manysideness of the play.

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## 5.3 LANGUAGE

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Synge's language has received a great deal of attention from critics. It has been praised as being close to the idiom of the people of Ireland and for being poetic and exuberant. On the other hand, he has been criticized as being 'a faker of peasant speech.'

The variety of English that Synge has used in his plays has a strong Irish flavour. It is based on the English speech of the country people of Ireland of his time. While English had been spoken in Ireland, Irish remained the first language of the people in the countryside, at least till well into the eighteenth century. As a result it is influenced by the native Irish language in its syntax, its vocabulary and its idiom. The resulting difference from the standard English language gives it the charm of the unfamiliar and also accounts for the difficulty it poses to the readers.

Synge holds strong views on language in theatre and has, also said a few things about the sources of language that he has used in his plays. So any discussion of his language must take these into account.

We shall discuss the whole subject in the following three sections:

Section 1 : will deal with Synge's views on language in drama, particularly in *The Playboy*.

Section 2 : will focus on features of syntax, idiom and vocabulary that make Synge's language distinctive and also sometimes difficult for the reader, and that also give it the charm of the unfamiliar.

Section 3 : will conclude the discussion with quoting some comments on Synge's language by critics.

### 5.3.1 Synge on Language in Theatre

In his preface to *The Playboy* Synge spoke of an organic link between the imagination of a people and the language they speak. He valued rich and poetic language in theatre and believed that such a language could come only from people whose folk-imagination is still rich and alive. The country people of Ireland of his time were one such people where, he said, "we have an imagination that is fiery, magnificent, and tender," and where the people have not "shut their lips on poetry." A writer working in such a situation was a privileged person who could produce rich and copious language "full of striking and beautiful phrases" that he had probably just heard.

Synge was critical of the linguistic fare provided by writers like Ibsen and Zola because they presented reality in what he called "joyless and pallid words." On the contrary he insisted that theatre should offer reality *together* with joy and that in a good play "every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or an apple." Obviously the joy that he wanted theatre to give was to come from the writer's own delight in the use of language. The obvious implication is that he has tried to achieve in *The Playboy* what he found wanting in Ibsen and Zola.

### 5.3.2 Synge's Language in *The Playboy*

Another implication of the preface is that Synge's language in *The Playboy* is authentic. There he claimed that he used "one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland." What does this mean? Does it mean that his characters talk the ordinary language of Irish country people? Or does it mean that though the characters frequently use the very words of their real-life originals the language they use is a 'reinvention' of the peasant dialect? The answer is that Synge's language is really a re-creation of peasant speech that he had heard from boyhood in the different countrysides of Ireland. He spent his boyhood in Wicklow and later visited the Aran Islands and West Kerry among other places for varying lengths of time. The idioms and phrases that he had heard and had noted down in his notebooks during these visits or later recalled came in handy when he started writing his plays. (Besides these idioms, there were those that he had invented.) But he did not reproduce the dialect *simply* because it was spoken by the people. He was prepared to reshape the dialect usage to make it more effective and serve his dramatic purpose. Here is one example :

One entry in a notebook used on Synge's visit to Kerry in 1905 reads: "*That seven thousand + seventy devil may play goals with your skull.*"

(Nicholas Grene, 61)

Synge refers to the devils during the course of Christy's cursing of his father in Act I but he reduces their number thereby making his language more effective.

Christy : "May I meet him with one tooth and it aching and one eye to be seeing *seven and seventy devils* in the twists of the road." (Act II, 208)

Another element in his language consists of those phrases that he had invented. One example of this occurs in a sentence where Christy describes his father's drunken behaviour. He would go out into the yard.

*as naked as an ash-tree in the moon of March*

The invented phrase *moon of May* instead of *Month of May* is more effective because it recalls the origin of the word *month* which gives it an archaic flavour and also because it gives us an image of the ash tree shining white under the moon.

These are but two instances of the way in which Synge reworked or reshaped phrases and idioms to suit his dramatic purposes.

We shall now mention the main characteristics of Synge's Irish English and note the kind of effect he was aiming at.

(i) The Omission of the Relative Pronoun :

Synge is apparently excessively fond of omitting relative pronoun ('that' 'who' 'which') from the sentence. He derived this habit from Irish Gaelic in which there is no true relative capable of inflection.

Example 1. Pegeen while writing down articles of dress for her wedding says -

*a hat is suited for a wedding-day* (Act I)

The standard English usage is - a hat [that] is suited for a wedding-day.

Some other examples :

2. 'The likes of Duneen Sullivan [who] knocked the eye,' (Act I)
3. 'With a man [who] killed his father . . . ' (Act I)
4. 'I brought you a little laying pullet - boiled and all she is — [that] was crushed . . . ' (Act II)
5. "Would you have me think a man [that] never talked with the girls would have the words . . . " (Act II)
6. "It was my own son [who] hit me." (Act III)
7. 'They are mounting him for the mule race [that] will be run upon the sands.' (Act III)
8. "That's man [that] is going to make a marriage with the daughter of this house . . . " (Act III)

This omission of relative or what we call ellipsis has the effect of adding pace to the language.

Look for other examples of ellipsis in the play

(ii) Use of a subordinate clause with and but no finite verb

This 'and' construction followed by a noun and participle is constantly used by Synge.

Example:

1. Pegeen : . . . and I pilling the turf with the dogs barking . . . ' (Act I)
2. Shawn : . . . and I going home lonesome . . . ' (Act I)  
Sometimes the participle is omitted.
3. Pegeen : 'And you without a white shift.' (Act II)

4. Pegeen : 'and you with a fine, stout neck . . .' (Act II)
5. Christy : 'and I a lonesome fellow' (Act II)
6. Michael : 'and he wet and crusted with his father's blood' (Act III).

Look for other examples from the text

(iii) Imperative formed with 'let'

Examples:

1. Shawn : 'Let you not be tempting me, . . .' for 'Dont tempt me.' (Act I)
2. Michael : 'Let you come up then to the fire.' (Act I)
3. Christy : 'Let you walk down now and tell the priest'. (Act II)
4. Christy : 'let you save me from the old man.' (Act III).

(iv) The 'After' Construction :

This is a translation of an Irish construction—'after' + gerund. In Irish it often replaces the standard English perfect.

1. Widow Quin : 'I'm after putting him down . . .' in the sports below:  
Standard English version: 'I have just put him down' . . . (I)
2. Pegeen : 'I'm after going down and reading the fearful crimes of Ireland' . . . (II)
3. Christy : 'I'm after toiling, moiling . . .'
4. Jimmy : and he after bringing bankrupt ruin on the roulette man (III)

(v) Inversions

Examples:

1. 'It's above at the crossroads he is . . .'  
Standard English version : He is above at the cross-roads.
2. 'Isn't it long the nights are now, Shawn Keogh . . .?' Shawn Keogh?

Notice the use of it's construction for the sake of emphasis. This again results from the influence of Irish construction.

(vi) The Use of the phrase 'the like of' in place of 'like.'

Examples:

1. 'You'd see the like of them stories.'  
S.E. You'd see stories like these (I, 182).
2. A soft lad the like of you . . . (I, 183).
3. for the like of him would get small mercies (II, 199)

According to one count, the phrase 'the like of' and its variations occur 63 times in *The Playboy*.

(vii) The Use of Progressive or present continuous forms

Synge also prefers using continuous or progressive forms—'I am saying' for 'I say'. This usage is again common Irish English.

Examples:

1. Shawn : 'Then I'm thinking himself will stop along' (... I think ... (I, 177-78)
2. Shawn : 'I'm afraid of Father Reilly, I'm saying' (... I say ...) (I, 179).
3. Pegeen : 'What right have you to be making game of a poor fellow' (... to make ...) (I, 180)
4. Sara : 'Don't be talking' (... talk ...) (II, 194).
5. Pegeen : 'What is it you're wanting?' (... you want? ...) (II, 198).
6. Michael : 'You'll be wedding them this day, is it?' ('You'll wed them ...') (III, 220).

(viii) Use of certain words, phrases and expressions

1. Have a right to : should know.

Example : Pegeen : 'If you're a dunce itself, you'd have a right to know that larceny's robbing and stealing' (I, 181)

2. The way that with the result that or so that.

Example

- (a) Christy : 'but you're decent people, I'm thinking, and yourself a kindly woman, the way I wasn't fearing you at all' (I, 186).
- (b) Honor : 'Well, it'll be a hard case if he's gone off now the way we'll never set our eyes on a man killed his father ...' (—so that we'll ...).

Other words : lay, poteen, curragh, quest.

3. Use of diminutive forms of words :

In Irish diminutives are formed by adding the suffix *-een*. Synge uses many diminutive forms in *The Playboy*.

Examples :

Shebeen	:	public house	(I, 176, 191)
priesteen	:	little priest	(I, 190)
houseen	:	little house	(I, 191)
boreen	:	track	
Cnuceen	:	little hill	(II, 194)

Some other words : supeen (II, 197), thruceen (III, 202)

4. The Use of 'for to' for 'to': This is a survival of Elizabethan English. An example occurs in the first line spoken by Pegeen on the stage :

Pegeen : Six yards of stuff for to make a yellow gown.

The word *for* is redundant here.

There is another example near the end of Act I. Find it out. There are other examples too later in the play.

Clearly Synge's language in *The Playboy* is marked by frequent use of certain favourite construction. Since these constructions deviate from standard English they make his language unfamiliar to the non-Irish speaker. But because of the frequency of repetition and the limited number of such constructions, the unfamiliarity weans off and the reader gets used to them. In addition, these repetitive usages also help to establish certain staple rhythm which recur regularly so that the ear gets accustomed to the texture of the dialogue.



## Poetry

'Such poet's talking.' That is how Pegeen compliments Christy's eloquence in the great love scene in Act III. This compliment can be applied to *The Playboy* as a whole. Synge's language has rightly been called poetic and exuberant.

It is the language of people whose imagination is still wild and unfettered and whose speech, as T.S. Eliot points out, is "naturally poetic" Synge was a meticulous craftsman who worked hard on his speeches before he achieved the effect of musical, rhythmic prose that he wanted. Here is one of the two examples of his verbal revisions in the play which David H. Greene gives. It relates to the opening lines of act one where Pegeen is shown writing aloud items for her marriage. The first draft of the speech with which he was not satisfied reads :

Two dozens of Powers Whiskey. Three barrels of porter, two bottles of hopes.  
To be sent by Timmy Farrell's Creel-cart on the evening of the coming fair to  
Mister Michael James Flaherty. With the best compliments of this season.  
Margaret Flaherty.

"The latter part of the speech," according to Greene, "strikes the right note at the very start; but the first part is all wrong because the three items she is ordering the whiskey, porter, and bottles of hopes are short and jumpy and delay the lyric take-off which follows with "To be sent by Timmy Farrell's creel-cart . . ." So in the margin Synge had written, "Try making her order her trousseau." On the back of the page is an attempt at the trousseau: "Six yards of yellow silk ribbon, a pair of long boots, bright red hat suited for a young woman on her wedding day, a fine tooth comb to be sent . . ." The *long boots* he changes then to "pairs of shoes with English heels," but still isn't satisfied, so he crosses out *English* and substitutes in succession the words *big*, *long*, and *lengthy*. The passage finally reads:

*Six yards of stuff for to make a yellow gown. A pair of lace boots with lengthy heels on them and brassy eyes. A hat is suited for a wedding-day. A fine tooth comb. To be sent with three barrels of porter in Jimmy Farrell's creel cart on the evening the coming Fair to Mister Michael James' Flaherty.*

The rhythmic effects that Synge achieved through such careful workmanship were however not easy to achieve in theatre and made great demands on the actors who had to speak those lines. Willie Fay, the first director of the Abbey Theatre, remarks on the difficulties of mastering the rhythm of Synge's lines. "They had what I call a balance of their own and went a kind of lilt."

Synge's language is capable of varied effects. His sensitiveness to the world of nature often shows itself in language that is at once simple and vivid :

I could hear the cows breathing and sighing in the stillness of the air, and not a step moving any place from this gate to the bridge.

In the famous love scene of Act II his language is at its finest. His skilful orchestration of metaphor, cadence and rhythm enables him to rise to heights of eloquence and lyricism that is perhaps unrivalled in modern drama.

## Imagery

A word about imagery in *The Playboy*. Synge's images come from two sources—folk and literary. Here are some examples :

### Folk Image

-and now she'll be turning again, and speaking hard words to me, like an old woman with a spavindy ass she'd have, urging on a hill. (Act II, 208)

Synge also uses the traditional image of the Helen of Troy in his love duet.

If the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets,  
I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen  
of Troy . . . (Act III, 218)

The phrase 'The star of knowledge' has been taken from Hyde's *Love Songs of Connaught*, as a traditional image of the beloved.

A serious criticism of Synge is that he sometimes strains after rhetorical effect.

. . . till you'd find a radiant lady with droves of bullocks on the plains of Mealt,  
and herself bedizenized in the diamond jewelries of Pharaoh's ma.

- (i) 'Synge wrote in a prose that sets him high among the poets.' (Maurice Bourgeois)
- (ii) 'He went to Aran . . . listening also to the beautiful English which has grown up in Irish-speaking districts, and takes its vocabulary from the time of Malory and of the translators of the Bible, but its idiom and its vivid metaphor from Irish . . . He made word and phrase dance to a very strange rhythm, which will always, till his plays have created their own tradition, be difficult to actors who have not learned it from his own lips.'  
(W.B. Yeats)
- (iii) 'The play of John Millington Synge form rather a special case, because they are based upon the idiom of a rural people whose speech is naturally poetic, both in imagery and in rhythm. I believe that he even incorporated phrases which he had heard from these country people of Ireland. The language of Synge is not available except for the plays set among that same people.' (T.S.Elliot)

## **5.4 THE PLAYBOY AS A PERFORMANCE TEXT**

Accounts of performances of plays particularly by those who have acted in them often furnish valuable clues to the play's meaning and also tell us what it means to transform a dramatic text into a performance text.

Two such accounts are available, both by Irish actors who have played the lead role of Christy Mahon. William Fay's account deals with the first 1907 production which has already been referred to. The other account is by Cyril Cusack who joined the Abbey Theatre after the Fays had left and who had a long innings of twenty years with the play from 1936 to 1955. Both these accounts are available in the Casebook volume on *J.M. Synge: Four Plays* (1992) ed. By Ronald Ayling. There are also stray references to some other production of the play. However the amount of evidence available with this writer does not qualify him to study *The Playboy* as a performance text as thoroughly as he would have liked to. But two points could be noted. I shall put these points in the form of question.

1. Does the play require to be presented naturalistically? Or should it be staged as an extravagant comedy? Would, for example, the presentation of Old Mahon with a "horribly bloodied bandage" detract from the extravagance of high comedy?
2. How should Pegeen be presented? Should she be presented with a 'touch of fury' in her? Or should she be presented as 'a decent likeable country girl,?

As for the first question, Cyril Cusack says that in his effort to present the real Synge he at first combined the purely theatrical with a form of naturalism that came perilously close to the representational. He also admits that it was only after 1954 when he moved out of his "too naturalistic style" into a wider acting orbit nearer to extravaganza, that he came to enjoy "the full flavour" of the play.

Padriac Colum pointed out that the "horribly-bloodied bandage" on Old Mahon's head "took the whole thing out of the atmosphere of high comedy." He preferred the Abbey Production of 1909 when Old Mahon "was made a less bloody object." He also felt that the somewhat "sardonic" Christy detracted from "the extravagance of the comedy" and that Fred O'Donovan's Christy in the 1909 production had more innocent "charm and gaiety."

What about Pegeen?

Willie Fay "begged" Synge, as he put it, to make Pegeen "a decent likeable country girl" but with little result. The part has been presented differently in different productions. In the Ashley Duke's production in London, for example, Pegeen was played as "a limpid young girl;" when according to a critic, she should have had a "touch of fury" in her. But the Cusack's production in 1954 and the Dublin Theatre Festival of 1960 returned to Pegeen's role "a necessary vibrant depth and wildness."

You should try and look up some other reviews of the production of the play including those in India. This should help you to get closer to the play.

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## 5.5 LET US SUM UP

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Our exploration of *The Playboy* is now coming to a close. The play is now an acknowledged masterpiece not only of the Irish Dramatic Movement but of modern drama. As Cyril Cusack says, it belongs to the large Western world. How does one account for its continuing relevance to our times?

*The Playboy* is neither a comedy nor a tragedy but a bit of both. Because of its unique combination of affirmation and despair, of the romantic, the Rabelaisian and ironic elements, it refuses to fit into any neat traditional category.

Like all classics it is thematically rich and lends itself to multiple interpretations. But as Thomas Whitaker has pointed out, it "most fully engages what seems the obsessive subject of modern drama: life as a question of 'role-playing.'" A character in Shaw's *Arm and the Man* spoke of six persons of his and he himself was not sure which of them was the *real man*. As Whitaker continues, life has become more inescapably histrionic. Words like *mask* and *performance* have become part of the modern man's vocabulary. *The Playboy* is a play where the mask literally creates or re-creates the man.

*The Playboy* taps another source of great power—it touches something very deep in human nature—the instinctive desire to rebel against tradition and the tyranny of the older generation. The play brings this subconscious desire to the surface and treats the dread subject of patricide in a light-hearted manner. In this sense the play shows us an image of ourselves which we both dread and wish to see at the same time.

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## 5.6 GLOSSARY

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- Ellipsis : Comes from a Greek word which means leaving out. Leaving out of a word or words when the meaning can be understood without them to achieve more compact expression.
- Eros : Greek God of Love, the power to produce and reproduce.
- Imagery : a term used for images collectively. The term covers use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts and states of mind.
- Motif : a dominant idea, part of a main theme; also a subject, pattern, or an idea that forms the main base on which a literary work is based.
- Perspective : the way in which a matter is judged.

## 5.7 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the characteristic features of Synge's language in *The Playboy*.
2. Write an essay on imagery in *The Playboy*.

## 5.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

*Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* by J.A. Cuddon (Third Edition). Penguin Books, 1992.

Yeats, W.B. "The Death of Synge" in *Autobiographies*. London Macmillan, 1955.

Greene, David H. And Edward M. Stephens. *J.M. Synge. 1871-1909*. New York: Macmillan, 1959, p.321.

Biography of Synge interspersed with criticism of his work. The authors include a discussion of the riots over *The Playboy* and critical reception and reviews of his plays both from Dublin and abroad.

Synge, J.M. *Four Plays and the Aran Islands*. Ed. With an Introduction by Robin Skilton. London: Oxford University Press, 1962, Pages 155-327 contain the introduction and four parts of the book *The Aran Islands*.

Henn, T.R. Ed. *The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge* with an Introduction and Notes. London : Methuen, 1963; rpt. 1968.

Contains General Introduction which has three sections: The Playwright, the Language of the plays, Rhythm; a separate introduction to *The Playboy*; contains annotations to each play and a bibliography also. Essential reading.

Whitaker, Thomas R. Ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Playboy of the Western World: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969.

Contains essays by W.B. Yeats, Una Ellis-Fermor, T.R. Henn, Norman Podhoretz, David H. Greene, and several others. Highly desirable. Whitaker's 20-page long introduction should be essential reading.

Frye, Northrop "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy" in *Anatomy of Criticism*. New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 163-86.

Also available in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*. Ed. Robert W. Corrigan. Second Edition. New York: Harper & Row, 1981, pp.84-99.

Contains an analysis of the mythic structure of comedy, a category that transcends drama. Frye's aim is to establish universal structures of all literature. Essential reading.

Williams, Raymond. "J.M. Synge" in *Drama: From Ibsen to Brecht*. Penguin Books, 1973; rpt. 1978, pp. 139-52. Section 4 of the essay deals with *The Playboy*. Useful.

Greene, Nicholas. *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays*. London: Macmillan, 1975 rpt. 1979.

Detailed discussion of each play, viewing the prose work as source material. Three chapters are particularly useful: "The Development of Dialect" dealing with Synge's language "Approaches to *The Playboy* and "Unhappy Comedies." Essential reading.

Benson, Eugene. *J.M. Synge*. London Macmillan, 1982, p. 167.

Contains a useful essay on *The Playboy*; also contains several pictures including those of the productions of plays.

Alying, Ronald. Ed. *J.M. Synge: Four Plays: A Selection of Critical Essays*. A Casebook. London: Macmillan, 1922, pp. 127-87.

There are three essays on Synge's dramatic art. The portion on *The Playboy* includes contemporary comments, reviews and nine critical studies.