

UNIT 4 THE PLAYBOY : A DISCUSSION

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Major Critical Perspectives on the Play
- 4.3 Themes / Genres
 - 4.3.1 Theme of Patricide
 - 4.3.2 Theme of Fantasy versus Reality
 - 4.3.3 Theme of Role-playing
 - 4.3.4 The Playboy as an extravagant comedy and *Stichtungsroman* in drama
- 4.4 Characters
 - 4.4.1 Christy
 - 4.4.2 Pegeen
 - 4.4.3 Widow Quin
 - 4.4.4 Other characters
- 4.5 Comic Strategies
 - 4.5.1 Farcical elements
 - 4.5.2 Irony
 - 4.5.3 Balancing through parallel/contrasting situations
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Glossary
- 4.8 Questions
- 4.9 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this unit are to (i) discuss the major critical perspectives on the play, and then (ii) converge on the major themes in it; cast a glance at the major characters in it; and finally discuss the comic strategies employed by the dramatist to present his comic vision.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

After the close analysis of the play undertaken in unit 3, you are now, hopefully, in a position to take on the question of how best to interpret the play. There are any number of critical approaches, some more fanciful or tempting than the others. One important condition that any critical approach must, I think, fulfil is that it should be true to the experience of reading the play or seeing it acted on the stage.

Several critics have, for instance, detected what Nicholas Grene has called 'concealed analogies'. Christy Mahon has been variously described as a parody version of Cuchulain, a mock Oedipus, also a Christ figure. But none of these readings according to him, are backed by solid evidence from the text.

What we need to do is to keep an open mind and look for an approach or evolve one for ourselves, that will help to account for the multiplicity of the play.

4.2 MAJOR CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE PLAY

For sixty years or so after *The Playboy's* hostile reception in Ireland in 1907, Synge received more attention outside Ireland than inside. As late as in 1971 in a volume published on the centenary of Synge's birth, Alan Price remarked that in Synge criticism there is 'almost nothing' from the Irish. Even so it will be generally agreed that W.B. Yeats is a pioneer of Synge criticism. He not only came splendidly to his defence during *The Playboy* riots, he wrote on Synge giving intimate glimpses of the man and his work and his style. Thomas Whitaker has even described him as possibly "Synge's most profound commentator."

Another important Irishman who has influenced Synge criticism is T.R. Henn whose edition of Synge's plays (1963) is among the best available. According to him *The Playboy* does not lend itself easily to classification and briefly talks about its different interpretations.

Then came Thomas Whitaker's collection of 12 critical essays on *The Playboy* (in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*) in 1969. Another significant work is Nicholas Grene's study entitled *A Critical Study of the Plays* (1975) where he "provides detailed criticism, analysis and evaluation" of the plays. A more recent landmark is the publication in the Casebook Series of critical essays on *The Playboy* included in *J.M. Synge: The Four Plays* (1992) edited by Ronald Ayling.

How has *The Playboy* been viewed over the years?

The play has been looked at variously from the point of view of its genre, its themes and its central characters.

Synge himself said that it was not a play "with a purpose." Though parts of it were "extravagant comedy," it was predominantly a "perfectly serious" play.

Yeats described it as "the strangest, the most beautiful expression in drama of . . . Irish fantasy" and also drew attention to the element of "mischievous extravagance" in it. Una Ellis-Fermor called it a "tragicomedy" which had as its main theme "the growth of fantasy in a mind or a group of minds." According to T.R. Henn the play could be looked at in seven different ways—as an extravagant comedy with elements of strong farce in it, as a free comedy, as a satire with Christy as a comic Oedipus, as a mock-heroic with Christy as a "Comic Odysseus," as a tragic-comic piece with the Widow Quin as Nausica and as a tragedy with Pegeen as the "heroine-victim." More recently J.L. Styan has described it as a "dark comedy."

Much of the criticism on the play turns upon the attitudes adopted towards the central character Christy Mahon. Among those who see him romantically is Alan Price (1961) who views it primarily as a play in which Christy's imagination transforms the dream into reality. He sees the ending of the play as a vindication of the creative power of imagination. According to Una Ellis-Fermor (1954) the play's theme is "a mind's exploration and discovery of itself," "the growth, like a Japanese paper flower dropped into a bowl of water, of Christopher Mahon's new self." Norman Fodhoretz (1953) attributes Christy's maturation through the myth of rebellion against his father. According to Patricia Meyer Spackes (1961), the play presents "the visions of a man constructing himself before our eyes." He also points to the element of the fairy tale in it which according to him "solves the problem of relation between realms and fantasy in it" and also "suggests the sources of its strange power." Ann Saddlemeyer (1964) suggests that in *The Playboy* "we see the power of the myth to create a reality out of the dream or illusion itself."

Hugh MacLean sees Christy as a Christ figure. Howard D. Pearce's essay "Synge's *Playboy* as Mock-Christ" acknowledges the parallel between Christy and Christ but he presents Christy as a scapegoat who can only save himself, and not the world. Like MacLean earlier, Stanley Sultan also finds in Christy's person a persuasive, sincere and full-fledged analogue to Christ."

There are those who do not take the romantic view implicit in the essays mentioned above. Howard Pearce as already stated warns us against oversimplifying Christy's apotheosis. Ronald Peacock gives a dissenting view holding that Synge's "delicate self-mockery" is directed against himself, "against the artist and his dangerous love of fine words." He also holds that Synge had a style that was "quite useless for the English drama, its basis being a speech of extremely local and ambiguously English character." R.R. Sanderlin believes that the play is "a direct satire on Irish romanticism—on blather and blarney."

There is another view expressed by J.F. Kilroy that the play "dramatizes the gradual development of the poet's craft from its first uncertain expressions to the full display of mature art." The play is also spoken of as symbolising Christy's growth as an artist.

Christy is the central figure round which a great deal of criticism moves. But there are dissenting voices also. Howard Pearce directs our attention to the role of the Widow Quir. He says: "If Widow Quir lacks the sparkle and romance of Christy, nevertheless her actions are grounded in actuality, in sharp contrast to Christy's points up Synge's ironic detachment." Pegeen has been described as a "heroine-victim" of the play. More recently scholars like Ann Saddlemyer (1983) and Gail Finney (1987) have looked at the play from the point of view of women characters. Clearly the play is complex and lends itself to interpretation in many ways, depending upon how one decides to look at it.

4.3 THEMES / GENRES

I take it that you have been able to read the play at least twice and also the background material and have formed your own impressions about it.

I also hope you have enjoyed reading the play and have laughed a great deal over it. Many people when they read it or see it on the stage for the first time find it puzzling, even bewildering. Perhaps you have also been bewildered by some of the things in it. Whatever be your first reaction, do put it down on paper before you read on. You know ideas have a way of escaping unless we catch them.

4.3.1 Theme of Patricide

An obvious theme of the play is patricide, Christy's killing of his father. This idea is linked with the idea of the growth of his personality.

To the ancient Greeks, patricide was the most dreadful of sins. Witness Sophocle's *Oedipus Tyrannus*. But in *The Playboy* the subject is treated with comic irony, indeed with comic reversal of values and is presented as a metaphor of emancipation and achievement. In this reading the play could be seen as an example of *bildungsroman* (a German term for a 'formation' novel or an 'upbringing' or 'education' novel) in drama with the murder of the father as a necessary step to Christy's maturity and his assumption of manhood.

Christy commits two 'murders' of his father and is prepared to 'kill' him a third time. The first time he hit him and thought he had killed him was when he [his father] tried to force him to marry a rich old widow. He strikes him a second time to win back Pegeen's respect, which he lost after the reappearance of his father.

The chief interest of the play seems to be in the expanding consciousness of Christy under the influence of the adulation of Pegeen and other Mayo women and men. The rewards of the murder are so palpable that Christy wonders why he had not killed his father earlier. The laughing stock of all women becomes their darling. But the more real reward is the growth of his personality and his poetic eloquence that accompanies it.

As against Christy's achievement in 'murdering' his father his rival Shawn laments that he has no father to kill. Till the end he remains under the authority of a father figure, the priest, Father Reilly.

The Christy who makes his triumphant exit from the play is unrecognizably different from the frightened runaway young man who seeks shelter from the law in a Mayo shebeen. He has finally subdued his father, has become a "likely gaffer in the end of all" and he walks out determined to be "master of all fights from now."

However the theme of patricide is only part of the total story.

4.3.2 Theme of Fantasy versus Reality

The expansion of Christy's consciousness is accomplished through a lie—a lie that snowballs and in which Christy's audiences are his enthusiastic collaborators. As he himself acknowledges at the end, the Mayo crowd has made 'a mighty' man of him by the power of a lie." Is the play then an example of a dream or fantasy or myth becoming a reality? Una Ellis-Fermor

says the play is about the fantasy in a mind or a group of minds. Ann Saddlemyer goes further and has suggested that *The Playboy* shows the power of the myth to create a reality out of the dream or illusion itself.

The Irish love of fantasy and myth-making is well known. In *The Playboy* Synge uses what has been called the "incorrigible Irish genius for myth-making." The play puts fantasy or romance against reality. Christy's lie of murder grows to heroic proportions at each telling. The growth of the lie is made clear in the extent of the split caused by the blow of the loy on the father's anatomy.

Christy begins modestly enough:

I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it [the loy] on the ridge of his skull and he went down at my feet like an empty sack . . . (Act I).

The story expands when Christy tells it to the admiring girls Susan and Honor and others in Act II.

I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet.

The split travels further down when he talks to the Widow Quin in the same Act :

. . . a gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt.'

To the admiring Mayo crowd Christy's fantasy is welcome so long as it remains distant, a 'gallous story' beautifully told but becomes disgusting when it comes too close for comfort and becomes a dirty deed.' It is principally for this reason that the Widow Quin's murder of her husband is dismissed as "a sneaky kind of murder did win small glory with the bery itself," whereas Christy's murder is lionized. Christy's exaggerations and those of his listeners provide a great deal of fun but Synge sees to it that in his handling of the theme versus reality never gets out of hand. Whenever Christy soars too high on the wings of his imagination, Synge punctures his flight and brings him back to solid earth. When for instance Christy is boasting about his bravery to Pegeen, a knock on the door sends him cowering to Pegeen. Later, when he is at his boastful best, telling Widow Quin how he cleft his father to his breeches belt, Synge deflates him by showing him a glimpse of his unsplit father. There are any number of other examples of this kind. Even so the fact that the fantasy does become a reality, it transforms the man. But this theme by itself does not do justice to the multiplicity of the play.

4.3.3 Theme of Role-playing

The Playboy is also about role-plying which is what Christy does in living his big lie.

As Thomas Whitaker has said, "drama has long used disguises, plays-within-plays, and other metaphorical gestures integral to the medium; it has long seen life as this stage, where each man plays many parts." But it is only in the past century that drama has become more aware of itself, become more "ironically self reflexive." Life itself has become a performance. Role-playing, as he points out, has become an obsessive theme of modern drama. Synge's treatment of it makes his play strikingly modern. It is one of those plays where role-playing starts early and continues till just before the end.

The role-playing in *The Playboy* involves a boaster, a *miles gloriosus* figure of Roman comedy, who is supposed to be a man of words rather than deeds. But though Christy begins as a braggart and continues to be one for quite some time, he proves to be a man of deeds in the end. That is to say, he breaks the traditional mould of a *miles gloriosus*.

For Christy role-playing is at first essential to his survival. But later it becomes a means to self-discovery.

Since he himself is the *raconteur*, Christy's role-playing requires improvisation, a task that he accomplishes with aplomb. Two examples of it could be given. When in Act I Michael asks Christy if he buried his father, he does not reply straightaway. Here is the exchange:

Michael (*making a sign to Pegeen to fill Christy's glass*) : And what way weren't you hanged, mister?

Did you bury him then?

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

The stage direction *considering* clearly indicates that he is trying to improvise, to give a reply that would be consistent with what he has said earlier and that would at the same time impress his listeners.

My second example is from Act II When Christy is boasting about his murderous deed to the Widow Quin:

Christy : From this out I'll have no want of company when all sorts is bringing me their food and clothing (*he swaggers to the door, tightening his belt*), the way they'd set their eyes upon a gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt.

Again the stage direction—*he swaggers to the door, tightening his belt*—is important. Earlier he had said that his father 'split to the knob of his gullet' but now the split has gone further down to *the breeches belt*.

Christy is indeed a naive braggart who does not lie grossly and whose fantasies are more a sign of his own growing self-esteem. This brings us to the recognition that Christy's role-playing proves to be educative and leads to self-discovery; it results in the creation of a new personality. The transformation in Christy could be explained with the help of Yeats's doctrine of the mask. Yeats held that "all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a re-birth as something not oneself. . . ." ("The Death of Synge" (1909), p. 121). Christy's self-discovery is made possible by his pursuit of his opposite. By imagining himself to be a daring man who is unafraid of his father, he does become one.

Each of the foregoing three readings taken by itself is a valid reading in a limited way but does not do full justice to the complexity and multiplicity of the play. Each is intimately connected with the other and only together do they come close to giving a truer picture of the play. Alas, they have the disadvantage of focussing more or less on Christy alone. For instance, they do not give due importance to the character and role of the Widow Quin or to Peggen who has been seen as a victim-heroine of the play. Clearly we cannot get a fuller idea of the play unless we are able to find a more adequate answer to the other important question we started with—*What kind of play is it?* We have no doubt referred to the writer's use of comic irony, comic inversion of values and repetitive comic deflation of Christy. But the themes and the comic devices need to be seen in relation to the form that the writer has employed. Only then can we have a comprehensive view of the play and the writer's vision embodied in it.

4.3.4 *The Playboy* as an extravagant comedy and bildungsroman in drama

I suggest that the best way to arrive at an answer to two questions—what is the play about and what kind of play is it?—would be to try and determine the basic structure of the play and see how Synge has used it to communicate his comic vision.

As stated in the section on Title the play was originally meant to be a farce. The action of the play was to begin with the fight between father and son in the potato garden in which the son was to hit the father with a toy and run away and to end with his exposure just as he is elected Country Councillor in Mayo. The central situation was the growth of a monstrous lie and the exposure of the braggart.

In the course of its evolution, the play saw many changes and revision and went much beyond its original intention. In Synge's hands the play has become an extravagant comedy of situation that shows the growth of its central characters. Even so Synge retained the substratum of a farce. This is clear from his characterization and plotting and some of the comic devices used in the play.

Eric Bentley says that "outrage of family piety is certainly at the heart of a farce." This is true of *The Playboy*, the obvious subject of which is the murder of the father and the approval of it by the Mayo crowd. The absurdity involved in this situation as also in others to which it leads is central to *The Playboy* and causes much of the laughter in it. Synge also takes the figure of an *alazon* or an imposter often found in farces and makes it central to his play. There is also much of knockabout farce in the play. As for plotting Synge uses the device of what Bergson calls the "snowball"—the growth of a lie to monstrous proportions. We find it used in Lady Gregory's farce called *spreading the News*, for instance, and other farces. Improvisation is another feature of a farce and several examples of it have been noted earlier in this Unit. The tempo in the play is also the tempo of a farce—Christy's lie expands with surprising rapidity. The unmasking that comes at the end of a comedy occurs all along in a farce. This is true of *The Playboy* where Christy is continually deflated, though the final unmasking comes only at the end. Inevitably in a farce the expansion of the lie reaches a point at which it is exploded and the braggart is exposed. This happens in *The Playboy* also but with a noticeable and significant difference. In the earlier drafts Synge had used a circular structure which means that Christy was to end where he had begun—as the fool of Farnham. But he breaks the traditional mould of a farce in which there is no development of character, and makes his braggart hero grow to maturity and confidence.

4.4 CHARACTERS

4.4.1 Christy

Christ is basically an extremely naïve and likeable character whose lies are more in the nature of his unconscious fantasies which grow with the active help of the Mayo crowd, particularly Pegeen and the other girls. His naiveté is clear from the fact that in spite of being boastful he speaks disarmingly about himself as he has really been. On such occasions we feel that there is no pretence in him. So while we laugh at his boastfulness, we also like him and sympathize with him.

The growth of Christy's fantasies is also an earnest of his growing confidence in himself. True, he is continually deflated, but he is also amazed at the interest that he has been able to arouse in the people of Mayo and he begins to discover himself anew. His love for Pegeen which he finds fully reciprocated releases springs of poetic eloquence in him. By the time he is exposed, his personality has been born anew. Here one can also detect the classical elements of *reversal* and *recognition*. The reversal in Christy's fortunes follows the return or the 'resurrection of the father, and recognition of his new self comes to him not long after. For a brief while he feels angry with the mob but soon recovers and before going away blesses the Mayo people for turning him into a 'likely gaffer.' He makes a triumphant exit with his father confident in his belief that he will be a master of all fights from now. But Christy is not the only character who grows and discovers himself. Pegeen too does not remain ununinfluenced by her involvement with Christy.

4.4.2 Pegeen

Love for Christy transforms her from being a sharp tongued woman into one who is gentle, eloquent and who vows unchanging fidelity to him. Though later she is angry with him, and is even cruel to him for having won him on the basis of a lie, and rejects him, she remains inconsolable at the end at having lost her man. "Oh my grief! I've lost him surely I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World." Her grief at her loss which is genuine shows that she is not the girl she was before Christy's arrival. In this denouement again Synge has departed from the practice of a traditional comedy where the boy gets the girl at the end. No wonder Una Ellis-Fermor has described *The Playboy* as a comedy that trembles on the verge of a tragedy. T.R. Henn has called her the heroine-victim of the play. This is how he describes her plight:

... it is Pegeen who is the heroine-victim. She has found her man, made him; won him in the teeth of opposition from her own sex. The marriage has been approved, in a superb drunken half-parody of the traditional blessing by her father.

The Playboy is an exuberant comedy that leans towards irony and at the end towards tragedy.

4.4.3 Widow Quin

Synge has used the Widow Quin as a counterweight to the romantic, highflying Christy and other characters. If the play is likened to a ship, she is the ballast to it keeping it stable and close to reality.

In the beginning she is one among a group of curious hankymoms, who comes 'racing the hills beyond to look on his [Christy's] face and tries to win him over by claiming an identity with him (I'm your like) but once she comes to know Christy's preference for Pegeen, she accepts his choice and in fact strikes a hard bargain with him and tries her best to further his prospects with Pegeen.

However, her role as a realist begins quite early. Her first reaction to Christy is more commonsensical than that of others: "... it'd soften my heart to see you sitting to be saying your catechism than slaying your da" (p. 190). She also warns him to beware of the fate that awaits Christy at the hands of Pegeen: "... Do you hear the way she'll be rating at your own self when a week is by?" (p. 191). Even more important is her ironic awareness of the gap between Christy's extravagant praise of Pegeen and the reality: "There's poetry talk for a girl you'd see itching and scratching, and she with a stale stink of poteen on her from selling in the shop" (p. 208). Towards the end after the turnabout, she senses danger to Christy and tries to save him from mob fury by asking him to go away. But when she finds her efforts unavailing Synge lets her disappear from the play much like Lear's Fool. There are several other examples of the Widow Quin's role as the realist in the play, which you should be able to discover for yourself.

4.4.4 Other Characters

Shawn Keogh

In the morally topsy-turvy world of *The Playboy* Shawn's conservative morals are in sharp contrast to Christy's amorality and are a source of a great deal of comedy in the play. When he senses danger to his morals, he invokes the aid of Father Reilly and escapes leaving his coat in Michael James' hands. When his marriage is in danger he unromantically refuses to fight the 'usurper' and tries first to bribe Christy himself to go away and then the Widow Quin to get rid of him.

Michael James

Michael James is a fat and jovial publican whom nothing can keep away from drinks. His almost pagan joy in life and sex comes through in his drunken blessing of Christy and Pegeen, where he exalts marriage and virility. He joins everyone else in lionizing Christy but when he returns to reality, he remembers his responsibilities as a law-abiding citizen and father, and turns against the playboy.

Old Mahon

Though fond of drink like Michael James, Old Mahon is by far the most eccentric character in the play. He is besides, a tyrant determined to force his son Christy to marry Widow Casey. And when Christy runs away after giving him what he calls a 'tap' with a loy, he chases him in order to punish him. In the end however he is reconciled to him and agrees to follow him when he discovers that the loony of Mahon has after all become a man.

4.5 COMIC STRATEGIES

'Of the things that nourish the imagination humour is one of the most needful, and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it.'

(Synge in his Preface to *The Tinker's Wedding*)

The Playboy, we said, is at once an extravagant comedy with the substratum of a farce and a dramatic *bildungsroman*. The combining of these two elements was an artistic feat that Synge was able to achieve by the use of his richly ironic style. Because of his Anglo-Irish ascendancy background and his agnosticism, his attitude towards Ireland and the Irish peasantry was highly ambivalent. He loved the peasantry and understood them but he was also able to view them with detachment and mockery. As a result the play achieves a delicate, even, precarious balance between opposing attitudes, a balance which it has not always been possible to maintain in the production of the play. Synge's comedy leans heavily towards irony. If at times it is close to satire, the satire is never harsh or ill-tempered.

The play offers a feast of comedy showing an exceptional range of effects, from broad farce to subtle irony.

4.5.1 Farcical elements

Some general features of farce in *The Playboy* have been mentioned in Section 4.3.4. This discussion is more specific.

A great deal of humour in the play is the result of absurd situations and incidents. The play has many such scenes. Two of these may be pointed out:

1. Shawn Keogh struggling to escape and managing to flee leaving his coat in Michael James' hands.
2. Pegeen and Widow Quin quarrelling over Christy.

Notice that the first scene involves the characters in an undignified physical situation and belongs to the category of broad farce. But its appeal is not merely primitive and visual—it has an undertone of subtler comedy in its reference to Shawn's subservience to Father Reilly.

The other scene also has a touch of subtle comedy because it reverses the comic convention and shows two women chasing a man.

There are other examples in Act II and Act III.

Act II.

3. Sara putting on Christy's boots.
4. Christy trying to conceal the mirror from the girls.
5. Sara proposing a mock toast to the 'union' of Christy and Widow Quin.
6. Old Mahon's sudden appearance and Christy's hiding behind the door. The fun of the scene lies in the fact that the character who is hiding is deflated.

Act III. You should be able to find examples yourself. One obvious example is Shawn's fleeing from Christy's threat of violence.

4.5.2 Irony

Irony, we need to remind ourselves, is a mode of seeing things. It involves the perception or awareness of a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning, between actions and their consequences, or between appearance and reality. In all these cases there may be an element of the absurd and the paradoxical.

Synge's comic vision requires the use of irony in its different forms, particularly verbal irony and irony of situation. At times both kinds work together. Here are some examples.

Verbal Irony :

The Playboy furnishes examples of both conscious and unconscious verbal irony.

1. When in Act I Pegeen tells Shawn - "You are a daring fellow." she is using the words ironically, meaning that he is not a daring man.
2. When in Act II the Widow Quin finds Christy cowering in terror at seeing his father come back 'alive,' she bursts out laughing and says :

"Well, you're the walking playboy of the Western World, and that's the poor man you had divided to his breeches belt."

Again she is being consciously ironical. She now knows Christy for what he is.

You should look for other examples of this in the play.

The examples of unconscious irony are far more numerous. Here are some examples.

1. Christy is being questioned about the use of weapon with which he killed his father. When it is suggested that he perhaps shot him dead, he says :

"I never used weapons, I've no [gun] license and I'm a law-fearing man."

The incongruity or oddity in Christy's response lies in his being a patricide and yet claiming that he is a law-abiding citizen. But he is totally unaware of it.

2. "Is it killed your father?"

"With the help of God, I did, surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother may intercede for his soul."

Here the oddity arises because of the habit of the Irish peasant to use pious and holy blessings, interjections and expletives without thought of their significance.

3. "Or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland . . ."

Again the normal pious expletive—God rest him—is at odds with his crime. Moreover both God rest him and holy Ireland is at odds with 'maiming ewes.'

You should be on the look out for similar examples of the incongruous conjunctions of pious expressions in relation to what happens in the play. Such usages provide grounds for attack on Synge on charges of being anti-Catholic and blasphemous.

Irony of situation

A good example of this is Christy's reaction to the Widow Quin's knocking in Act I. The knocking has the effect of deflating Christy. Similarly Old Mahon's appearance in Act II at which Christy hides behind the door makes the situation highly ironical.

There is another example of situational irony in Act III. Can you find it out?

4.5.3 Balancing through parallel/contrasting situations

Synge's comic effect depends on a delicate balancing between laughing at Christy for his excesses and sympathy for him. His tall claims are ironically undercut continually. So Christy's progress is jerky and his surges of confidence are balanced by setbacks. But he never seems to lose the sympathy of the audience entirely.

- (1) Synge also uses parallel and contrasting situations to maintain the balance. e.g., Christy's appearance in Act I is balanced by his father's 'resurrections' in Act II and Act III. More particularly, Pegeen's interrogation of Christy foreshadows the father's questioning by the Widow Quin. That means the structure of the play requires us to weigh Christy's version of the story against the father's version of it. The parallel extends to the use of the same expression even.

In Act I when Christy finds Pegeen attributing to him 'a quality name' and praising him for being a fine, handsome young fellow with a noble brow, he is surprised :

"Is it me?"

The same surprise—"Is it me?"—is experienced by the father in Act II when he is accused of provoking his son to hit him on the head. The difference is that while one is delighted, the other is shocked and angered.

- (2) Christy-Widow Quin's mock union and the girls' proposing a toast to the two "heroes" in Act II is contrasted with Christy-Pegeen engagement' blessed by Michael James.
- (3) Christy's epic blow to his father grows rapidly in narration. This is counterpointed by Pegeen's anti-heroic account of how Widow Quin killed her man :

Christy : "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 groans from him at all"
(Act I)

(b) "I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull laid him stretched out, and he spilt to the knob of his gullet." (Act II)

(c) "... a gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt" (Act II)

Pegeen : "She hit him with a worn pick, and the rusted poison did corrode his blood the way he never overed it, and died after. That was a sneaky kind of murder did win small glory with the boy itself."

4.6 LET US SUM UP

I hope the many possible angles from which we may possibly view *The Playboy* and the variety of effects that Synge has sought to achieve through his comic strategies have made you realize that the play is a veritable kaleidoscope. The play's comedy acts at several levels from broad farce to skilful irony and yet it looks beyond a comedy. The section on characters makes manifest Synge's obvious delight in characters who step outside the beaten track or who are amoral or eccentric.

4.7 GLOSSARY

- Alazon:** the braggart in Greek comedy. According to Northrop Frye "the Greek word means imposter, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is." His counterpart in Roman comedy is *miles gloriosus*.
- Bindungsroman :** The German word means 'formation novel.' Widely used by German critics, it refers to a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine. "It describes the processes by which maturity is achieved through the ups and down of life." (Cuddon, 88-89)
- Miles Gloriosus :** The term originated in a comedy by Plautus where the *miles gloriosus* was a braggart soldier. It stands for a character who is basically a coward but who boasts of his valour and is made a fool of by other characters.

4.8 QUESTIONS

1. Pick out the farcical situations in the play and describe their effect.
2. Write an essay on the use of irony.
3. Examine the different levels of comedy in the play.
4. Discuss the view that Pegeen is the victim-heroine of the play.

4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Greene, David H. & E.M. Stephens. *J.M. Synge 1871-1909*. Collier Books, 1959, pp. 145-46.
- Synge, J.M. *Four Plays and The Aran Islands*. Ed. Robin Skelton. London : OUP, 1962, pp. 216-18.
- Henn, T.R. Ed. *The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge*. London : Methuen, 1963; rpt. 1968. (The Introduction to *The Playboy* pages 56-67 is very important.)
- Whitaker, Thomas R. Ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Playboy of the Western World"*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969. (The Introduction pages 1-20 is indispensable.)
- Greene, Nicholas. *Synge : A Critical Study of the Plays*. London : Macmillan, 1975; rpt. 1979. (Chapter entitled "Approaches to *The Playboy*" pages 132-45 is particularly important.)