The Playboy of the Western World Study Guide

The Playboy of the Western World by John Millington Synge

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Introduction

J(ohn) M(illington) Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* caused riots during its opening week in Dublin in 1907. Inspired by his close observations of the inhabitants of the Aran Islands off the western coast of Ireland, Synge based the play on a historical incident. His realistic yet poetic depiction of that incident and the manners and mores of Irish life angered many who thought the play indecent and guilty of promoting negative stereotypes. Critical acclaim, however, has grown over the years to the point where it is now regarded as the masterwork of one of the most highly regarded Irish playwrights in the modern age.

The play focuses on the reception given to Christy Mahon as he wanders into a small Irish village, declaring that he has just murdered his father. The villagers initially embrace Christy, determining that his courageous act has made him "the playboy of the western world." Their vision of him, however, soon changes as the plot develops. In his depiction of the interaction between Christy and the villagers, and especially of the relationship between Christy and Pegeen Flaherty, an attractive, strong-willed, young local woman, Synge explores the effects of social conventions and celebrates the power of the imagination.

Author Biography

J. M. Synge was born on April 16, 1871, in the Dublin suburb of Newton Little, to John Hatch and Kathleen Traill Synge. After his father died a year later, Synge, his three brothers, and one sister were raised in a comfortable, upper-class home by their devoutly religious mother. Synge suffered from poor health during his youth, which eventually prompted his mother to have him tutored at home. He began his studies in music theory and Irish history and language at Trinity College in Dublin when he was seventeen and completed a bachelor's degree in 1892. Synge began to write poetry during his years at Trinity as well as at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, where he completed graduate work in music theory.

Synge left Ireland in 1893 to study music in Germany, but his stage fright caused him to reconsider his career choice. A year later, Synge began language and literature studies at the Sorbonne. During his time in Paris, Synge met William Butler Yeats, who would have a dramatic effect on the rest of his life. Yeats inspired Synge to go to the Aran Islands, off the coast of Ireland and, as Yeats notes in his preface to *The Well of the Saints*, encouraged him to "live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression." For four years, Synge studied Irish life on the islands as he took photographs of the islanders and careful notes on their speech and habits.

In 1901, he turned his notes into a collection of essays, *The Aran Islands*, and wrote his first play, *When the Moon Has Set*. Two verse plays followed in 1902, but Synge would not develop his mature style until later that year when he penned three plays: *Riders to the Sea*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and *The Tinker's Wedding*. On October 8, 1903, *In the Shadow of the Glen* was the first play shown by the Irish National Theatre Society, run by Yeats and Lady Gregory. Though the play initially received a mixed reaction, due to its honest depiction of Irish life, it later gained success during its run in Dublin and England. *Riders to the Sea* earned positive reviews in Ireland and England.

While writing his next play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge became ill with Hodgkin's disease, which delayed the play's opening. *The Playboy of the Western World* became the most controversial production of the Irish National Theatre. Theatergoers rioted during initial performances in response to what they deemed to be a degrading portrait of Irish life. Controversy followed productions of the play for years. However, by the later part of the twentieth century, it came to be recognized as Synge's masterwork.

Synge drafted *Deirdre of the Sorrows* during hospital visits as he battled his increasingly debilitating illness. He died on March 24, 1909, in Dublin without having had time to revise it.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Playboy of the Western World opens in a country public house owned by Michael Flaherty, father to Pegeen, who is preparing for her upcoming wedding to Shawn Keogh, a young farmer. Shawn arrives and is uneasy about being alone with her. Pegeen complains about being left by herself at night, fearing some harm will come to her. They argue about Shawn, who is waiting for the local priest to get a dispensation allowing their marriage, since they are cousins. Pegeen insists that Shawn should be more daring. When her father and local farmers Philly O'Cullen and Jimmy Farrell arrive, they join Pegeen in berating Shawn about his fear of doing anything to displease the Church.

Christy Mahon soon arrives exhausted and frightened, asking whether the police often come to the pub. When Michael assures him that they do not, all begin to quiz him about why he is running from the law. After several wrong guesses, Christy admits that he killed his father. The others embrace him as a courageous young man, and Michael promptly gives him a job helping out Pegeen, which delights his daughter. With the exception of Shawn, who does not appreciate the interest Pegeen is taking in Christy, they all assert that Pegeen will now be safe at night. Pegeen quickly dismisses Shawn, telling him to seek out the priest.

After Christy tells Pegeen the details of his father's murder, which increases her admiration for him, the Widow Quin arrives full of curiosity about the newcomer. Pegeen and the Widow Quin battle over Christy's attentions until he declares that he will stay in the pub. After the Widow Quin departs, Pegeen declares that she will not be marrying Shawn, and Christy goes to sleep wondering at his good fortune.

Act 2

The next morning four girls from the village, Sara, Susan, Nelly, and Honor, come to see Christy, wanting to meet the man who killed his father. They all offer him presents and admire his brave act. When the Widow Quin arrives, she entreats Christy to tell them all the details of the murder. Christy takes great pleasure in telling the story and afterwards all call him a hero.

When Pegeen arrives, she chases everyone out and angrily orders Christy to work. She tries to scare him away from talking to the village girls by suggesting that they might tell the police. Shawn arrives and tells Pegeen her sheep are in a neighbor's garden, and she runs out. Shawn then tries to convince Christy to accept a passage to America, admitting that he fears Christy will interfere with his plans to marry Pegeen. Christy refuses the ticket but accepts the new clothes Shawn has brought him. The Widow Quin

soon convinces the despondent Shawn that she will marry Christy and so clear the way for him with Pegeen.

Just as Christy begins to believe himself to be the hero all claim he is, he spots his father and hides from him. Mahon explains to the Widow Quin that Christy hit him but he recovered. Mahon then characterizes his son as a coward and "the laughing joke of every woman where four baronies meet." In an effort to save Christy, the widow tells Mahon that he has "gone over the hills to catch a steamer."

After Mahon leaves, Christy comes out of hiding and admits that he had mistakenly thought he had killed his father. When he expresses the desire to finish the job, the widow is shocked. She later tells him that the two of them are alike and so proposes that they marry. Christy, however, reaf-firms his love for Pegeen. After exacting a promise from Christy that when he marries Pegeen, he will supply her with provisions from the pub, the widow agrees to keep his secret.

Act 3

Later that day, Jimmy and Philly arrive at the pub, discussing Christy's mastery of the village's games and sports and his new role as "playboy of the western world." Soon, Mahon arrives, and the widow tries to convince Jimmy and Philly that Mahon is a raving lunatic and not to pay attention to him. But, as Mahon tells his story, the two men become convinced of its veracity, and they point Christy out to him. After just having won all the day's trophies, Christy tells Pegeen of his love for her in poetic terms, and Pegeen returns his devotion. After some disagreement, Christy convinces Michael that Pegeen should marry him and not Shawn.

When the three return to the pub, Mahon confronts Christy and begins to beat him. Initially, Christy denies that Mahon is his father, but the crowd, along with Pegeen, soon turns against him. When Pegeen calls him "an ugly liar," he threatens to finish the job he had started and goes after his father with a club. The crowd thinks he has really killed him this time and so calls for him to be hanged. After they bind him, Pegeen burns his leg.

When his father appears at the door and sees what the crowd has done to his son, Mahon tells Christy to turn his back on the "villainy of Mayo and the fools is here." The two depart, Christy confidently swaggering out the door. When Shawn insists that he and Pegeen can now marry, Pegeen boxes his ear and laments, "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the western world."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The Playboy of the Western World is a three-act play set in a small village in Ireland in the early 1900s. The plot involves the arrival of a young stranger, Christy Mahon, whose claim that he murdered his own father challenges the villagers' beliefs and social dynamics.

As the play opens, Pegeen Flaherty, a young woman of about twenty, is alone and tending the public house of her father. Pegeen is writing a letter to a merchant about the items necessary for her upcoming marriage to Shawn Keogh, who just happens to come into the public house. Pegeen is not happy about the prospect of being alone in the building all night, as her father will be gone to attend a wake.

Due to religious convictions, Shawn cannot stay all night with Pegeen until they are married, a process which has been delayed as the couple awaits dispensation from the Pope to allow marriage between cousins. Pegeen wishes that Shawn were bolder and he is chided for this when Michael Flaherty and some of the local men come in for some ale. Although Shawn is worried for Pegeen because he has heard the moans of a stranger lying in a ditch not too far away, Shawn is strict about his Catholic upbringing and will not stray from the teachings.

While Shawn is being taunted, Christy Mahon arrives at the public house visibly tired and hungry. Leery of being spotted by the police, Christy is not at ease until Michael tells the young man that the authorities do not frequent the public house. Christy admits that he is running from the police and the others in the public house are intrigued and try to guess his crime. He dashes every possible scenario and finally admits to murdering his father just last week.

Slightly in awe of this young man, the others consider him to be brave and Michael eventually gives Christy a job as a peg boy. This means that Pegeen will have company during this night and she could not be happier. Shawn is not thrilled at the prospect of his intended bride passing time in the company of a self-confessed murderer, but Pegeen is excited at the prospect of someone new to talk to and sends Shawn on his way.

Pegeen gives Christy some food and the young man divulges the circumstances surrounding his relationship with his father, which led to the murder. Suddenly a woman of about thirty, Widow Quin, enters to see the stranger that Shawn Keogh and Father Reilly have told her about. The Widow Quin has also committed murder in her time and feels a sort of kinship with the young man.

Eventually the Widow Quin suggests that Christy stay at her home because it is more appropriate than staying with a young unmarried girl like Pegeen. In addition, the widow,

having already committed murder, is certainly capable of defending herself. Christy opts to stay at the public house and Pegeen prepares a mat of fresh straw and a quilt where he can sleep. Pegeen is angry with Shawn for sending the widow to spy on Pegeen and Christy and the young woman declares that she will not marry Shawn now at any cost. Christy lies down in his freshly made bed with his stomach full and wonders aloud at his own good fortune.

Act 1 Analysis

The author writes the play in the language and dialect of rustic Irish villagers, which can be somewhat challenging but definitely lends to the credibility and authenticity of the story. These people are hard working farmers who enjoy a mug of ale and the camaraderie found with the other people of the village. The introduction of Christy Mahon injects a sense of new energy and excitement in the sleepy little town, especially with Pegeen Flaherty, who is bored with the stodgy Shawn Keogh.

The author has set up Shawn to symbolize adherence to rules and social convention in contrast to the recklessness symbolized by Christy Mahon. The play will continue with the contrast of the two concepts as exhibited by these two characters.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Christy cannot believe his own good fortune to have found hospitality at the Flaherty public house and fingers the bottles and goods on the shelves as he explores his new surroundings. Suddenly he hears female voices. Hoping one of them is Pegeen's, he looks out to find not her but some village girls who enter the house just as Christy hides in a side room.

The village girls, Sara, Susan, Honor and Nelly have come to look at the man who they have been told has killed his father. That kind of courage has earned Christy a reputation quickly and the girls bring gifts of duck eggs, a chicken and some butter as gifts. This newfound attention emboldens Christy, who tells the story of his father's murder with increasing relish.

The Widow Quin enters the house and instructs the girls to fix breakfast for Christy, as she beckons him to sit with her and tell the whole sordid story of the murder one more time. As it turns out, Christy's father wanted the young man to marry the Widow Casey, a fat, old woman from his village. Christy's refusal to ask the woman to marry resulted in an argument between father and son, resulting with weapons being drawn. Mr. Mahon swung a cleaver at Christy and missed but Christy hit his father with a loy, a narrow spade, which resulted in the old man's demise.

The widow and the young girls all toast Christy as their new hero and are dancing around him when Pegeen enters, ends the merriment and sends them all on their way. Pegeen tells Christy that she had been into town to read the newspaper; it was filled with the stories of a young man who was hanged because he had murdered his own father. According to Pegeen, it is not in Christy's best interest to tell the murderous tale to people like the girls from the village, who are more than happy to gossip and repeat any tale they hear.

Christy is sufficiently chastened and soon Shawn and the Widow Quin arrive to tell Pegeen that her father's sheep are eating cabbage in a neighbor's field and Pegeen runs out to stop the destruction. While Pegeen is gone, Shawn offers Christy a ticket for a trip to the United States, in addition to a set of clothes, which Christy immediately tries on in another room. While Christy is away, Shawn confides in the widow that his plan is to convince Christy to leave for America so that Pegeen will not be diverted by the young man's presence.

Christy decides to keep the clothes but declines the ticket to America. The Widow Quin convinces the crestfallen Shawn that she will marry Christy and eliminate the young man as a threat to Pegeen. Christy is unaware of this new plot and struts about in his new clothes, heading outside so that Pegeen may see him in his new finery. Before he can leave, however, Christy spots his own father walking up the road toward the house

and hides leaving the Widow Quin to greet the man that everyone thought to be murdered.

Mr. Mahon has been walking for ten days with the horrible blow to his head in an attempt to find Christy, who he reveals to the widow is a whining, weak boy who is afraid of most things, including women. The Widow Quin does not reveal Christy's whereabouts and sends Mr. Mahon away under the pretense of following Christy, who had been spotted in the village not long ago.

When Christy emerges from his hiding place, the widow chides him for his weaknesses as revealed by Mr. Mahon and sarcastically calls him the Playboy of the Western World for his trepidation with women. Christy ignores the widow and wishes that he could finish the job of killing his father, which he apparently failed to do.

The widow is somehow intrigued with Christy and tells him that they are kindred spirits, because she accidentally killed her husband and suggests that she and Christy marry. Christy is in love with Pegeen and cannot marry the Widow Quin, but does promise to give the widow supplies from the public house in exchange for her secrecy.

Act 2 Analysis

The author uses the technique of irony to position the murderous Christy in the midst of this village of ardently religious people. The villagers adhere strictly to their religious and social structures yet call Christy a hero for his criminal deed. The behavior is not condoned by anyone within their social structure, but is viewed as heroic from someone whose life has no real bearing or impact on their own.

Foreshadowing is another technique employed, used when Pegeen tells Christy of the story she read in the newspaper about the young man who was hanged for killing his father. The concept of good versus evil is still present as the diligently structured Shawn attempts to convince Christy to leave for America. Shawn seems to symbolize the voice of reason or conscience in the atmosphere of the village, which has been awed by Christy's appearance.

The significance of the play's title comes to light in this act as well when the Widow Quin sarcastically calls Christy the Playboy of the Western World, in view of his limited worldly experiences.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

Jimmy and Philly, two of Michael Flaherty's friends, have arrived at the public house looking for Pegeen. Shawn Keogh has taken a cart to go pick up Michael, who is still drunk from the wake that day. While they wait, Jimmy and Philly discuss Christy and whether or not the young man has been telling the truth about murdering his own father. Just then, old Mr. Mahon walks into the public house and announces that he is looking for Christy. Jimmy and Philly cannot believe that this is the man who is supposed to be dead. Mr. Mahon describes the event that led up to his being wounded by his own son.

The Widow Quin, who has much to lose should Christy's secret be revealed, tries to convince Jimmy and Philly that Mr. Mahon is a lunatic. Mr. Mahon, however, tells the story of Christy's young life and how he came to be wounded with such sincerity that Jimmy and Philly cannot help but believe the old man. Outside there are noises at the village games, in which Christy is winning each event. Jimmy and Philly point out Christy to the old man, who identifies the young man as his own son.

The widow tries to intervene and tells Mr. Mahon that the young man is the Playboy of the Western World, who is engaged to marry the daughter of the shopkeeper and therefore could not be Mr. Mahon's son. This information convinces Mr. Mahon, who runs away after the Widow Quin frightens him with the possibility of the villagers harming him if they were to find out he was talking such lunacy.

The noise from the crowd increases as Christy enters the public house, followed by many of the villagers. They have come to watch the awarding of the prizes to Christy, who has won them all. Pegeen wants to spend some time with Christy and rids the shop of all the other people and the two are finally alone. Christy declares his love for Pegeen in such a lyrical way that she is completely mesmerized by his charm and agrees to marry him immediately.

Michael Flaherty returns home and Pegeen announces plans to marry Christy, but Michael does not want his daughter to marry a murderer. Pegeen declares her love for Christy and is adamant about it. Eventually Michael relents; he rationalizes that it is better for Pegeen to have someone like Christy, with his daring character, than someone weak-willed like Shawn Keogh.

Suddenly old Mr. Mahon rushes into the shop and knocks Christy to the floor, where the two grapple and the villagers realize that Christy has lied about the murder after all. Pegeen is outraged that Christy has deceived her about the murder and is no longer interested in him now that the halo of treachery has slipped from him. Christy tries vehemently to deny that Mr. Mahon is his father but the evidence is too great and soon Christy chases his father out the door with a loy. He beats him severely and leaves him for dead in front of the whole village.

The villagers cannot turn a blind eye to this violence and everyone, including Pegeen, turns against the younger Mahon and demands that Christy be hanged. Pegeen urges Christy to give in willingly to the hanging because it is a relatively quick and painless death.

Christy is not so easily swayed, however and locks his legs around those of a nearby table, refusing to move until Pegeen sets fire to a piece of sod and touches Christy's leg. At this point, the villagers begin to pull Christy toward the door but they have not yet seen the older Mr. Mahon, who has crawled inside the shop. He is outraged at what the people have done to his son and demands that Christy be set free.

Mr. Mahon tells Christy to turn his back on the fools of this village and that the two of them will have many stories to tell about this incident for many years to come. Christy is emboldened by the notoriety he has found here and orders his father out the door as he swaggers behind him.

Michael Flaherty feels relieved that Pegeen did not marry into the madness of the Mahon lunacy and Shawn is happy now that he and Pegeen can proceed with their own plans to marry. Pegeen is not as thrilled as the others and laments that she has lost the only Playboy of the Western World.

Act 3 Analysis

The author points out the fickle nature of people with the village's adoration of the daring Christy, when his murderous crime was committed on an anonymous victim. When the people saw Mr. Mahon in the flesh, however, they turned violently against Christy for his attempted crime. The nature of the two Mahon men is fickle as well, with their raging anger and threats to kill each other, until the villagers threaten Christy and the father and son reunite against the mob.

The Irish love of a good story or fable lies at the core of the play, as well with Christy bragging about his heinous deed to anyone who will listen. All the villagers gather around to hear the lurid details so that the story can be told repeatedly. It is Christy's lyrical way of speaking to Pegeen that convinces her to agree to marry him so soon, as she has never experienced anything so magical. At the end of the play, the exhausted and nearly dead Mr. Mahon rallies to comment on what a great story this incident will make.

The concept of rebellion is another overriding theme of the play, both the act and the wish. Christy represents the daring attitude of someone who is willing to take violent action if necessary to protect his own rights. The people in the village are so awed by his actions that they accept him immediately and make him their champion.

The author could also be suggesting the wishes of the downtrodden Irish people, whose lives were filled with violence and the struggle, to rebel in the political arena at the turn of the century. The lower classes who struggled to survived longed for a hero and Christy Mahon is the representation of that concept.

Characters

Jimmy Farrell

Jimmy is a forty-five-year-old "amorous" villager who flatters Pegeen when he visits the pub. He and his friend Philly represent the voice of the villagers as they respond to Christy's story. Jimmy's praise of his actions helps build Christy's confidence and create his mythic stature in the community.

Michael James Flaherty

A jovial publican, the good-humored Michael James allows his daughter to run the pub with a strong hand. Like the other villagers, Michael James initially regards Christy as a hero, but as soon as the truth is discovered, he is one of the first to call for his hanging.

Pegeen Flaherty

Pegeen, a young, attractive woman of twenty, runs the pub for her father. Though Pegeen complains bitterly about being left alone at night, her strength of character and quick tongue suggest she is capable of taking good care of herself. At the beginning of the play, Pegeen is engaged to Shawn, whom she is easily able to control. Pegeen's fiery nature emerges in her dealings with her fiancé, her father, and the Widow Quin, her rival for the attentions of the local men and Christy when he arrives.

Although independent and self-confident, Pegeen allows herself to be seduced by Christy's mythology. Her penchant for romance and her active imagination cause Pegeen to encourage his poetic lovemaking and, as a result, she pledges herself to him. Her lack of clear-sightedness, coupled with her fiery temper, makes Pegeen turn against him when she discovers that he has not killed his father. By the end of the play, however, Pegeen regrets her impulsive actions and laments, "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the western world."

Shawn Keogh

Shawn is engaged to Pegeen at the beginning of the play, although she appears not to think too highly of him. She often calls him Shaneen, which translates to "little Shawn," teasing him for his timid demeanor. Shawn reveals his conservative nature when he declares that he cannot marry Pegeen until he gets approval from the Catholic Church, since the two of them are cousins. This conservatism also causes Shawn to be afraid to be alone with Pegeen, assuming that if word got back to the clergy, they would disapprove. Shawn also shows himself to be a coward when he finds Christy outside the pub, "groaning wicked like a maddening dog," and he is too afraid to get close enough to him to offer aid.

After Christy arrives, Pegeen compares Shawn unfavorably to "the playboy of the western world." Shawn does show some spunk, however, when he tries to bribe Christy into leaving the village with a new suit of clothes and a ticket to America. Yet, when Christy refuses, Shawn resorts to his true self when he admits to the widow that he is too afraid to turn Christy in to the police for fear of retribution.

Christy Mahon

When Christy first comes to Michael James's pub, he is quite fearful about his reception there and being caught by the police. He had just committed a desperate and impulsive act from which he had run in panic, not checking to see if his father was truly dead. Yet, Christy's attempted murder of his father also reveals his rebellious nature. Christy's father had tried to force him to marry the Widow Casey, who is twice his age, blind in one eye, and noted for "misbehavior with the old and young."

When Christy first arrives at the pub, Pegeen calls him a "soft lad," but after she hears his story, she determines him to be a hero. When Michael James decides to entrust Pegeen's safety to him while she works alone in the pub at night, Christy becomes more confident in his abilities. His fears soon return, however, when Pegeen, angry at the attention Christy receives from the local girls, suggests that the police might find him out.

After all in the village declare his bravery and embrace him as "the playboy of the western world," Christy swells with pride, believing and becoming his own myth. Since the villagers believe Christy to be a clever, daring man and so expect him to win at all the local sporting events, he becomes the day's hero. Since Pegeen regards Christy as a desirable lover, he becomes passionate and eloquent as he woos her. By the end of the play, Christy retains his newfound strength and courage as he confronts his father and the angry villagers. As a result, Christy's father gains a new respect for him as the two turn their back on the community that rejected him.

Old Mahon

Christy's bad-tempered father has alienated all of his children with his brutish behavior. His constant berating of Christy provoked his initially mild-mannered son to crack his skull. When Old Mahon comes looking for Christy at Michael James's pub, he is bent on revenge. However, when Christy is ill treated by the villagers, Old Mahon's paternal instincts surface as he declares they will turn their backs on "the villainy of Mayo and the fools is here." After Christy stands up to him and threatens to finish the job he had started, Old Mahon gains new respect for his son and follows him out of the village, smiling at his newfound courage.

Pegeen Mike

See Pegeen Flaherty

Philly O'Cullen

Philly, along with Jimmy, represents the collective voice of the townspeople. Whereas Jimmy is more trusting, Philly is more cynical; yet he too is taken in by the excitement surrounding Christy's actions, at least initially. When he learns the truth, he, like the others, is ready to hang the boy.

Widow Quin

The thirty-year-old Widow Quin is a lusty woman who appears to be engaged in a sexual rivalry with Pegeen. The Widow Quin appreciates men, although she hit her husband with a rusty pick, under circumstances never revealed, and as a result he died. This act prompts her to feel an affinity toward Christy, along with the fact that she finds him as attractive as does Pegeen. The Widow Quin is more realistic than her neighbors are, however. She is the first to discover that Christy did not kill his father and immediately strikes a deal with the boy, which would benefit both of them.

Themes

Social Conventions

Although there are a few independent characters in the play, like the Widow Quin and Pegeen when she challenges male authority, most act according to social conventions. Shawn Keogh is the most conservative member of the community, refusing to step outside the boundaries set by the Catholic Church. He will not marry Pegeen until he has permission from the Vatican to do so, and he even refuses to be alone with her in fear of the Church's disapproval. Although most in the community consider Shawn's conservatism a mark of cowardice, they follow certain social standards as well. All consider Christy a hero since their community considers this type of rebellion praiseworthy.

Synge illustrates their devotion to convention by sending groups of people to listen to and approve of Christy's story. First, two local men, Jimmy Farrell and Philly O'Cullen, arrive and soon champion him for his bravery. Later, a group of young women appear bearing presents as rewards for his heroic deed. Yet, when the myth is exploded, they all again act according to a herd mentality as they almost lynch Christy, determined that his crimes deserve such harsh treatment.

Rebellion

The play contains an ironic mixture of rebellion and conformity to social conventions. All of the characters, save Shawn, value a rebellious spirit. Pegeen often rebels against convention when she stands up to her father and any other man or woman who comes into the pub. She is not afraid to ignore Church doctrine and derides Shawn for his devotion to it.

The village lionizes Christy for his murderous act because of the nature of that act. By killing his father, Christy was striking a blow against the tyranny of the older generation and of the traditions of the past. As a result, the community applauds his courage as expressed by Jimmy who notes, "bravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I'm thinking, could face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell." Ironically, though, when they face the reality of the act as Christy goes after his father with a club outside of the pub, they declare him barbaric and roundly condemn him.

The issues of conformity and rebellion were at the forefront of Irish politics when the play was produced. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Ireland was in the midst of clashes between those who wanted to maintain the status quo by remaining a colony of England and those who pressed for home rule. The battle between these warring groups was waged throughout the twentieth century and resulted in Ireland

declaring itself a free republic while Northern Ireland retained its colonial status. Clashes, however, still occur in Northern Ireland over the issue of home rule.

Style

Realism and Poetry

The play is an interesting mixture of realism and poetry. Synge's time on the Aran Islands studying the inhabitants helped him create vivid and accurate portraits of Irish life. He writes in his preface to the play that his experiences on the islands provided him "more aid than any learning could have given [him]."

His focus in the play also reflects the dominant themes of realism, with its attention to ordinary people confronting difficult social problems. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge adopts this focus in his depiction of the villagers' treatment of Christy, which is based on a combination of the community's devotion to mythmaking and its mob mentality.

The language of the play is a complex combination of realism and poetry. Dubliners were initially shocked by terms like "shift," referring to women's garments that they found filthy—terms that are considered examples of local color today. When this language is expressed through the unique phrasing and rhythms of the Irish tongue, Synge creates poetry within his prose. Christy's declarations of love to Pegeen are especially praised for their lyric beauty.

Symbolism

As an extension of the theme of mythmaking, Synge transforms Christy into a symbol of the Christ figure. His name adds just a *y,* and, like Christ, he is the son of Mahon (man). The villagers' treatment of him echoes Christ's, as the community first praises and then betrays them both. Ultimately, both are also saved by their fathers.

Historical Context

Birth of the Irish Theater

At the end of the nineteenth century, Irish writers were divided between two impulses: to express the nostalgia of the heroic legends of the past and to illustrate the beliefs and struggle of the home-rule movement. They met in Dublin, as that city's theater became an artistic representation of Irish country life and legends as well as the politics of the age.

In the 1890s, the Irish middle and upper classes clamored for literature that reflected the nationalistic spirit of the age. They turned their interest to the tales of Ireland's heroic past, recorded by folklorists like Douglas Hyde who studied the Irish language still spoken by the inhabitants of the western coast of the island. William Butler Yeats, who had already established himself as an important Irish poet, discovered the store of poetic material in the stories of this part of the country. Yeats, along with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, founded the influential Irish Literary Theatre in 1899 to promote a national movement of the arts. When Martyn, an Ibsen devotee, later left, the remaining members retitled themselves the Abbey Theatre Company. Yeats had envisioned a people's theater where writers and actors could return to the sources of their art: the native speech, habits, and rich mythology of the Irish. Later, Synge would become one of the Abbey's directors.

The first performance at the Irish Literary Theatre was a production of Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen,* on May 8, 1899. Yeats's forte, however, was lyric poetry, not realistic drama. His early verse dramas contained beautiful language but had little dramatic spark. Though he inspired the resurgence of the Irish literary movement, Yeats turned over the literary duties to Lady Gregory, who would pen several plays for the group, and Synge, who became the Abbey's most famous and controversial playwright.

Realism

In the late nineteenth century, playwrights turned away from what they considered the artificiality of melodrama to focus on the commonplace in the context of everyday contemporary life. They rejected the flat characterizations and unmotivated violent action typical of melodrama. Their work, along with much of the experimental fiction written during that period, adopts the tenets of realism, a new literary movement that took a serious look at believable characters and their sometimes problematic interactions with society. To accomplish this goal, realistic drama focuses on the commonplace and eliminates the unlikely coincidences and excessive emotionalism of melodrama. Dramatists like Henrik Ibsen discard traditional sentimental theatrical forms as they chronicle the strengths and weaknesses of ordinary people confronting difficult social problems, like the restrictive conventions under which nineteenth-century women

suffered. Writers who embraced realism use settings and props that reflect their characters' daily lives and realistic dialogue that replicates natural speech patterns.

Synge adopted many of the characteristics of realism in his plays but also added poetic elements. As a result, his plays became a complex mixture of traditional forms arranged in new ways. Ann Saddlemyer writes, in her introduction to Oxford's collection of Synge's plays, that Synge's study of the inhabitants of the Aran Islands resulted in an "appreciation of their heightened sensitivity to the changing moods of nature and the harsh conditions they endured," which helped him develop "his own aesthetic, a blending of romantic pantheism and ironic realism." Synge writes in his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* that he rejected the realism of Ibsen and Zola whom he argued "dealt with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words." He insisted that "on the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy . . . the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality."

Critical Overview

Irish theater had never experienced such a violent audience response as it did when *The Playboy of the Western World* premiered on January 26, 1907. Theatergoers loudly proclaimed their disapproval of the plot, which appeared to glorify parricide; of what they considered offensive dialogue; and of Synge's depiction of the Irish character. Hisses continually disrupted the performances during the play's first week, and arrests were made nightly. The most controversial line in the play was Christy's declaration that he was not interested in "a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself." Similar outbursts occurred during a 1909 revival of the play and during performances in North America in 1911. County Clare, County Kerry, and Liver-pool issued official condemnations of the play. Elizabeth Coxhead, in her article on Synge for *British Writers,* explains that when the play was produced, "Irish nationalistic feelings were high, and Synge's plays had caused offense before among those who felt that Ireland and the Irish should always be depicted with decorum on the stage."

While the January 28 edition of the *Irish Times* would observe that the play's language brought "what in other respects was a brilliant success to an inglorious conclusion," most reviews roundly condemned it. The *Freeman's Journal* considered the "squalid, offensive production" to be an "unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and worse still upon peasant girlhood," citing its "barbarous jargon" and "the elaborate and incessant cursings of [the] repulsive creatures" in the play.

The riots during the first week's performances prompted Yeats, a firm supporter of the play, to hold a public debate on the issue of artistic freedom. Susan Stone-Blackburn, in her article on Synge in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* quotes Yeats's argument that "every man has a right to hear" a play "and condemn it if he pleases, but no man has a right to interfere with another man hearing a play and judging for himself." In an effort to instill a sense of national pride, he insisted, "The country that condescends either to bully or to permit itself to be bullied soon ceases to have any fine qualities."

The play's reputation has grown throughout the twentieth century to the point that it is now recognized as Synge's masterwork. P. P. Howe, in his critical study of Synge, insisted that *The Playboy of the Western World* "brought to the contemporary stage the most rich and copious store of character since Shakespeare." Charles A. Bennett, in his essay "The Plays of John M. Synge," considered it to be Synge's "most characteristic work. It is riotous with the quick rush of life, a tempest of the passions with the glare of laughter at its heart." Norman Podhoretz, in his assessment of the play in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Playboy of the Western World": A Collection of Critical Essays,* championed it as "a dramatic masterpiece" that expresses "the undeveloped poet coming to consciousness of himself as man and as artist."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of English and American literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines the theme of mythmaking in the play.

Soon after Synge met William Butler Yeats in Paris, Yeats advised Synge to spend time living on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland, to "live there as if you were one of the people themselves" and to "express a life that has never found expression." Synge heeded Yeats's advice, spending a good amount of time living on the islands and recording his observations of the inhabitants' behavior and personalities. His observations, eventually collected in a series of essays, became translated into the central themes, settings, and characters in his plays, which would be heralded for their lyrical yet realistic portraits of the Irish spirit. Daniel Corkery, in his *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature,* considered Synge's Aran materials "descriptive of the consciousness of the people."

One story Synge had heard on the Islands concerned a young man from Connaught who killed his father with a spade. The man then fled to Aran, where he begged the inhabitants to shelter him. This tale would become the plot of Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, which first appeared on the Dublin stage in 1907. In this play, Synge incorporated his observations of Irish life, uncovering what Robin Skelton in his *The Writings of J. M. Synge,* deems the "heroic values" and the "awareness of universal myth" that characterize the islanders. Skelton also determines that, through his studies, Synge was able to create "images and values. . . which point towards the importance of reviving, and maintaining, a particular sensibility in order to make sense of the predicament of humanity." The "particular sensibility" that Synge artistically recreates in *The Playboy of the Western World* is what he calls in his preface to the play "popular imagination [in Ireland] that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender." The Irish penchant for employing the imagination in the creation of myth becomes the focus of the play as Synge explores the lure of mythmaking as well as its inevitable clash with reality.

The characters in the play initially appear unsophisticated and unsentimental. The independent, strong-willed Pegeen especially is characterized as adept at seeing others clearly. Although she has agreed to marry Shawn, she has an accurate perception of his drawbacks. She notes his conservatism and berates him for it. Yet, Shawn does have a touch of the poet, at least in the opening scene when he declares that as he was standing outside of her door, "I could hear the cows breathing, and sighing in the stillness of the air." This lyrical line foreshadows the arrival of the more verbally talented Christy, who will steal Pegeen's heart with his poetic overtures. Shawn will become the voice of reality for the villagers, even though they will pay him little heed.

When Christy arrives, the process of mythmaking begins. The characters' love of storytelling becomes evident soon after Christy's arrival, as they quiz the lad about who he is and why he has arrived in their community. Their interest is immediately piqued when Christy inquires whether the police often stop at the pub. As Christy is reluctant to tell them the true reason for his fear of the authorities, all at the pub begin to create their

own versions of his story. Pegeen assumes that "he followed after a young woman on a lonesome night." The others decide he is either being chased by bailiffs or landlords, or perhaps he made counterfeit coins or married more than one wife. Their curiosity about him increases as they construct one scenario after the other that Christy refutes until Pegeen reasons that the fearful boy "did nothing at all." She declares him "a soft lad" who "wouldn't slit the windpipe of a screeching sow." Her accurate portrait of his weak character prompts Christy's rebuttal, and he declares that he murdered his father.

Immediately, all are caught up in the drama of the event; even Pegeen is amazed at this daring feat. They will not let Christy rest until he has told the entire story, and when he has finished, they all determine him to be a brave and fearless lad who should be given the job of watching over Pegeen as she works at night in the pub. Shawn expresses the only voice of reason at the scene when he warns, "That'd be a queer kind to bring into a decent quiet household with the like of Pegeen." The others dismiss him, caught up in their vision of the hero in their midst.

The villagers' shower of praise begins to transform Christy from a weak and fearful boy into a confident young man who declares himself "a seemly fellow with great strength in me and bravery." The transformation, however, is gradual. Often, his confidence is checked by his fear of the police catching up with him, which causes him on one occasion to cower in the corner when someone knocks on the door of the pub.

Christy especially blossoms under Pegeen's attention, becoming the romantic hero all assume him to be. No one can beat him at games and sports, and by the end of the day, he is heralded as "the playboy of the western world." Christy's newfound confidence inspires him to construct lyrical declarations of love for Pegeen, who, completely won over, declares, "it's the poets are your like, fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused." Synge illuminates the seductive power of the imagination in his depiction of the relationship between Christy and Pegeen. Christy leads a willing Pegeen but she is too late. As Christy declares that he has become "a likely gaffer in the end of all" and exits triumphantly to "go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning to the judgement day," Pegeen's vision of an escape from her conventional life evaporates. She understands, after he leaves, that she has truly lost "the only playboy of the western world."

Elizabeth Coxhead, in her article on Synge for *British Writers,* quotes Lady Gregory, one of the founders with Yeats of the Irish Literary Theatre and a strong supporter of Synge's works, who expresses her view of the Irish character by recognizing "our incorrigible Irish talent for myth-making." In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge deftly illuminates that talent and the subsequent tension it inevitably produces between imagination and reality. His villagers are ready for a hero to rescue them from their monotonous and difficult lives and so do not examine Christy too closely when he appears. The lure of the dream, however, is difficult to reconcile with reality, at least for those who cannot break free from the bonds of convention. For others, like Christy, the "Irish talent for mythmaking" can become the inspiration for the fulfillment of the dream.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *The Playboy of the Western World,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following review, Untermeyer asserts that the play "points with promise to the reincarnation of poetry in prose."

Under the fanfare of the wrangling schools, a new voice is making itself heard, and strange, peasant-like harmonies announce the advent of another figure. It is to simple but exotic strains—to the melodies of rustic flute and weatherbeaten strings that the spirit of J. M. Synge is disclosed—the spirit of bogs and peatmarshes, the spirit of unfettered poetry. Wild poetry itself is in his utterance, for although Mr. Synge writes entirely in prose, his sentences are so steeped in similes of the skies that his very commonplaces are filled and colored with all the *nuances* of rhythm. The sunlight filters through his lines and the spell of scenic splendor is over all his work. This very poetic quality is at one time the most obvious and most indefinable characteristic of the four prose plays with which Mr. Synge has declared himself. Nor is dramatic power lacking; as the following passage between the two into his visions of their future, full of afternoons when he declares they will be "making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap of sunshine with yourself stretched back unto your necklace in the flowers of the earth." Christy's new confidence allows him to stand up to Michael James's reservations about him marrying his daughter and to threaten Shawn with bodily harm if he does not leave the two of them alone.

Reality abruptly shatters the mythmaking, however, with the appearance of Christy's battered but still breathing father, who declares that his "dribbling idiot" son is lazy, stupid, and inept with women. When confronted by his father, Christy teeters on the edge of the reality and the myth, fearing his father's wrath but unwilling to give up the adoration of the crowd. Initially, Christy appears to revert back to his fearful self as he insists, "he's not my father. He's a raving maniac would scare the world." Eventually, the myth wins out, and Christy determines to finish the job he started and goes after his father with a club. The myth, however, has exploded for the villagers, who see Christy's once "gallous [splendid] story" of murder now as "a dirty deed" as it is played out in front of them.

Christy's fall from his mythic status infuriates the villagers who turn into a nasty mob, fueled by their shattered illusions and bent on revenge. All resort to conventional behavior in their demands for retribution. Ironically, by the end of the play, Christy has become the man the others had envisioned him to be. While he is bound and threatened with hanging, he bravely declares, "if I've to face the gallows I'll have a gay march down, I tell you, and shed the blood of some of you before I die." His father recognizes that his son has transformed into a courageous and capable man and so allows him to take the upper hand. Pegeen also notices the transformation, disillusioned beggarfolk (the man and wife in 'the Well of the Saints') testifies:

Mary Daul.—I wouldn't rear a crumpled whelp the
like of you. It's many a woman is married with finer
than yourself should be praising God if she's no child,

and isn't loading the earth with things would make the heavens lonesome above, and they scaring the larks and the crows and the angels passing in the sky.
MartinDoul.—Go on now to be seeking a lonesome place where the earth can hide you away; go on now, I'm saying, or you'll be having men and women with their knees bled, and they screaming to God for a holy water would darken their sight, for there's no man but would liefer be blind a hundred years, or a thousand itself, than to be looking on your like.

Even in this scrap, torn from its context, there is the natural burst of speech that is almost lyric. William Butler Yeats has pointed out that 'it blurs definition, clear edges, everything that comes from the will; it turns imagination from all that is of the present, like a gold background in a religious picture. . . Perhaps no Irishman had ever that exact rhythm in his voice, but certainly if Mr. Synge had been born a countryman, he would have spoken like that. It makes the people of his imagination a trifle disembodied; it gives them a kind of innocence even in their anger and their cursing.'

In *The Playboy of the Western World* (his latest drama, published by Maunsel & Co., Dublin), he himself explains this absence of prosiness in a remarkably spirited preface (the Shavian worshippers notwithstanding). In this he acknowledges his debt to the fishermen and ballad-singers, the beggar women and peat gatherers; from Kerry to Mayo or near Dublin he borrows the phrases from the folk imagination of these people. 'Any one who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame, indeed, compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala or Carraroe or Dingle Bay. All art is a collaboration; and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the storyteller's hand as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time [or the playwright's].' And so Mr. Synge goes on to tell how, when he was writing *The Shadow of the Glen* (a tremendous little one-act play), he got more aid than any learning could have given him from 'a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen.' The keynote of the preface, however, may be found in the next to last sentence where he maintains—'In a good play every speech should be as fully flavored as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by any one who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry.' 'Give up Paris; you will never create anything by reading Racine,' Yeats told him. 'Go to the Arran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.'

Christy Mahon, a young Irish Peer Gynt, but with more dreams and less fire than the Norwegian ne'er do well, confesses to the murder of his father and thereby gains the respect of the community in general, and the girl Pegeen in particular. This, and the subsequent chorus of admiration from the countryfolk, furnishes the first shock to the unprepared reader—a shock from which the theatergoers in Dublin did not recover, until provoked by further outrages against what they considered the sanctity of the drama,

they had vented their disapproval in rather medieval manners at the Abbey Theater early last year. Later, when the Widow Quin and Pegeen bid openly for Christy's favor and vie with each other before the bashful braggart the shock is aggravated, and finally in the second act, when the village girls and the widow hotly woo him, the climax is reached. These passages are boldly written and forceful dialogues, and though the writer of this cannot vouch for their genuineness, they have the almost unmistakable ring of truth. Intensely modern it is yet highly poetic. It is Shaw, without his sophistries and smart speeches—it is the 'Life force' revealing itself with neither paradox, decoration, nor apology. And in a country where the sex relation is a topic unfit for public mention—a topic for the fashionable clubman on one hand and the psycopath on the other—all of this was, naturally, unpardonable.

But it will succeed in spite of the 'prurient prudes' (as Charles Reade was wont to call that estimable class). Mr. Synge is not writing for today, but for the years to come in such passages as these:

It's that you'd say surely if you seen him and he after
drinking for weeks, rising up in the red dawn, or
before, it may be, and going out into the yard as naked
as an ash-tree in the moon of May, and shying clods
against the visages of the stars till he had put the fear
of death into the banbhs and screeching sows.
I've told my story no place till this night, Pegeen. . .
I've said it nowhere till this night, for I've seen none
the like of you the eleven long days I am walking the
world, looking over a low ditch or a high ditch, on my
north or south, into stony scattered fields, or scribes of
bog, where you'd see young limber girls, and fine
prancing women making laughter with the men.

The imagery of the first quotation and the delicate naturalism of the second can only be matched with prose like this:

It's little you'll think if my love's a poacher's love or
an earl's itself, when you'll feel my two hands stretched
around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered
lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God (who)
is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair.

But it is futile to quote; the play is full of such lines, and illuminated with the most skilful character-delineation. Mr. Synge calls it a 'comedy in three acts,' but in reality it is at one time history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, etc. There are moments of truly glorious farce (such as the return of Old Mahon, supposedly 'destroyed' by Christy), and there are times (notably in the last act) when the play verges perilously on rather bitter tragedy. But it is a comedy for all that, even though the

ending may not be the conventional happy one, for this unflinching dramatist has no intention of flinging a sop to Cerberus.

All of which has borne fruit in this play itself, which, though it may lack the delicate suggestion and the haunting minor cadences of his *Riders to the Sea*, contains fresher and more virile writing than anything the prophets of the 'Celtic revival' have produced. The characters move naturally and seemingly of their own warm will,—they are peasants of today who live with hot words on their lips and hot blood in their hearts—peasants who believe in the beauty of the actual and who concern themselves little with esoteric symbolism, or the fates of Deirdre and Naois.

Taking it all in all the play (in conjunction with Mr. Synge's other dramas) points with promise to the reincarnation of poetry in prose, the beautiful growing up through the common.

It is to the chronicler of the peasant of today that we must look for the fulfilment of this promise, and should Mr. Synge continue to carry out this wonder, he shall have put the whole world in his debt.

Source: Louis Untermeyer, "J. M. Synge and the *Playboy of the Western World,*" in *Poet Lore,* Vol. XIX, No. III, Autumn 1908, pp. 364-67.

Adaptations

Playboy of the Western World was adapted for television in 1946 by the BBC and in 1983 in Ireland.

A film version of *Playboy of the Western World* was produced in Ireland in 1962, starring Siobhan McKenna and Gary Raymond and directed by Brian Hurst.

Topics for Further Study

Research the movement for home rule in Ireland during the early part of the twentieth century. Explain how the clash between those loyal to England and those who supported Ireland's separation from the British is reflected in the themes of the play.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, a "New Woman" emerged who rejected the stereotyped roles of the past and demanded equal rights. Investigate whether this movement also appeared in Ireland. Then, analyze Synge's treatment of women in the play. Do they fit stereotypes, or are they reflective of more modern ideas concerning a woman's place?

Read Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Analyze the qualities of Irish life and character as depicted in the play and compare this portrait to that of *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Think about how an American version of the play would be produced. Would the play be able to retain its main themes, or would they have to be tailored to reflect the American character? Write up a scene-by-scene outline of a possible American version.

Compare and Contrast

Beginning of the 1900s: In the latter part of the nineteenth century, realism becomes the dominant literary movement in the Western world. In the last decade of the century, symbolism and naturalism emerge as important new movements.

Today: Musicals like *The Producers* and reality-based plays like *Proof* dominate Broadway.

Beginning of the 1900s: In 1905, Arthur Griffith founded Sinn Fein among Irish Catholics to help establish home rule in Ireland. Demonstrations, especially in Northern Ireland, often turned violent as England fought to retain control over her colony.

Today: The troubles in Ireland have calmed but have not been resolved. Northern Ireland is still under British rule and as a result, violent skirmishes between the Nationalists and those loyal to England still occur.

Beginning of the 1900s: Samuel Clemens dubbed this era "The Guilded Age," due in large part to the industrialization of the West. During this period, a handful of large industries gained control of the economy in the United States. Those industrialists who profited saw their fortunes grow at a rapid rate while the working class suffered with low wages and dangerous working conditions.

Today: Public awareness of major companies exploiting foreign workers has grown. Many fear that the current push for economic globalization will reinforce the imbalances between the rich and the poor.

What Do I Read Next?

In *The Abbey Theatre* (1987), E. H. Mikhail presents a comprehensive history of the Abbey Theatre from the beginning to the present time, focusing on the actors, playwrights, directors, and supporters of the theater.

Following Yeats's suggestion, Synge lived for a time on the Aran Islands, where he made careful observations of the inhabitants there. He gathered together his notes in essay form, which were eventually published as *The Aran Islands* (1907).

Riders to the Sea was produced by the Irish National Theatre Society in Dublin in 1904. Like *Playboy of the Western World,* this play presents a realistic yet poetic vision of Irish life, specifically on one of the Aran Islands off the western coast of Ireland.

In the Shadow of the Glen (1903) was Synge's first play to be produced by the Irish National Theatre Society in Dublin in 1904. It began the author's battle with Irish theater patrons over his authentic portrait of Irish life.

Further Study

Bushrui, S. B., ed., *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight,* Colin Smythe, 1972.

Bushrui edits several essays on Synge's plays, including several on his use of language.

Greene, David H., and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge, 1871-1909,* rev. ed., Macmillan, 1989.

This indispensable biography contains little criticism of the works, but it offers a wealth of information about Synge's life and influences on his work.

Price, Alan, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama,* Methuen, 1961.

Price presents insightful analyses of Synge's plays and places them in a literary historical context.

Skelton, Robin, *J. M. Synge and His World,* Viking, 1971.

Skelton's admirable work provides commentary on Synge's life as well as relevant historical background.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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