



Illusion and Reality in J.M. Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World*

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Abstract

J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, which provoked riot when it was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1907, is a realistic play dealing with the life of the people of rural Mayo County, Ireland which was totally cut off from the humdrum of the town life of Ireland. In this play the dramatist has realistically described the life, habit, customs, and culture of the people, who are basically peasants, living in the Aran Ireland. Although the play is realistic, the dramatist has also used non-realistic technique like dream, illusion and fantasy in this play in order to highlight the miserable condition of the lives of the peasants and their hidden desires which they only dreamt but could not put into reality. In this paper we propose to trace the elements of illusion and fantasy and their role in the development of the theme of the play and also their effect on the characters of the play. In the process of the discussion we will also discuss themes of the play to prove our points.

Keywords: Fantasy, Illusion, Reality, Theme, The Abbey Theatre.

Introduction

Though met with near instant rioting and controversy at its first performance at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1907, **The Playboy of the Western World**, received a lot of applause from the critics of the time and even today it is considered a masterpiece of modern drama. Praising its universality and permanence Thomas Disch in **The Nation**, said that "**The Playboy of the Western World** is one of those plays, like **She Stoops to Conquer**, or **Our Town**, that have made themselves part of the permanent repertory by virtue of warmth and amiability all the more irresistibility for seeming to issue from a cynical or chilly temperament..."¹ In the opinion of Sternlicht Sanford, "**The Playboy of the Western World** is the glory of early twentieth-century Irish drama and the most frequently performed and read Irish play the period. The play is the finest Irish comedy just as Oscar Wilde's **The Importance of Being Earnest** is the finest





comedy".² The praise, critical applauses and its comparison with those of world class plays prove the universality of **The Playboy of the Western World**. This is a realistic play dealing with the life, customs, habit and culture of the people of Ireland living in the rural areas (2) and small town of Mayo. The reality of the people of the rural Mayo County is that they are stuck in a boring corner of Ireland. There are no excitement and adventure in their life. They are leading a smooth, dull and boring life there. The only means of entertainment in the rural Mayo County is attending the wake, although ironically, where they find opportunity to drink unlimited wine and to talk useless. Whenever they find any source of excitement they happily accept it and feel adventurous. The coming of Christy Mahon among them is a source of excitement whom they accept, give shelter and believe his story without knowing the reality. Christy's tale of patricide offers the villagers a chance to imagine their own violent liberation from the stifling village life. We may understand the villagers' celebration of Christy's patricide as an expression of their own subconscious desire to relish in their dark impulses and thereby upset the reigning moral order.

In order to bring some spice, excitement and feeling of adventure in the life of the people of the Mayo, the dramatist introduces illusion and fantasy in the play. With the coming of Christy to Mayo, a connection between the outside world and the rural Mayo County is established and the elements of illusion, fantasy and falsehood are brought into the rural Mayo County. In other words we can say that with Christy illusion enters into the play and so in the life of the characters and make their life happy and they forget their pathos, although for a short time because no one can live in the illusion for a long time. We have to face the reality anyhow. The same thing happens in this play, as we will see in our foregoing discussion.

The illusion and fantasy which are brought into the play, ironically become the source of happiness for the Mayo people. The very story of Christy of killing his father is based on falsehood. But the villagers glorify Christy's deed of killing his own father and admire him as a hero. They are so much obsessed with the illusion that when the reality is disclosed and Christy is exposed of his falsehood, they are hurt and become sad. The appearance of Christy's father on the scene is the climax of the hero worship. When the villagers come to know that Christy has not killed his father, they are hurt because they are not ready to face the sordid reality of their life. They had forgotten their miserable life in the world of imagination. Thus we see that the reality and illusion are mixed together in this play. They are running side by side. In the beginning, before the coming of Christy, the villagers are living a realistic life with their daily routine. Christy brings illusion for them. Again the appearance of Christy's father on the scene, brings reality which is a source of mental torture for the villagers.





In this play we have been reported two murders----the first is the murder of Widow Quin's husband which is a real murder and the second is the murder of Christy' father which does not happen in reality but only in the imagination of the people. Now the (3) important question may come in our mind that why do the villagers hate and degrade Widow Quin and idealize and worship Christy while both of them are murderers? The answer is very easy. Widow Quin's murder of her husband is reality which happens on the stage and so it seems a dirty deed for the people of the village because this is against their temperament. But Christy's murder of his father is an illusion. It does not really happen on the stage and moreover, Christy takes the people of Mayo in a world of illusion and fantasy by the art of his telling the story. He becomes famous only due to his art of telling story. It is a fact that reality, sometimes, is sordid and harsh so it distract the people. On the contrary, the illusion, fantasy and imagination provide a fancy world for the people where they may fulfil their hidden and unfulfilled desires which is not possible in the real world. This is the reason the world of imagination attracts. The same thing happens in this play. All the characters find a solace in the world created by Christy where they find the outlet of their unfulfilled desires and all of them become, although for some times, happy. But when the reality enters into the play in the form of Christy's father, the illusion is shattered and all the characters again return to their daily real previous life except Christy Mahon who is now a grown up wise man and a totally changed person as now he has gained confidence in him. The illusion has changed his life. Now he is a matured man who can understand the life very well. So he rejects Pageen and goes with his father in the real world. His last speech shows this transformation in him, **"Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day."**³ On the other hand Pageen feels looser in the end of the play. She is the most affected character of illusion in the play. Her grief in the end of the play is unbearable. The departure of the emancipated Christy makes the departure of her own dream of liberation. She recognizes that she does not have the strength to re-make herself as Christy has done. Her last speech summarizes her loss and grief, **"Quit my sight.(Putting her shawl over her head and breaking out into wild lamentations) Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the Western World."**⁴ Maurice Bourgeois, in his book, has rightly described Pegeen's mental condition in these words, "When old Mahon appears and knocks his son down and orders him about, Christy's false courage and boastful swagger are exposed, and Pegeen's idol falls shattered to pieces."⁵

J.M.Synge's, **The Playboy of the Western World** was first performed in 1907 in Dublin and provoked a riot. In the beginning of the play, there was complete silence and the audience was enjoying the play and seeing the reaction of the audience Lady Gregory send a message to





W.B.Yeats that the play was a grand success. But, as the play progressed, The Irish Nationalists felt that the play represented an insult to honour of (4) their country. They shout down the characters. The immorality of Synge’s peasants (they admire a murder and use words like “shift”) was only the ostensible cause of the outrage. The characters were shown to be fools. Others objected to the mention of a woman’s undergarment in public. In fact the play sent a shock wave throughout the dramatic world, pushing the limits of decency and stoking an already red hot nationalistic fire. But later on the play was taken to America and with initial protest the play proved to be a grand success and now it is considered the master piece of Irish drama. It is true that the play has some satiric elements but Synge’s intention was not to hurt any community. He only wanted “his audience to laugh at his characters, but he also wanted the audience to notice their humanity for they have their faults and defects.”⁶

Themes

The main theme of the play is a desire of Mayoistes to escape from the monotonous and suffocating life the rural areas of Ireland. The Mayoists lead a monotonous life and everyone in the play has a strong desire to change his life into happy and full of excitement. So, they never miss even a little chance of excitement in their life. For this they even take refuge in the world of illusion because the reality is very sordid. That is why when Christy narrates his false story of killing his father , all the villagers are excited and start worshipping him as their hero. It is from here that timid Christy Mahon starts getting confidence in him. When Chrity first appears on the scene he is “**very tired and frightened and dirty**” and “**too miserable to feel the others staring at him with curiosity**”. The people in the pub including Pegeen take him lightly and think that he is a thief or an ordinary criminal who is on run from the police. So, they insult him , make fun of him and Pegeen even threatened him to hurt him. In order to make fun of him they ask many insulting question to Christy:

MICHAEL (going after him) Is it yourself fearing the polis? You’re wanting, maybe?

CHRISTY. There’s many wanting.

MICHAEL.It should be larceny, I’m thinking.

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MICHAEL. If you’re a dunce itself, you’d have a right to know that larceny’s robbing and stealing. Is it for





the like of that you're wanting?

(5)

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MICHAEL(impressed). If it's not stealing, it's maybe something big.

Christy(flattered). Aye; it's maybe something big.

Jimmy. He's a wicked-looking young fellow. Maybe he followed after a young woman on a lonesome night.

CHRISTY (shocked). Oh, the saints forbid, mister; I was all time a decent lad.

MICHAEL (to CHRISTY, mysteriously). Was it bailiffs?

CHRISTY. The divil one.

MICHAEL. Agents?

CHRISTY. The divil one.

MICHAEL. Landlords?

CHRISTY (peevishly). Ah, not at all, I'm saying.⁷

With this long interrogation without knowing the real crime done by Christy, Pegeen is irritated and declares that:

He's done nothing so.(To CHRISTY) If you didn't commit murder or a bad , nasty thing, or false coining, or robbery, or butchery, or like of them, there isn't anything that would be worth your troubling for to run from now. You did nothing at all.....You're only saying it. You did nothing at all.A soft lad like of you wouldn't slit the windpipe of a screeching sow.....Not speaking the truth, is it? Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of the broom? ⁸

But when Christy declares that **"I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that,"** all of sudden the attitude of the people present in Flaherty's country tavern towards Christy is changed because in Christy's declaration of killing his father they comprehend an





exciting story which may bring some delight in their monotonous day to day life. From this point Christy, Pegeen as well as other villagers enter into the world of illusion which really brings excitement and delight in their life.

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They start praising Christy and as the result of their praise he now gains confidence and tells them boastfully why and how he killed his father:

He was a dirty man, God forgive him, and he getting old and crusty, the way I couldn't put up with him at all....I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all....Aye. I buried him then. Wasn't I digging spuds in the field?...Never a one of them, and I walking forward facing hog, dog, or devil on the highway of the road.⁹

After his false story which Christy narrates very skilfully all of them, present in the pub, are very much impressed by the brave deed which Christy has done. Jimmy Farrell praises him for his bravery, **"Bravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I'm thinking, would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell."** Pegeen also joins him and says, **"It's the truth they're saying, and if I'd that lad in the house, I wouldn't be fearing the loosed kharki cut-throats, or the walking dead."**¹⁰ Christy swells with pride, and Flaherty gives him a job in the pub. Pegeen's fiancé, Shawn Keough objects by saying that **"That'd be a queer kind to bring into a decent quiet household with the like of Pegeen Mike."** But Pegeen silences him very rudely. Christy now feels safe and decides to stay with Pegeen at least for one night. Here we see that almost all the characters in the play are now under the complete grip of illusion. Illusion gives them relaxation. With great relief Jimmy Farrell says, **"Now by the grace of God, herself will be safe this night, with a man killed his father holding danger from the door, and let you come on, Michael James, or they'll have the best stuff drunk at the wake."** This is the best illusion of Christy's bravery which is exposed in the end of the play. This illusion gives Christy confidence, respect and changes his life in the end. Due to the illusion of his bravery, the young village girls become his fan and worship him as a hero. Even Pegeen and Widow Quin fight for him. Widow Quin wants to take Christy with her to her place. She argues that a woman who has buried her children and murdered her husband is a better match for Christy than a girl the like of Pegeen. But Pegeen fends her off because she is determined to keep Christy for herself. The irony is that Pegeen thinks that she now she has a brave man, a hero, to protect her. That is why when the illusion is shattered in the end of the play she is the





most grieved character in the play. On the other hand Christy feels so rewarded that he thinks why not he killed his father a long before:

May God and Marry and St. Patrick bless you and reward you, for your kindly. (She shuts the door behind her. He settles his bed slowly, feeling the quilt with immense satisfaction.)..Well, it's a clean bed and soft with it, and it's great luck and company I've won me in the end of time..two fine

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women fighting for the likes of me..till I'm thinking this night wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by.11

The other theme of the play is a satire on religion. When Pegeen expresses her fear in living alone at home because her father is going to a wake party, Michael tells Shawn Keogh, who is also Pegeen's fiancé, to stay with Pegeen for a night, Shawn is horrified and takes refuge in religion in order to hide his cowardice. In fact he is afraid of darkness and criminals and specially an unseen "queer fellow" who has been reported wandering in the locality in the darkness but he makes an excuse by saying that if he stays with Pegeen alone at night the priest of the church will mind it and it would be against the religion as he says, "**in horrified confusion, I would welcome, Michael James, but I'm afraid of Father Reilly; and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard Idid the like of that.**" This shows Shawn's hypocrisy and false hood. Along with this comic scene the dramatist has also described some realities. In the fear of Pegeen living alone at night, we find the real fear of a real girl of any part of the world. Pegeen's reason of fear, as she expresses, "**Isn't there the harvest boys with their tongues red for drink, and the ten tinkers is camped in the east glen, and the thousand militia...walking idle through the land...**" shows the real condition of Ireland of that time. There were criminals and militia everywhere at that time and the lives of the common people were not safe. Thus we see that in this play illusion and reality run side by side, although it is reality which wins in the end of the play.

In **The Playboy of the Western World**, Synge turns patricide into a theme for comedy. Which, unlike most modern comedies, is neither sadistic nor despairing. Christy Mahon becomes the hero of the peasant when he wanders into their town telling of his heroic murder of his father. The sudden appearance of Old Mahon shows Christy up as a mere poet, a liar. And when he actually does perform the crime before their eyes, he becomes a criminal. At this moment Pegeen's speech summarizes the theme of the play, "**I'll say, a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught**





me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed. (To MEN) Take him on from this, or the lot of us will be likely put on trial for his deed to-day." Her rejection of Christy jolts him to an awakening: the idle dreamer becomes a poet of reality, and in the process, a man. When Old Mahon survives his second murder, he leaves for home with Christy saying, "...my son and myself will be going our own way, and we'll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo, and the fools is here. "Now Christy walks with his father "like a gallant captain" because he feels triumph and expresses his gratitude to the villagers due to whom he has recognized his strength, "Ten thousand blessing upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely (8) gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day." Michael J. Collins has rightly said in his essay, 'Christy's Binary Vision in **The Playboy of the Western World**, that Widow Quin "is a realist who accepts the fallen world. Pegeen is an idealist who dreams of a heroic, romantic world. Neither wins Christy because neither can do both. Christy triumphs in the end because he can dream and do the 'dirty deeds' to make his dreams come true. In fact Christy dreams of killing his father in order to gain self-confidence as it happens in the oedipal drama in which a boy needs to symbolically kill his father in order to achieve independence and man hood. Un consciously the villagers help him to achieve independence and manhood in the end of the play and prove to be fools.

Clash of Illusion versus Reality

The clash versus illusion and reality has been shown through the nature and deeds of the character of the play. Shawn Keough is a dull, spineless young farmer. But he is also a law fearing citizen. He is a realist. He does not change from the beginning to the end of the play. On the other hand Christy represents illusion which changes him into a man of nerve in the end of the play. He is a young man for nothing but on the basis of his lie that he has killed his father, he gets the admiration of the villagers which improves his self-esteem and by the end of the play, he is a better man. The other characters which have been contrasted on the basis of illusion and reality are Pegeen and Widow Quin. Pegeen is attractive, intelligent and full of spirits. But she becomes an easy prey of illusion. In the beginning of the play we are informed that she is engaged to Shawn Keough and she is preparing for her marriage. But as soon as the illusion enters into the play in the form of Christy, she is attracted towards it which gives her unbearable grief in the end of the play. On the other hand, Widow Quin is a realistic and so she is not affected at all by the illusion. Although she tries to woo Christy but when she fails she happily returns to her realistic life. That is why she is not a sufferer like Pegeen in the end of the play. Contrary to her, Pegeen is deceived by the illusion and so she is badly affected when she faces the reality in the end. To say that no other character, except Christy, changes in the play is





not justified. Pegeen is changed in the end of the play because now she realizes the difference between reality and illusion as she says with a serious tone, "...the blow of a loy. Have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed." In spite of learning this lesson, she is unable to change her situation in which all the villagers are living. She tries but fails to come out of the boring life of the rural Mayo County. It is only Christy who emerges from a dull fellow into a hero in the end. He becomes a hero not due to his actions but due to his ability and talent of the art of telling story. Throughout the play, Pegeen and other villagers are struck by Christy's verbal brilliance. In her first exchange with him, Pegeen compares him to the great poets. Despite his low education, Christy has a rhetorical skill (9) which mesmerizes the villagers. With the development of his character his language, too, develops. In short we can say that he becomes a hero because he represents himself in a better way.

Conclusion

To conclude we can say that the theme of the play is closely related with the illusion and reality. Christy's imagination helps him to create a myth which makes him the hero of the people. In the preface to **The Playboy of the Western World**, Synge says, In Ireland...we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender...." It is this strong imagination of Christy that delinks the villagers from the reality, although for a time being. A myth is created around Christy and his confession of his crime makes him a hero. The villagers' imaginations complete his story and he is worshipped as a hero. But when his father, senior Mahon appears on the scene searching his son, there starts a strong clash between reality and illusion. When Christy tries to kill his father second time before the villagers, their illusion is shattered. Now they realize the difference between a gallous story and dirty deeds. So they want to punish Christy for his crime. But for Christy it is a newly found reality which changes his life due to which his father also accepts him and both go together leaving the villagers shocked. Thus in the end of the play we find a severe clash between illusion and reality and we also see that it is illusion which inspires reality. It is reality in the end of the play which wins and which unites Christy with his father and makes him leave Pegeen. Reality gives him a new life in which he will act as a wise man. Regarding this Barret H. Clark has rightly observed that, "The play is the living embodiment of Synge's ideas on the combination of reality and poetry in the drama. **The Playboy of the Western World**—indeed, all of Synge's plays---is outside the realm of literary "movements"and coteries."11





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