

# *The Playboy of the Western World*

by  
J. M. Synge

## Know-the-Show Audience Guide

compiled and written by  
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for the Education Department of  
The Shakespeare Theatre  
of New Jersey







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# The Life Of J. M. Synge



J. M. Synge (Source: Creighton University).

John Millington Synge was born in 1871, in a suburb of Dublin, to a family of devout Protestants. His father died during Synge's infancy, but his mother would end up supporting her son financially for the rest of his life. As a sickly child, Synge spent a good deal of time excused from school and able to indulge an interest in natural history by playing outside and bird-watching with a cousin.

Despite Synge's close-knit family, he often felt like an outsider. An early encounter with Darwin's theories of evolution eventually led him to a crisis of faith – a difficult experience for a child whose grandfather was a rector and whose older brother and uncle were missionaries. His atheism created problems not only for his family life but also for his love life. A proposal to Cherrie Matheson in 1895 (and another in 1896) was rejected

on the grounds of religion. Soon after abandoning God, Synge took up music, his 'gateway drug' to romanticism, and he developed a profound interest in all things Irish.

Synge entered Trinity College but barely scraped by with a second-class degree. He was so focused on his musical studies at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, however, that he received scholarships and considered a career as a music teacher. After college, he spent much of 1893 and 1894 in Germany studying music but eventually decided it wasn't for him. He moved to Paris where he would spend the next seven years studying literature, though his early attempts at writing were floundering, awkward, and self-conscious.

In Paris, Synge met W. B. Yeats and other rising members of the Irish literary revival. Yeats claimed that on their very first meeting he told Synge to "give up Paris" and go to the Aran Islands, three windswept barren islands off the west coast of Ireland. Although scholars doubt the chronology of Yeats's story, what is true is that Synge went to Aran, where he lived among the peasants observing their customs and listening to their stories, soaking up the rhythms and imagery of their language, and learning

## AN "EMO KID"?

Synge took a while to find his voice as a writer. He penned what we might call angst-ridden teenage poetry well into his twenties. For example: "I curse my bearing, childhood, youth / I curse the sea, sun, mountains, moon, / I curse my learning, search for truth, / I curse the dawning, night, and noon."



to appreciate the harsh existence of a people whose life is a constant struggle for survival against the elements. Also true, whether or not Yeats foresaw it, is that after Synge's series of visits to the islands he soon became a much better writer – a writer, in fact, whose plays would become staples of the renowned Abbey Theatre in Dublin, and, eventually, revered classic works.

Between 1903 and 1908 Synge published the plays *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and *The Tinker's Wedding*, as well as *The Aran Islands*, an account of his time on the islands. All of his plays except the posthumously published *Deirdre of the Sorrows* are peasant plays, and three are directly inspired by stories Synge heard on Aran. Distinctive features of Synge's writing include a preoccupation with folk beliefs, especially how they conflict with conventional Christianity; a deep vein

### IRISH NATIONALISM

The Irish long bridled under the yoke of English colonial rule. Their resistance took various forms, including violent rebellions, but by the late 1800s the revival of Irish Gaelic culture became an important aspect of nationalism.

Invoking Ireland's historic and mythic past presented Irish cultural identity as distinct from English and helped make the case for independence.

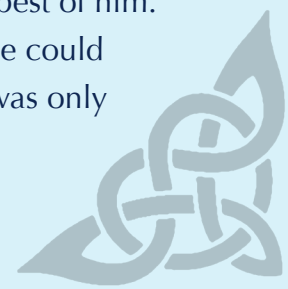
of irony and the tragic dimensions of life; the agency and primacy of nature; and an acute sense of the lyrical and musical in language. Although Synge was a key member of the Irish National Theatre Society and the Abbey Theatre, he generally steered clear of the politics in which other literary nationalists

engaged. Many have wondered how the salt and fervor of Synge's plays emerged from this quiet, melancholy, and respectable man. As Yeats wrote of Synge: "He loves all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy."



Molly Allgood, Synge's fiancée, as Pegeen in the original 1907 production of *The Playboy*. (Source: The Abbey Theatre).

Having endured several bouts of unrequited love in his life, Synge finally found a woman who reciprocated his affections: Molly Allgood, the actress who played Pegeen in the premiere of *The Playboy*. Their relationship was sometimes tempestuous – not to mention disapproved of by family and friends – but the two became engaged. Unfortunately, Synge's Hodgkin's disease, which had plagued him since 1897, finally got the best of him. Synge died on March 24, 1909, in Dublin, before he could finish his last play or marry the love of his life. He was only thirty-seven years old.



# Playboy: *An Introduction*

Written in 1907 by the great Irish playwright J. M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World* is now one of the all-time classic plays of a nation that at first resoundingly rejected it. Its first performances were greeted by such massive rioting that the authorities dispatched hundreds of police officers to keep order in the streets. Viewing the colorful language as blasphemous and the vibrant characters as caricature, the audience took the play as an affront to the honor and dignity of the Irish and missed Synge's subtle ironies, masterful interweaving of tone and plot, and beautiful re-workings of traditional imagery. With language as rich and poetic in its way as Shakespeare's, Synge and his playboy gradually weave a romantic dream out of the impoverished surroundings that have contrived to stifle such aspiration. Whether to follow the playboy or turn against him is as much a choice for us the audience as it is for the characters on stage.



**ACT I:** A bedraggled young man, **Christy Mahon**, stumbles into Michael Flaherty's pub in rural County Mayo, Ireland. Upon

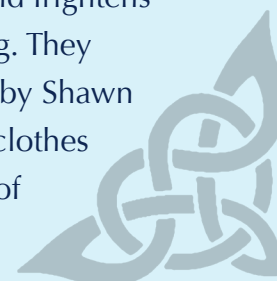


A scene from the Druid Theatre Company's 2005 production of *The Playboy*, part of their 8.5-hour presentation of Synge's oeuvre. Photo by Keith Pattison.

hearing that their surprise visitor is on the run from the law, the curious onlookers, including Flaherty's daughter **Pegeen Mike**, try to guess his crime. When it eventually comes out that Christy murdered his father with the blow of a loy (a heavy spade used to dig potatoes), the locals stand in awe of him. A man who kills his father, they reason, must be strong, brave, and dangerous. Against the protests of Pegeen's meek and God-fearing fiancé, **Shawn Keogh**, Flaherty engages Christy as a pot-boy to help around the place and keep Pegeen safe on dark, lonely nights.

Now left alone together, Christy and Pegeen start talking and fall in love with each other. They are interrupted, however, by the **Widow Quin** who has been sent by Shawn and the priest to take Christy away. She is unable to persuade him to leave and Pegeen kicks her out of the house. Pegeen then puts the tired Christy to bed and retires to her own room.

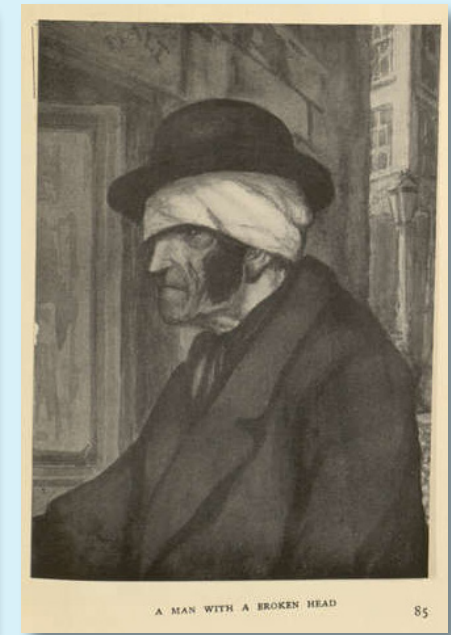
**ACT II:** Christy, overjoyed to find himself with a job and a girl and a roof over his head, draws the attention of the local lasses, who trek over from town to marvel at the man who killed his father. Returning to the house, Pegeen angrily sends the girls away and frightens Christy with the story of a man hanged that morning. They reconcile until they are again interrupted, this time by Shawn and the Widow, who try to bribe Christy with nice clothes and a ticket to the States. When this ploy to get rid of





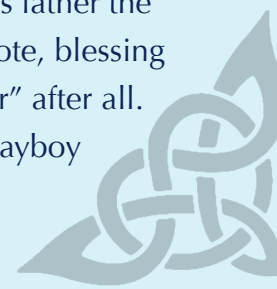
Christy also fails, Shawn leaves the Widow to attempt to seduce Christy herself. Unexpectedly, Christy's father, **Old Mahon**, approaches the pub. Christy hides and the Widow questions the old man. It turns out that not only did Old Mahon not die of the blow, but he claims that Christy is lazy, shy, and incompetent. The Widow has some fun at his expense, but also protects Christy by sending Old Mahon away on a wild goose chase and vowing to keep Christy's secret. The danger having passed for the moment, the village girls come to take Christy away to participate in the local games and sports.

**ACT III:** The farmers **Philly Cullen** and **Jimmy Farrell** are chatting in the pub when Old Mahon returns. Widow Quin, arriving soon after, tries to convince them that the old man is crazy, but the farmers' suspicions are aroused as to the man's identity. As they are talking, the races start in view of the window. Mahon thinks he recognizes Christy, but can't reconcile this flashing young "playboy" with the good-for-nothing that is his son, and leaves the pub, convinced he's crazy. The crowd enters, celebrating Christy's win. Pegeen and Christy, now at the height of his confidence and poetic powers, convince Flaherty that he's a better match for Pegeen than Shawn. Just as it seems that everything is falling into place for the young lovers, however, Old Mahon returns and chaos ensues. Christy, sensing that public opinion has turned against him for appearing to be a liar, chases his father outside to kill him for good. Now the villagers become entirely hostile, scared they will be arrested as accomplices. The Widow and a village girl try to save Christy



Illustrations from Jack B. Yeats's *Life in the West of Ireland*. Many of these drawings were created while Yeats was traveling with Synge, and one can see where Synge may have gotten some of his ideas - the first image ("Will he catch them?") is of a horse race, and the second portrays "A man with a broken head," like Old Mahon (Source: Villanova University Library).

from hanging by disguising him in a petticoat and sending him off to the States, but he refuses to leave Pegeen. The villagers come back in and tie him up, and Pegeen even burns him. At the last minute, Old Mahon – miraculously, still alive – returns and unties his son. Christy agrees to go with his father, but reverses their roles: now the young man is the master and his father the cowed subservient. Christy leaves on a triumphant note, blessing the crowd for having turned him into a "likely gaffer" after all. Pegeen, devastated, laments her loss of "the only Playboy of the Western World."





# Playboy: *Who's Who*

**CHRISTY MAHON:** the down-and-out young man who stumbles into Michael Flaherty's pub and intrigues all the locals with a tale of killing his father.



Widow Quinn  
Playboy of the Western World  
Shakespeare Theatre of NJ 2013

Costume design by Candida Nichols for the Widow Quin in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2013 production of *Playboy*.

**PEGEEN MIKE:** the daughter of Michael Flaherty and already betrothed to Shawn Keogh; the fiery Pegeen falls in love with Christy.

**WIDOW QUIN:** a young, local widow who vies with Pegeen for Christy's attention but continues to help and protect Christy when he reaffirms his love for Pegeen.

**SHAWN KEOGH:** Pegeen's fiancé, but not brave, romantic, or fierce enough to compete with Christy.



Set model by Brittany Vasta for The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2013 production of *Playboy*.

**OLD MAHON:** Christy's abusive father, who is supposedly dead at the beginning of the play but reappears later in pursuit of his son.

**MICHAEL FLAHERTY:** Pegeen's father and the owner of the pub in which the play takes place.

**PHILLY CULLEN, JIMMY FARRELL:** farmers who frequent Flaherty's pub.

**SARA TANSEY, SUSAN BRADY, HONOR BLAKE, NELLY:** local village girls who trek across hill and dale to see "the man [who] killed his father."



# Quotable:

W. B. YEATS ON SYNGE

“...I am certain that, in the long run, [Synge’s] grotesque plays with their lyric beauty, their violent laughter, *The Playboy of the Western World* most of all, will be loved for holding so much of the mind of Ireland. ...It is the strangest, the most beautiful expression in drama of that Irish fantasy, which overflowing through all Irish Literature that has come out of Ireland itself...is the unbroken character of Irish genius. ...[In Synge’s plays] fantasy gives the form and not the thought, for the core is always as in all great art, an over-powering vision of certain virtues, and our capacity for sharing in that vision is the measure of our delight. – from “J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time” (1910)

Mr. Synge has in common with the great theatre of the world, with that of Greece and that of India, with the creator of Falstaff, with Racine, a delight in language, a preoccupation with individual life. He resembles them also by a preoccupation with what is lasting and noble, that came to him, not as I think from books, but while he listened to old stories in the cottages, and contrasted what they remembered with reality. ...Every writer, even every small writer, who has belonged to the great tradition, has

had his dream of an impossibly noble life, and the greater he is, the more does it seem to plunge him into some beautiful or bitter reverie. ...Mr. Synge, indeed, sets before us ugly, deformed or sinful people, but his people, moved by no practical ambition, are driven by a dream of that impossible life. ...He tells us of realities, but he knows that art has never taken more than its symbols from anything that the eye can see or the hand measure. – from “Preface to the First Edition of the Well of the Saints” (1905)

Once, when midnight smote the air,  
Eunuchs ran through Hell and met  
On every crowded street to stare  
Upon great Juan riding by:  
Even like these to rail and sweat  
Staring upon his sinewy thigh.

– “On Those That Hated ‘The Playboy of the Western World’, 1907” (1911)

## ABOUT THESE PASSAGES

W. B. Yeats was a good friend of Synge’s, having met Synge in Paris and allegedly suggesting to him the idea of visiting the Aran Islands. The two of them became prominent figures in the Irish dramatic movement. In his writings, Yeats mythologized his friend by romanticizing and conflating various times and events. Some of his claims angered Synge’s family, but Synge just laughed and said, “That’s the way Yeats writes.” (For more on this, see “Yeats and the Re-making of Synge,” by Nicholas Grene.)





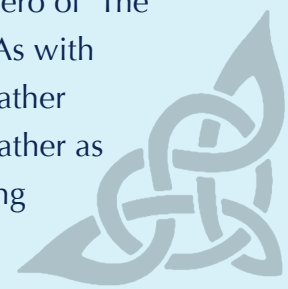
# Sources in Folklore

J. M. Synge, like many Irish nationalists and literary figures of the time, took a deep interest in traditional Irish folklore and in the peasants for whom it was still an integral part of everyday life. Although not quite the mystic his friend W. B. Yeats was, Synge nevertheless felt a deep connection between folklore and nature, poetry, and human psychology, and believed that he himself had “[t]hat kind of frank imagination by which folk-lore is created.” Much of his time on the Aran Islands was spent listening to storytellers, and many of these tales went into his book *The Aran Islands*, where they punctuated Synge’s reflections on the routines and customs of the people and the harsh natural environment of the islands. These stories also provided the basic plotlines for several of his plays.

**THE TALL TALE:** The idea of a man who killed his father being welcomed and shielded from justice by a rural community came from a tall tale told to Synge by Aran storyteller Pat Dirane. (see [p. 11 of this guide for the passage from \*The Aran Islands\*](#)). Tall tales are a prominent feature of Irish folklore and are defined by scholar Carolyn Brown as first-person narratives told as true, but which “challenge the listener’s credulity” and which perform

“different social functions depending on whether [they are] heard as true or fictional.” *The Playboy of the Western World* transformed its source tale into a work of theatre that, in a way, acted like a tall tale itself. Synge’s published preface to the play and the Abbey Theatre’s promotional material both stressed the fact that Synge had lived among peasants and that the story in the play had (allegedly) actually occurred. When that first audience in 1907 saw fantastical and crude elements in what they had expected to be a piece of realism, they took it as an affront to the politically symbolic Irish peasantry, and rioted ([for more on the \*Playboy\* riots, see p. 15](#)). On the other hand, those more prepared to see the play as a piece of fiction hailed it as a great work of art.

**THE OUTLAW AND THE HERO:** Christy Mahon echoes several characters or types from traditional lore. The criminal or outlaw as hero is not uncommon among groups that have been historically oppressed, because the criminal defies unjust laws and a societal system that keeps the group subjugated. Because of Ireland’s long history of colonization by and rebellion against England, the heroic outlaw is especially strong in Irish tradition. However, violence in folktales is not limited to criminals and in many cases functions as a ritual rite of passage into maturity: Oedipus kills his father; Gretel kills the witch; the hero of ‘The Sea-maiden’ cuts off the heads of the Laidly Beast. As with these characters, Christy’s “murder” of his abusive father precipitates his personal growth. Described by his father as “the looney of Mahon’s” and a lazy, good-for-nothing





Emer and an army of her maidens confront her husband, Cuchulainn, after he betrays her with another woman. (Source: sacred-texts.com).

laughingstock, Christy is like yet another folk hero: the foolish, bumbling younger son who succeeds where his older and cleverer brothers fail. And to return to specifically Celtic sources, Christy also resembles the great Irish hero Cuchulainn in some general (and possibly satirical) ways. Both Cuchulainn and Christy are reckoned for violent deeds

and are relentlessly pursued by women, though initially shy of female attention. Both accomplish great feats (Christy's verbal, Cuchulainn's physical) in order to woo their chosen brides. More specifically, Christy's line, "a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself," references the episode in which Cuchulainn is brought down from a battle rage by being confronted with 150 naked women.

**INTERPRETATION:** The heavy influence of folklore on both Synge and his play has led to significant crossover between anthropology and literary criticism in the interpretation of *The Playboy*. Historian George Bretherton's analysis engages philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on **carnival and popular festivals**. Carnival is a time of "festive misrule" in which roles and values are inverted. In *The Playboy*, a murderer is considered a protector, a son lords it over his father, a "liar on walls" becomes "the playboy of the western world." The carnivalesque acts as a release-valve in which built-up pressures and resentments dissipate and society can revert to normal. When the festivity ends, deviance is no longer welcome: according to Bakhtin, "The King is crowned, only to be uncrowned, abused and scourged." Literary scholar Randolph Parker also discusses theatre as ritual, but focuses on the concept of **liminality**, i.e. the transitional or marginal, to explore how the play negotiates the boundaries between dream and reality, youth and age, romance and practicality, comedy and tragedy, "gallous story" and "dirty deed." English professor and author Steve Wilson looks at *The Playboy* from the perspective of **performance theory**, which studies how a particular performance arises from and communicates meaning within its specific performance context. For Wilson, the character of Christy represents the "exploration of identity as performance": Christy does not start out a hero, but becomes one in response to his audience's actions and reactions.







# Synge's *Language*

Synge writes in his preface to *The Playboy*: “I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers.” This would imply that the language is easy or simple. This is hardly the case now, for us, over one hundred years later and in a different country. But it was not the case in Synge’s own time and place either. The first cast had difficulty with their lines, and Synge himself spent a great deal of time and revision getting them right. As he wrote to Yeats: “with my stuff it takes time to get even half a page of new dialogue fully into key with what goes before it.”

Synge derived his language from the peasant speech of Aran and especially Kerry, which Yeats characterized as having a “long and meditative [cadence], as befits the thought of men who are much alone.” Whether or not Synge acknowledged it, there was a significant political dimension to the literary use of peasant language. Yeats (to quote him yet again), wrote that “this use of Irish dialect for noble purpose...has done much for national dignity.” Synge thought of rural Ireland as one of the last remaining places whose vernacular language had the natural

poetry essential to the nurturing of great literature.

Although Aran was Synge’s first significant experience with peasant language, and he adapted some of it into dialogue for *Playboy*, the language of West Kerry was even more influential. The people there were more bilingual than on Aran, and spoke with what Robin Skelton calls “harshly poetical and figurative” English. Many speeches in the play were taken almost directly from quotes that Synge recorded in his journals while in Kerry.

Another source of language and imagery for Synge was Douglas Hyde’s *Love Songs of Connacht*, a collection of Irish folk songs and their translations into English. Images such as the “star of knowledge” shining from a woman’s brow, Heaven being jealous of earthly love, and trysting by moonlight on the mountain Neifin, derive from this volume.

Language is also, of course, a central thematic concern in the play. Pegeen, Christy, and the village girls all comment on Christy’s skill at poetry and storytelling, and he gets better and better the more they praise him. Critics have variously described Christy as “a young poet in the supreme difficulty of getting born” (J. B. Yeats) and “the undeveloped poet coming to consciousness of himself as man and as artist” (Norman Podhoretz).





## Quotable:

J. M. SYNGE'S *THE ARAN ISLANDS* (1907)

“While the curaghs\* are out I am left with a few women and very old men who cannot row. One of these old men, whom I often talk with, has some fame as a bone-setter, and is said to have done remarkable cures, both here and on the mainland. Stories are told of how he has been taken off by the quality in their carriages through the hills of Connemara, to treat their sons and daughters, and come home with his pockets full of money.

Another old man, the oldest on the island, is fond of telling me anecdotes – not folktales – of things that have happened here in his lifetime.

He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with a blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related. They hid him in a hole – which the old man has shown me – and kept him safe for weeks, though the police came and searched for him, and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America.

This impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. If a man has killed his father, and is already sick and broken with remorse, they can see no reason why he should be dragged away and killed by the law.

Such a man, they say, will be quiet all the rest of his life, and if you suggest that punishment is needed as an example, they ask, ‘Would any one kill his father if he was able to help it?’”

### ABOUT THIS PASSAGE

J. M. Synge spent a great deal of 1898-1902 on the Aran Islands, three small islands off the western coast of Ireland, listening to the locals' stories and observing their daily life. Synge's plays all draw on these experiences in one way or another, whether for plot, language, or local flavor. The anecdote given here provides the inspiration for *The Playboy of the Western World*, although *The Aran Islands* was not published until 1907, the same year that *Playboy* was first performed.

\*curaghs (currachs): traditional Irish rowing boats.







# Explore Online

The artist Jack B. Yeats joined Synge on many of his travels through rural Ireland. Explore Villanova's digital exhibition on Yeats: <http://exhibits.library.villanova.edu/jack-butler-yeats/>



Many of Synge's works are freely available online. *The Aran Islands* includes the anecdote that Synge adapted for the plot of *Playboy*: <http://books.google.com/books?id=G6cxAQAAMAAJ>

shipped for a fair on the mainland, which i  
to take place in a few days, and I went down  
on the pier, a little after dawn, to watch them  
The bay was shrouded in the greys of  
coming rain, yet the thinness of the clouds  
threw a silvery light on the sea, and an unusua  
depth of blue to the mountains of Connemara  
As I was going across the sandhills one dun  
sailed hooker glided slowly out to begin her  
voyage, and another beat up to the pier  
Troops of red cattle, driven mostly by the wo

Compare the sounds of different Irish dialects by listening to recordings at the International Dialects of English Archive: <http://www.dialectsarchive.com/ireland>





# Commentary & Criticism

**LANGUAGE AND POPULAR IMAGINATION:** “In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry. In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks.”

– J. M. Synge, from the preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*

**POETRY, NOT IDEOLOGY:** “This 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; his plays are not plays of ideas. Theses and problems die. Ideas are for a generation, or for a few generations.”

– Barrett H. Clark, *The British and American Drama of Today*

**REALISM AND IDEALISM:** “[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.”

– Michael J. Collins, in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*

**IDENTITY IN PERFORMANCE:** “...*The Playboy of the Western World* describes a world in which act is essence...Christy has become what he has performed. All the world’s a stage, after all, and we may well be nothing more than players...The villagers’ support led to Christy’s confidence as well as authority. From where did it arise? From context, and not from “self.” To assert otherwise is to offer details not in the play but in a Romantic notion of essentialism.”

– Steve Wilson, in *The Midwest Quarterly*

**CHRISTY AS A BLANK CANVAS:** “Denied identity and freedom by his father’s misrule, [Christy] is living evidence of the nullity to which oppression may reduce a person or a community. Yet that very nullity is also the source of his charm, for it offers the Mayo villagers an empty space into which they can read from a safe distance their fondest dreams.”

– Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*







**JUSTIFIABLE VIOLENCE:** “Ritual bloodshed is both necessary and significant: blood must be shed before the child becomes a man, before the non-entity becomes a hero. And the strange attitude toward father-murder in *The Playboy* is explainable in exactly the same way...It is a ritual murder, a step in the process toward maturity.”

– Patricia Meyer Spacks, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*

**TRIUMPH OR LOSS:** “It is important, of course, that Christy is able to stand up to his father, but his transition seems to be from abused child to rebellious punk. Ironically, the Mahons merely change places: Christy becomes the bully his father was and Old Mahon, exiting with the line “I’m crazy again,” takes over his son’s former role as the “looney of Mahon’s.” ...I find a reading focused on Pegeen’s very believable loss more adequate than one stressing Christy’s less credible triumph. ...I accept my disenchantment and see Christy’s triumph as prodigiously fantastic, but I still cannot dismiss him...[T]he spirit of carnivalistic exuberance he releases in the theatre is real. I recall the buoyant language and the playful joy of the earlier scenes, and my longing for that playworld is made all the stronger at the end because my desire for it is not dramatically realized.”

– Randolph Parker, in *Theatre Journal*

**POWER OF THE LIE:** “Ultimately the excitement, romance, and relative harmony engendered by the “gallous story” and its teller

have been shattered by disillusion, and the disharmony, fear, and dreariness of “real life” have returned in its wake. The loss of Christy is felt all the more deeply for their two-day respite from life’s monotonous cares and the loneliness of the Western World. But this lesson is not confined to the West of Ireland: society needs its artists, storytellers, and poets, Synge implies, to give life the vitality of the imagination, made potent through “the power of the lie,” which we need to feel deeply, to transcend and even transform mundane reality and prevent its isolation and tedium from overwhelming us.”

– Julie Henigan, in *New Hibernia Review*



Synge at a rehearsal for *Playboy* (sketch by J. B. Yeats; source: *J. M. Synge and His World*).





# The *Playboy Riots*

W. B. Yeats was unable to attend the first performance of *The Playboy*, on January 26, 1907. That evening, he received a telegram: "Play great success." This telegram was sent after the first act. At one in the morning, Yeats received another telegram: "Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift."

What had happened was this: the audience, while content with the first act, grew increasingly restive at the mounting absurdities and small blasphemies of the second act and upset by the violence of the third act. Their outrage reached a tipping point at Christy's line, "what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe" ("shifts" referred to women's undergarments and was therefore something no decent person would say in public). The audience broke into a full riot, with the actors having to shout and mime to finish the play. The remaining performances were attended by protesters blowing trumpets and by hundreds of police officers to keep them in line.

The first American tour (1911-1912) fared little better than its Dublin counterpart – in New York, the objects thrown on stage included potatoes, a currant cake, and a watch (retrieved later by its owner), while in Philadelphia the entire cast was arrested.

W. B. Yeats later called the audience's response to *The Playboy* "the one serious failure" of the Irish literary movement. Yet the reaction was not totally unexpected. Yeats and others described another Synge play as "too dangerous" for Dublin, and the *Irish Times* described *In the Shadow of the Glen* as a "slur on Irish womanhood." Jack Yeats warned Synge that if he wanted to keep any of his "coloured language" in *The Playboy* he would have to "station a drummer in the wings, to welt the drums every time the language gets too high for the stomachs of the audience."

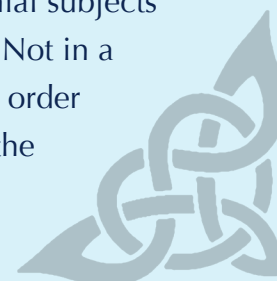
The riots happened in response to more than just indecency.

At that time, the Irish peasant was a very politically loaded symbol. The middle-class

audience considered the Irish peasantry to be noble, honest, and victimized by the English. When the play repeatedly subverted their expectations, they took it as an attack not only on the peasantry but on themselves, their conceptions and beliefs. The extravagant, violent character of Christy Mahon struck them as a return to the 'Stage Irishman' that had been the insidious stereotype foisted by the English on their Irish colonial subjects for ages, and the vivid lyricism as mocking brogue. Not in a position to separate the literary from the political in order to appreciate the subtleties and ironies of the play, the audience reacted defensively.



A clipping from *Gaelic American*  
(Source: Villanova University Library).







# Terms from Playboy

**banbhs** – piglets

**banns** – public notice of intention to marry

**bona fide** – a person living more than three miles away and therefore entitled under the licensing laws to obtain a drink as a traveler outside normal hours

**cess** – luck

**cnuceen** – small hill

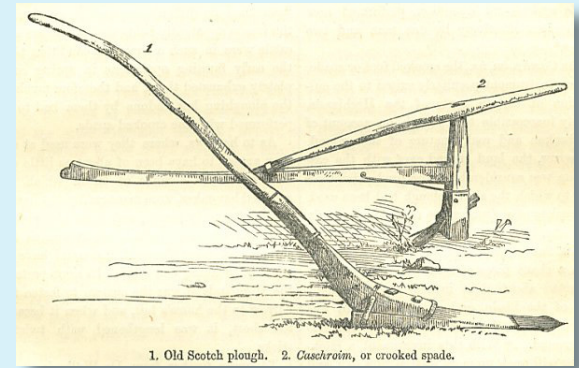
**curragh** – light canoe-like boat (see image below)

**frish-frash** – type of porridge made with oats and cabbage



Aran Islanders carrying a curragh to the water. Photo: Harold Strong, 1962 (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

**furze** – gorse bush  
**gallous** – mischievous, spirited, plucky  
**hop'orth** – a halfpenny's worth  
**liefer** – rather  
**loy** – a spade for digging up potatoes (see image, right)



In the foreground is a caschroim, the Scottish equivalent of a loy (Source: Electric Scotland).

**mitch off** – play hooky

**pandied** – beaten up

**paters** – the Lord's Prayer

**peelers** – policemen

**perch** – a rod of definite length for measuring land

**playboy** – hoaxer or trickster

**poteen** – (pronounced "puch-een") illegally distilled whiskey

**publican** – the keeper of a public house

**pullet** – a young hen

**shebeen** – small country pub, or unlicensed house selling poteen

**skelping** – thrashing, beating

**spavindy** – lame

**streeleen** – gossip

**supeen** – a small portion of drink

**thraneeen** – a small straw, or a weak person

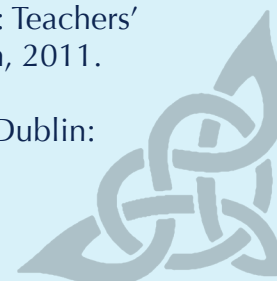
**turbary** – the right to cut turf (peat) from a stretch of bog

**whisht** – be quiet



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Note: Many of the articles listed here are available on [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org). If your institution does not provide access to JSTOR, you can get limited free access to content through the new Register & Read program.



A *Playboy* riot-themed cartoon published in *The Lepracaun* in 1907, in which a woman carrying a bag labeled "Freeman's Journal" knocks at the Abbey Theatre door with an umbrella labeled "cheek." "Casey's Circus" and "Muldoon's Picnic" were music hall shows (Source: National Library of Ireland).