

Conformity and rebellion in the playboy of the western world



The Playboy of the Western World is a story about conformity and rebellion towards the law. In the play, Shawn Keogh is the ultra-conservative figure who bows towards the law with deference and meekness. At the other extreme, Christy Mahon is the rebellious figure who rebels against the law by posing himself as the perpetuator of patricide and a criminal of the legal system. In the play, the law is portrayed as an oppressive social institution that stifles the expression of a person's individuality. The law-abiding Shawn is portrayed as an uninspiring figure whose individuality is totally stifled by the law of society, while the rebellious Christy is portrayed as the flamboyant individualist who exudes vigour and individuality by breaking himself free from the law. By unshackling himself from the legal constraints, Christy develops into a supreme individualist who rises above law and society, while the conservative Shawn possesses no individual character by remaining the slave of the legal system. Through the contrast of these two characters, the play suggests that Ireland could equally achieve its unique individual character by breaking itself free from the oppressive dominance of the British legal system in the manner of Christy rather than remaining as a passive occupied country which meekly obeys the British law in the manner of Shawn. Shawn is the most law-abiding and god-fearing figure in the play. Throughout the course of the play, Shawn exhibits a deferential attitude towards law and morality. He is the paragon of the law-abiding citizen and is repeatedly described by his entourage as a "decent man" (13). He is saddled with all sorts of legal and moral obligations and forbids himself to do anything in contradiction to the law. Shawn is totally subjugated to the laws of the church and waits patiently for the holy dispensation from the bishops to get married. He constantly fears of breaking the rules of the church. His

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deference to the religious authority is such that he fears to be left alone in the company of his fiancée before obtaining a proper legal dispensation from the church. His obedience to the secular criminal law is equally noticeable. Upon learning Christy's patricide, he is the only person in the play who is not amused by his crime. He immediately identifies Christy as a "bloody-handed murderer" (20) and a devilish figure, rather than applauding him as the hero of a glorious exploit like everyone else. In the play, Shawn moves strictly within the conventional legal strictures and is hemmed in by both legal and moral constraints. However, rather than applauding Shawn as an exemplary law-abiding citizen, the author portrays him as an insipid and uninspiring figure who is subjugated to the many social institutions such as the law and the church. His slavish subjugation to these social institutions devours his individuality. The audience never witnesses any active expression of his individual character; instead, his individuality is entirely expressed through his servile relations to these legal and social institutions. Rather than behaving like a sovereign individual capable of independent feelings and judgment, Shawn resembles a robot who mechanically obeys the dictates of the law, both secular and religious, without any mental reflection on his part. His passive meekness towards the law turns him into a part of the wider moral framework, thus making him the very opposite of an individualist. Through the portrayal of Shawn's slavish subservience to the law, the law is presented as an oppressive social institution which curtails individual freedom by hindering the expression of one's individuality. Unlike Shawn, Christy is someone who rises above law and the legal institution. Although Christy starts off as a conventional "law-fearing man" (20) in the beginning of the play, he chooses to rebel against the law by posing as someone who

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has committed patricide. Christy explains his act of murder by telling his audience that he strikes his father in a fit of rage after he forcefully persuades him to marry a certain widow, which he refuses to do. By acting as someone who murders his father in order to defend his freedom and independence, Christy proves himself to be a radical individualist who tramples upon the laws of the coercive legal authority in order to defend his individual sovereignty and freedom. By murdering his father, Christy eliminates the authority figure in his life and is now free to become his own master. Christy poses himself as someone who believes in radical personal freedom and who is willing to break the legal strictures in order to achieve it. After he defies the law by committing his imaginary crime, Christy develops greatly as an individual. The sexually timid and cowardly Christy who has once been the “ fool of men” (58) and the “ laughing joke of every female woman” (49) develops into a “ champion of the world” (58) who exudes confidence and swaggers with self-assurance. The Christy who once hid himself at the sight of women now wins all the sports and pursues Pegeen with boldness. Christy’s astonishing development illustrates the oppressiveness of the legal institution. It is only through the breaking of the law does Christy truly unleash his individuality and develop into a full person. Christy liberates himself from the oppressiveness of the law by unshackling himself from the legal constraints, thus transforming himself into an emancipated individualist who is free from legal coercion, and who is at liberty to develop his individuality to the full. By acting as someone who breaks the law and detaches himself from the wider moral framework of society, Christy is transformed into a supreme individualist. The breaking of the law enables Christy to rise above fettering constraints of law and society,

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rather than becoming the law's obedient slave in the manner of the conservative Shawn. The Irish community in the play initially presents itself as law-abiding society. The audience learns from Michael that the consumers of the liquor house are all "bona fide" (14), which shows the community's respect for the law. However, the community quickly reveals a rebellious law-breaking spirit beneath its law-abiding façade. When Christy reveals himself to the community as the perpetuator of patricide, the people of the community applaud him to the skies as the gallant hero of a glorious deed. Rather than delivering Christy to the police, the people regard the illegal act of patricide as a grand action. As one member of the community puts it, the man who dares to break the law by killing his father "would face a foxy devil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell" (19). The community's deep admiration for Christy's crime clearly reveals its hidden law-breaking spirit. In the play, the police are referred as the "peelers", after the English Prime Minister Robert Peel who created the justice system. This shows that Ireland is an occupied land and that the police are working under the British legal system by "selling judgments of the English law" (37). The entire legal system is thus an instrument of foreign oppression. By breaking the law, Christy can almost be seen as someone who bravely resists the oppressive British legal system. In this way, the breaking of the law is transformed into a virtue. Breaking the law means the defying of authority, which is what Ireland needs to do if it wants to free itself from British rule and become sovereign once more. It is no wonder that Christy's act of resistance against the legal authority should receive such rapturous applause from the community. Just as Christy achieves his individuality by "breaking" the law, the author seems to suggest that Ireland could equally achieve its unique individuality by

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breaking itself free from the British legal system through active rebellion. Just as Christy's act of rebellion turns him into the "master of all fights" (80) at the end of the play, Ireland could shake off the yoke of foreign oppression and become its own master by striking down the British authority figure in the manner that Christy strikes down his father. The Playboy of the Western World is celebration of the courageous and rebellious spirit who dares to strike down the law and authority. The Irish community living under the oppression of foreign rule is quick to lionize the father murdering Christy because he possesses the will and the energy to defy the forces of authority, which is exactly the kind of people that Ireland needs if Ireland intends to be free and independent once more. The law is an instrument of colonial oppression; therefore, for Ireland to become sovereign again, its people must learn to break the British law and to strike down the authority figure in the manner of the father murdering Christy. Ireland can choose to become free and individualist by defying the legal authority in the manner of Christy, or it can choose to remain subservient to the British law in the manner of Shawn. Even though the community ultimately loses its courage towards law-breaking at the end of the play and threatens to deliver Christy to the police, the Irish community's psychological disposition towards rebellion has been clearly demonstrated through its deep admiration towards Christy's crime. Just as Michael puts it, it is better for his grandchildren to grow up like "little gallant swearers" (71) like Christy who exude vigour and rebellious spirit, than to become the "puny weeds" (71) in the like of Shawn who can only bow down meekly to the oppressive legal authority by remaining a passive law-abiding citizen in an occupied land. Works Cited Synge, M, John. The Complete Plays of John M. Synge. New York: Vintage Books, 1960. <https://assignbuster.com/conformity-and-rebellion-in-the-playboy-of-the-western-world/>