

Father figures,
reason, and gender
roles in the playboy of
the western world



J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* is a three-act play which follows Christy Mahon's escape to a rural community of Western Ireland after striking and presumably killing his father. In the small Mayo village, authority presents itself in many facets as an interlocking, linear structure that is both tangible and intangible. Three aspects of the power structure present in the text are patriarchal figures, religious figures, and the community, which are also intertwined with logical conduct and gender stereotypes. Furthermore, Synge depicts momentous and meaningful resistance as only exerted against patriarchal and community forces – religious figures are subjected to a perversion, distortion, or reallocation of their authority.

In *Playboy* there are three child-father relations for examination: Christy and Old Mahon, Pegeen Mike and Michael Flaherty (Michael James), and Shawn Keogh and Father Reilly. Each relationship represents a different gradient of resistance to paternal oppression, with Christy demonstrating significant defiance. Nothing that either Pegeen or Shawn attempt in the play is remotely comparable to his crime of patricide. Christy's motivation for doing so, explained in a noticeably more dramatic version of the tale later in the play, is to avoid an arranged marriage with the Widow Casey who is a woman significantly older and larger than Christy and 'of noted misbehaviour with the old and young' (2. 116-120). The reason for this union is none other than his father's personal gain, according to Christy, evidenced by Old Mahon's judgment of him as not worthy of the Widow (2. 125-127, 137). Further reinforcing Old Mahon's tyranny is Christy's initial description of himself as the 'son of a strong farmer' (Synge 1. 203-204), but Christy then replaces that 'strong farmer' with a 'dirty' and 'crusty' man he could

not tolerate (1. 266-268). Therefore, by depicting Old Mahon as domineering, selfish, and a less-than-ideal father, Synge allows the villagers to pity Christy and accept the killing of his father as justified, even honorable.

Where Christy engages in the ultimate resistance to paternal authority, Pegeen is only able to struggle between her force of will and her reliance on her father. For the majority of *Playboy* she is compliant with Michael James' wishes, but also does not hesitate to voice her own inclinations when they differ from his. This aspect of her personality remains intact throughout the text; for example, in Act 1 she chastises her father for leaving her alone while he attends Kate Cassidy's wake (1. 102-105), and in Act 3 she rejects Michael James' arrangement of her marriage to Shawn and insists on marrying Christy instead (3. 350-351). After some hesitation, her father eventually gives in to Pegeen's persistence and allows the two his blessing. Her persistence, however, does not translate into repudiation. As Christy and Old Mahon leave the village, Pegeen loses 'the only playboy of the western world' (3. 653-654) and, unable to sustain herself, she remains dependent on her father and the life he provides for her.

Lowest of all is Shawn Keogh, Pegeen's second cousin and soon-to-be husband until Christy appears at the tavern. His relationship with Father Reilly is different than Christy's to his father and Pegeen's to hers because Shawn makes no effort to challenge Father Reilly's (and by extension the Church's) religious power. Unlike Old Mahon and Michael James, Father Reilly never appears on stage yet exerts enough power to make Shawn constantly nervous, in turn causing Shawn to abandon all religious expectations for the sake of self-interest. When Michael James tells Shawn to stay overnight to <https://assignbuster.com/father-figures-reason-and-gender-roles-in-the-playboy-of-the-western-world/>

act as protector for Pegeen while he is away, Shawn responds '[in horrified confusion] I would...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 I did the like of that?' (1. 116-119). His aversion to being associated with indecency, coupled with his refusal on the grounds of being 'afraid of Father Reilly,' is met with contempt as Michael James sarcastically reflects that he has found a decent man for Pegeen (1. 148-149).

While Christy grows from 'a dirty, stuttering lout' (2. 434) to 'the master of all [future] fights' (3. 636-637), Shawn is never able to break away from Father Reilly's paralyzing influence. Although Shawn and Father Reilly have a religious connection rather than a familial one, direct comparison between this pair and Christy/Old Mahon is inevitable. Levitt argues that the comparison implies oppressive patriarchal authority should be – and can be – overthrown, and that this is necessary for the child's maturation (20).

Pegeen seems aware of the concept, but is not entirely willing or able to implement it. Additionally, Shawn's total obedience to Father Reilly relieves him of the responsibility of making any difficult decision, but leaves him as a flat character and an undesirable man. Christy and Shawn begin the play as equals, but by the end one has transgressed prescribed paternal boundaries while the other has remained comfortably static (21).

No significant resistance to Father Reilly's religious authority can be truly expected because of his absence from the play, and Synge gives the reason for this as due to fear of the murderous Christy. According to Levitt, Father Reilly's avoidance of Christy and his failure to alert the local police both

portray him as a priest whose fear outweighs not just his sense of moral
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duty, but his 'authoritarian sympathies' as a Father of the Church as well (21). This is not an attempt to dismantle the Church's power on Synge's part, but rather an attempt to transfer religious identity to other characters, particularly female characters. Thus, the transference is combined with a reversal of gender roles. Upon Widow Quin's entrance into the play she announces that she has come to the tavern on the orders of Father Reilly to board Christy in her house (Synge 1. 488-496). His command seems out of place, since there is no immediate logical explanation as to why a confessed murderer should be housed alone with a woman. Father Reilly's apprehension prevents him from serving the orders in person, and he instructs a hardened woman to deal with the 'young gaffer who'd capsize the stars' in his stead (3. 349). Moreover, during the scene of the next morning four village girls pursue Christy at the tavern by bringing him presents of duck eggs, butter, cake, and boiled chicken (Synge 2. 63-77), which is reminiscent of the Three Wise Men offering their own gifts. The analogy is further emphasized when it is mentioned that one of the girls traveled for ten miles to see him (2. 45).

Other men in addition to Father Reilly rely on the Widow Quin several times for her steadfastness. For example, at first Shawn tries to bribe Christy with a ticket for the United States, a new hat, breeches, and a new coat as incentives for leaving and preserving Shawn's proposed marriage to Pegeen (2. 320-327). But his offers are not successful, and he turns to the Widow Quin for help. Even Philly O'Cullen and Jimmy Farrell, two of the men who previously mocked Shawn for his cowardice, cannot muster any courage themselves when Old Mahon drags himself into the village with his bandaged

head. All they can do is direct him toward Widow Quin when he demands room and board in exchange for sharing his version of the events (3. 52). Though the local police are present, they are never notified. Instead, the women are charged with handling all dangerous outsiders when the men cannot.

Absurdly, the whole community save for Shawn, Father Reilly, and the Irish Constabulary accept and approve of Christy as a murderer from the start. His tale of homicide comes to serve as his only identity, with him not being 'able to say ten words without making a brag of the way he killed his father and the great blow he hit with the loy' (3. 15-17). With all the others responding so encouragingly Christy cannot help but elevate himself to a prominent name and Christ-like figure, absorbing the distinction conferred to him. Interestingly, Christy and Old Mahon are extremely alike since the latter has been using the same tactic of storytelling to win a clean bed and a full stomach during his travels, explaining his request at the tavern (3. 47-51), and is proud of the attention his head wound has received (3. 43-44). It is only because of their similarity and the novelty of Old Mahon's arrival that the fickle community rescinds the notoriety it has bestowed on Christy and demotes him to social pariah. Only after Christy bludgeons his father for a second time do they behave reasonably and arrest him to protect themselves from being accomplices in murder (3. 446-499, 565-567). Continuing Synge's role reversal, the men are wary of going near Christy, and it is up to Pegeen to do the dirty work of fastening rope around him and burning his leg to remove him from the tavern (3. 553-560, 618). In the end,

everyone comes to their senses and unites under the work of driving out the very man they rose up.

This raises the obvious question - why did it take them so long? The answer can be found in another examination of Pegeen's and Christy's paternal relationships. Michael James, though perhaps inattentive at times, is well-intentioned and invested in Pegeen's future. Old Mahon on the other hand is the exact opposite. The implication of a comparison between the two is that 'good' fathers such as Michael James deserve the obedience of their children, whereas 'bad' fathers like Old Mahon deserve nothing short of death.

However, since Christy did not actually kill Old Mahon, Synge also implies the potential for redemption for both the child and the father. Christy's experiences in the village are based on falsehoods but are necessary for his individual development and reconnection with his father.

The combined nature of authority represented in *The Playboy of the Western World* makes it impossible to analyze one without necessarily analyzing the resulting intricacies of the structure's chain order. Most of these depictions stem from the umbrella authorities of the patriarchy, religion, and the community, then devolve into other facets such as reason and gender roles. Through the illustrations of resistance to authority, it can be argued that Synge gives his 'protagonist' agency to redefine and subvert by one way or another the limitations set upon them. Whether or Christy's outcome can be considered successful, his struggle and defiance offer a contemplation of the psychological effects of oppression and the lengths one will go to escape them.

References

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