

Playboy of the
western world:
synge's view of irish
identity



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Prior to the release of Synge's work *Playboy of the Western World*, Ireland was typically depicted as an orderly and civilized nation in its prized literature. What made Synge's play stand out from other theatrical productions was its portrayal of Ireland as a tainted, morally depraved place, but what was Synge's purpose in disrupting theater norms and angering his audience? In reading *Playboy of the Western World* and Declan Kiberd's article from *The Guardian* on Synge's work, readers can see that Synge paints a negative thematic landscape that showcases the true grime of the Irish to reveal their underlying savage nature.

In *Playboy*, Synge has his main character commit a wrongful deed only to be celebrated by those around him in order to illuminate the depravity of the Irish identity. In the story, Christy, the main character, murders his father and brags about his crime to others. Christy counterintuitively finds himself not only welcomed, but also adored in County Mayo for killing his father. He reflects on his newfound good fortune: "two fine 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 years gone by" (Synge, 131). The author's choice to make women attracted to Christy's immoral action to the point where they're "fighting" for him shows the wicked nature of the Irish. Additionally, the fact that the power of storytelling, something representative of Irish culture, functions despite immorality further illuminates the madness and savagery that the author wanted to display as defining qualities of the Irish identity.

This observation is reinforced by a different character's feelings following Christy's popularity. The fatherless orphan, Shawn Keogh, is jealous of Christy's rise to fame and complains to Widow Quin that "... it's a hard case

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to be an orphan and not to have your father that you're used to, and you'd easily kill and make yourself a hero in the sight of all" (Synge, 141). Keogh is lamenting about being an orphan, as evidenced by his self-pitying statement, " it's a hard case ... not to have your father... ." The fact that Keogh wishes he had a father after Christy murders his own and is celebrated for doing so suggests that Keogh would " easily kill" his father to become a " hero" just like Christy, reflecting the savage intentions of the Irish people. In other words, Keogh is sad about being an orphan for the wrong reasons; being an orphan prohibits him from killing his father and becoming the hero that the villagers celebrate in Christy. Moreover, the author's inclusion of Keogh's deranged way of thinking steers away from the classic depiction of Ireland as a steady, refined place, as discussed by The Guardian...

The article from The Guardian explores the stark contrast between Synge's play and the more appropriate ones that came before it, thereby strengthening the argument that Synge created a negative thematic landscape to finally expose the savage nature of the Irish identity. In the article, it's mentioned that the play was performed at " Ireland's national theater," which had a mission " to show that Ireland was not the home of buffoonery but of an ancient idealism" (Kilberd). Synge's unique choice to follow Christy's murder with countywide praise, as discussed in the paragraph above, differed from the usually refined plot lines of other Irish plays, upsetting Irish nationalists who believed their country " was not the home of buffoonery." Synge most likely had his play performed at the famous theater to get enough people to witness a truer, grimier portrayal of

Irish identity for the first time. Furthermore, The Guardian article reveals the irony in the Irish protesters' response to Synge's play. Upon viewing the production, "[The protestors] insisted that the Irish were not by nature a violent people - and on the second night they stormed the stage and rushed the actors to prove their point." The protestors' anger-filled, violent reaction to Synge's work simply demonstrated what Synge hoped to convey in his play: the Irish identity is partly made up of savage behavior. Thus, Synge's choice to have his grimy play contrast the nationalist-themed Irish plays of the time period caused a wild response among the audience, successfully revealing the savage characteristics of the Irish people as depicted in the play.

Synge's play *Playboy of the Western World* and The Guardian article reveal the Irish identity as inherently. As seen in the positive response to Christy's killing of his father and the portrayal of Ireland as a place of disorder at Ireland's national theater, it's evident that the author intended to depict a different, more depraved side of Irish identity. To end, Synge gave a more accurate representation of Irish identity in his work, and he managed to do so by capturing the grime of the everyday Irish citizen.

Declan Kiberd, "Riotous History of *The Playboy of the Western World*":

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/sep/23/playboy-western-world-old-vic>

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