

A divided world and a divided self

Philosophy



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* is essentially a play of opposites. The tension between tradition and individualism is the active force that drives the characters toward the comic conflict.

Shawn and Christy embody the masculine half of this equation while Pegeen Mike and the widow Quinn exemplify the feminine. Interestingly, the conflicts of the characters in isolated situations throw a brighter light on their motives than when secondary characters are present in the scene.

While much of the play's actual humor derives from the chorus-like responses of subordinate characters (notably when the pub patrons question Christy about his father's supposed murder), the inner lives of the four main characters are explored in greater detail in direct dialogue exchanges.

For this reason, it is important to consider *Playboy of the Western World* as a psychological as well as a social inquiry into the early 20th century Irish mind.

The moral, social and familial institutions at work in the lives of the characters are inseparable from the behavior of the characters themselves and their behavior, in turn, affects the ways they perceive and challenge the institutions that establish a collective social identity. Synge's satire, then, is fundamentally subversive. By undercutting a prevalent strain of Irish romanticism Synge effectively exposes the difference between the real and the ideal in Irish opinions about their own history and customs.

The influence of religion is at the heart of Synge's concern. Shawn's reluctance to stay with Pegeen Mike overnight testifies to his fear of the priest's, and by extension, the community's censure. This is confirmed when

he admits, “ I'm afeard 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?” Shawn is unable to take the passionate leap in terms of his affection for Pegeen Mike, being overly concerned with outward appearances.

Though his presence at the pub overnight will not be breaching social etiquette in any way immediately revealed by the opinions of the pub house patrons, he worries about the possibility that some vague “ other” will entertain harsh opinions. For this reason, Shawn is repeatedly unable to take a stand for what he purportedly desires—marriage to Pegeen Mike.

While religion is key, Shawn also demonstrates a pronounced avoidance to action of any kind. He is fearful of what he perceives as Christy's passionate and unpredictable nature. The threat of violence is abhorrent to Shawn. However, his pacifism is not the result of moral objection but rather a product of physical cowardice.

Christy, in contrast, is not concerned with the price of taking extreme action. Despite his meek exterior, his story of parricide is told with earnest, and he behaves first in such a way that he seems shell shocked by committing the murder. Later, of course, this turns into something else, when he begins to celebrate his action as proof of his own manliness.

This is an important turn in the play because he moves from a fear of the social judgment of his illegal and immoral action into a defiant assertion of his own individualism. This shift occurs because he senses the positive (and perverse) effect his reputation as a murderer has on the members of the community in general and on Pegeen Mike in particular.

Once Christy recognizes the advantages he has when perceived as “dangerous” he quickly adopts a romantic and celebratory posture. His pride in the matter is exactly what sets him up for his serio-comic fall when his father, the elder Mahon, appears miraculously “raised” from the dead.

Another pair of characters defined by their opposing views is that of Pegeen Mike and the Widow Quin. Their pronounced division is related to domesticity. While the Widow Quin is perceived as an outsider and generally shunned by the community, she is more of a realist. This is evidenced when Mahon arrives and the widow does not reject Christy as a potential love interest.

As an older and more mature woman, the Widow Quin is not as easily swayed by the romantic appeal Christy’s story of murder offers. She is more interested in his companionship and status as a help-mate. She is eminently practical.

Pegeen Mike, however, is far different. For the twenty year old barmaid, the idea of a savage killer for a husband is alluring. Shawn’s proposal disgusts her when compared to that of Christy because he lacks the essential brutishness that defines her idea of an appropriate mate.

Consider the hastiness of her words when she says, “ Wouldn't it be a bitter thing for a girl to go marrying the like of Shaneen, and he a middling kind of a scarecrow, with no savagery or fine words in him at all?” She is not concerned with the pragmatic reality of what it means to be married to a man who has defied the law. Her head is full of high romance and flattered by Christy’s sentimentally poetic use of language.