

J. M. Synge's Images of Society and Social Critique

Michal Lachman

HJEAS

Introduction

Through the decades of critical reception J. M. Synge's political and social views have been usually seen as part of a bigger artistic project of contributing to the creation of the Irish National Theatre and the revival of native folk culture. Yet his work was also directly influenced by the immediate political situation and, consequently, its ironic and satirical twist was driven equally by his aesthetic taste and by social, or even socialist, engagement more akin to those of G. B. Shaw.¹ His overall objective then could perhaps be best summarized as an intention to reform and modernize Irish society through the influence of theatrical and literary images.²

In general, the social or sociological aspects of Irish drama have traditionally been relegated to a secondary role as greater attention has been devoted to politics on the one hand and aesthetics on the other. Yet, the social imagery and a coded social criticism weave a subtle strand across the history of Irish drama. Apart from the obvious and declared "social thinkers"—such as Sean O'Casey and Tom Murphy—the drama of Brian Friel, Christina Reid, Garry Mitchell, as well as Synge carry the potential for a critical examination of Irish society in its material condition of life.

The bulk and weight of social thinking which informs Synge's prose and theatrical writing focuses on the presentation of an individual in confrontation with the community. In the most obvious, as well as meticulously documented, way the strength of Synge's critical thinking about Irish society may be judged by the vehement rejection of his plays by some members of the theatre public at the time of their premieres. The riots and discontent were often triggered by individual scenes or even words which audiences as well as critics found difficult to accept in the light of current political and cultural debates which accompanied the rise of the new Irish state. But Synge's social thinking runs far deeper than the superficial provocation of which he was accused by angry detractors. Synge's drama and prose engage with a systematic presentation of characters in the process of gaining social self-consciousness and with an analysis of the creation of a strong, almost Nietzschean, protagonist. Both in a philosophical and social sense Synge's interest lies in dramatizing the birth of an outsider who, along with his or her growing independence and self-sufficiency, suffers from communal criticism and rejection leading up to the severing of links with his

or her environment. Retracing the line of social conflict in J. M. Synge's work shows how consistent the author of *The Playboy of the Western World* was throughout his work in depicting the social condition of the Irish nation in its existential, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions.

Community in retreat

With his earliest play, *Riders to the Sea* (1904), Synge reached the greatest depth of his writing and—as some critics claim—achieved a mastery which the later, tragicomic drama could not possibly surpass.³ The play concerns the power of human character which reaches far back into the mysterious spirituality of Gaelic culture. This energy shining through characters who are inherently moral, full of inner integrity and a sense of independence, all of which communicates itself at a time of trial, informs every protagonist in Synge's dramatic oeuvre. In various ways, such potential for enriching a dramatic character with a power of vision and action has natural political and cultural resonances. Tom Paulin describes how his understanding of *Riders* evolved from seeing it as a “beautifully constructed miniature classical tragedy” to a “coded historical drama which represented Irish history in both tragic and a revisionist manner” (113). *Riders* provides a paradigmatic model for the later plays, in which Synge in covert or overt ways offers a revisionist image of Irish culture by subverting and/or challenging both the myth of modernized Ireland and the narrative of traditional, Victorian and Catholic, morality by offering insight into a more primordial, pre-revivalist spirit of Gaelic vision and imagination.

On the structural level, the powerful effect of this complex play derives from an integrated system of references which connect objects and props with the characters' images, opinions, and visions. Nicholas Grene stresses the integrity of the unfolding action, saying that “there is simple satisfaction in the economy principle by which *Riders* is constructed, where every object serves a multiple function and the most casual stage properties are used as pivots for the action” (47). One of the play's most significant themes, the testing confrontation between an individual and the power of nature, observed and assisted by the rest of the community, derives from the story of a woman whose husband and sons are systematically claimed by the murderous sea. It unfolds in the context of her metaphysical anguish combined with the failing presence of the village community and an absent, ineffectual priest. Already in his first play, Synge reviews the condition of the character confronted with religious, existential, and social solitude, which produces a strong figure alienated from the rest of the community.

Synge—touching upon but never mindlessly imitating any of the dramatic traditions of Greek tragedy or Christian drama—creates a central character who becomes a universal emblem of human suffering and endurance. All of the supporting parts, and that includes Maurya's daughters, Bartley as well as her absent sons and husband, contribute to focusing the audience's attention on the spiritual and existential state of Maurya's mind and emotions and the lack of real communal or religious support. She may suffer from the invisible hand of fate the way King Oedipus did; but, unlike that ancient hero, she does know and foresee the future tragedy from the very start. She is Tiresias and Oedipus in one body. Yet, what Synge dramatizes is the image of a character who, despite the empathetic attendance of the community, withdraws into the inner world of her own grief.

One of the reasons why it is difficult to place Synge's narrative within a single, identified religious or literary tradition lies in the nature of the tragedy befalling the family: it has no specific identity, and no reason or universal consequence by which the community could avail themselves. The tragedy or fate touching Maurya and her kin does not result from anyone's sin, does not mend or repair any visible vice of the world as would be the case in an ancient tragedy, nor does it produce a saint or a radiating holiness as an example of how to cope with suffering in the future—as in typical stories of Christian martyrs or saints. It does not have any teleological objective to complete, apart from exposing a woman's endurance under extreme stress. Although surrounded by her daughters and the keening village women emotionally engaged in her tragedy, Maurya is still existentially as well as spiritually alone, and Synge offers no hint at explaining any wider cause or reason for the tragedy. Breaking the theological link between the martyr and her community renders her suffering useless and void in a broader religious or social scheme.

Maurya prays to God, yet she does not find any reassuring understanding or guidance from His invisible presence. The final words, "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (31), carries no hope for any afterlife or continued existence of the soul. The absence of God and the Young Priest is further emphasized by Maurya's sprinkling holy water over Michael's clothes and Bartley's body, herself performing the sacramental duties of a priest. Her struggle to be satisfied with the basic hardships and tragedies of life turns her into a heroically self-sustaining character, the strong self who is tragically forced to invent and produce the sense of life on her own. The cruel fate she faces offers only as much meaning and knowledge as Maurya is able to verbalize in her own words.

Her intriguing monologue about no longer being interested in the weather or tides carries a suggestion of complete withdrawal from, and a rejection of, all existing attachments and commitments:

I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain; and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. (30)

Her tranquility comes when "there isn't anything more the sea can do to me," and she knows that: "It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights" (30). In other words, the world is bearable only when she maintains the least dependence on it, when her relation with it is kept to a minimum and thus controlled by herself and not some unspecified external force. It is an image of a person isolated and distanced from the concerns of the world, a person whose isolation results not from personal inhibitions but from external tragedy, unmotivated and unproductive. The sea, which for Synge epitomizes a blindly hostile force, stands for a general sense of mindless, senseless cruelty which leaves human beings without consolation from religion and alone despite the presence of the community. The theme of the community which fails in producing sense or meaning, which does not take over the burden of life when other systems of belief collapse, remains one of the most significant topics in Synge's social thinking in his later work.

Social utopia of the Western World

J. M. Synge's early prose work, *The Aran Islands* (1907), paints a complex picture of two types of community and social organization. Synge's documentary and anthropological insights into the life of the Aran villagers are accompanied with references to industrial and capitalistic society, composing in equal measure an idealistic image of the primitive Irish culture and a critical view of modern civilization. The narrator of the work is placed between these two worlds, and he functions as an intellectual connecting point between realities which normally lie worlds apart. *The Aran Islands* is driven by the need to confront oneself with the limits of the civilized world and with Irish culture in its primordial, primitive form.⁴ Synge points out the contrast between the unspoiled local culture and the invasive and corrosive encroachment of the modernized world: "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” (Synge, Preface to *The Playboy* 112). Bricks—the presence of civilization—replace the natural straw, killing both the spirit and the imagination of the local community. Synge uses the concept of “primitive” culture as a synonym for authenticity, and he mournfully records its disappearance: “The other islands are more primitive, but even on them many changes are being made, that it was not worth while to deal with it in the text” (*Aran Islands* 252). *The Aran Islands* records an encounter between a specific vision of the European mind and a specific vision of the “primitive” life filtered through some cognitive categories fundamental for European culture and literature.

One of the most significant topics consistently developed in Synge’s account is that of the human being related to civilization and its multiple representations. The way Synge composes his narrative about the life of the Irish helps him formulate criticism of Western culture of which he is a sceptical representative. There is no doubt that Synge’s narrator in *The Aran Islands* sees himself as a product of Western civilization. He poses as an utterly critical disciple of the civilized world whose sensitive understanding of the primitive culture to a large extent rests on recognizing the contrast between the negative influence of European civilization and the refreshingly lively customs of the local communities. The world of the islands is often represented as a positive antithesis to the spiritless, threatening, and monotonously dull world of industry and mechanization.⁵

Witnessing the evictions on Kilonan, the narrator gives an account of the visit of the constabulary and police brought in to supervise the process. His description bears all the characteristic features of the tensions and contrasts between the two worlds, two societies, and two systems of values:

After my weeks spent among primitive men this glimpse of the newer types of humanity was not reassuring. Yet these mechanical police, with the commonplace agents and sheriffs, and the rabble they had hired, represented aptly enough the civilisation for which the homes of the island were to be desecrated. (292)

The expression “primitive men” clearly indicate the background with which the narrator now identifies, feeling the gap and the abyss between the admired world of the Arans and the doubtful civilized advancement of mainland life and its public institutions. The term “newer types of humanity” forms a generic

name, slightly Hegelian in nature, ironically suggesting that any policeman equipped with a state-of-the-art rifle becomes allegedly a stepping stone in the evolutionary progress of humanity. Yet, Synge's views on evolution in the entire book seem to be ironically sceptical: while Europe's progress is conventionally represented as an assumedly triumphant achievement of the forward march of technical and industrial advancement, the Aran Islands break this hegemonic narrative and prove the value of tradition tinged with a sense of Pre-Raphaelite beauty. The mechanical aspect of the police presence is connected with their marching formation and homogenous style of uniform dress, which clearly visualizes the dehumanization of the modern world. Moreover, the phrase "commonplace agents and sheriffs" indicates the featureless lack of variety and individuality which Synge's narrator often refers to, writing about a typical man of European, continental descent. Finally, the desecration of the local homes establishes a sharp polarity between the spiritual life of the island and the secularized minds of the conquering agnostics.⁶

Many ethnographic, economic, and cultural observations made by Synge's narrator in *The Aran Islands* are overt or covert reflections of the ideological politics influenced by Marxist theory which powerfully shaped the views of a number of contemporary writers and artists. During his Paris days he had a chance to witness the germination of socialist philosophy and to hear radical, anarchic speakers. Synge's writings display a clear anticapitalistic leaning in which Marxist thought becomes the general guiding principle in formulating judgments on individual cases and facts.⁷ It is as if Synge found an ideal, slightly utopian social organization which fulfils many of the failed promises made by mainland capitalist states. In *The Aran Islands*, the image of civilization and of modern society, framed in sharp opposition to the authenticity, spontaneity, and spirituality of the local community, builds a contrasting disparity of cultures as Synge formulates an alternative to the capitalistic world of European industrialized societies. The Arans are not only and not simply an antithesis to civilization in a general sense; they are also a safe haven or an enclave in which it is possible to maintain life free from the mechanical, industrial, spiritless exploitation. Here life is liberated from class wars and the capitalistic struggle for profit as well as free from religious wars and regimes.

Anthony Roche observes that Synge's stay on the islands gave the writer an "imaginative interconnection with the oral folktales" (*Synge* 456). Yet one might also conclude that his regular sojourns in the West of Ireland were much more than just an instance of reconnecting with the local folklore. Synge's visits turned into a political and artistic project that shaped his thinking on a much deeper level: what he discovered among the native Irish were

elements of a utopian vision, which offered a welcome alternative to the decadent artistic life and failing political ideology practiced on the continent. For Synge, the visits to the islands were much like George Orwell's 1926 journey to Spain during the Spanish Civil War. Orwell's account of his involvement with the communist militia, described in his documentary *Homage to Catalonia*, is an expression of a strong communist belief in social equality and a new anticapitalistic social order. It was among the Spanish communists that Orwell expected to find an ideal model for the socialist commune. Unlike Synge, his expectations were severely disappointed and his entire account of the war ultimately turns out to be an ironic comment on the failure of any possibility of achieving a workable communist state. Synge, in contrast, finds on the Arans a true realization of his artistic and social dreams. A true socialist utopia lies in the West of Ireland.⁸

The beauty and poetic imagination of *The Aran Islands*—a work planned and composed as a utopian vision of life and as a manifesto of sorts—derive from the absence of the corrupting presence of the Church, the police, the economy, the state: that is, all the institutions of contemporary society which frame and form a modern human being into a contemporary citizen of the capitalistic, industrialized, post-Enlightenment world. The image of society in the subsequent dramatic works appears almost an exact opposite of society pictured in *The Aran Islands*. Instead of an ideal vision of Irish peasant life, there is a dark, grotesque, repulsive, and dystopian image; lives are tightly controlled by state and church institutions both symbolically and in the basic practicalities of life. The presence of the police is no longer rendered as the phony attempt at evictions which sends the officers to sleep—as one of the images persuasively presents in *The Aran Islands*. The Church, the bishops, and Vatican rule provide some of the main determining forces for the entire action as well as the mental condition of the dramatic protagonists. The characteristic spirituality and ancient Gaelic energies which so prominently shape and energize the lives of the Irish villagers in *The Aran Islands* are relegated in the subsequent plays to a secondary position in the community dominated by institutional power and grotesquely deformed human vices.

Coining a rebellious self

Chronologically, *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), *The Well of the Saints* (1905), and *The Tinker's Wedding* (with its later posthumous production in 1909) precede *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), and clearly they anticipate its coming. In a general sense, they can also be regarded as complementary to Synge's critical vision of Irish society voiced through the

medium of drama and in the form of definitely less complex tragicomedies than *The Playboy*. The three plays are similar in mood,⁹ and to some extent they depict—using different stories—a theme of challenging the social order through characters who are evolving towards rebellion. The plays narrate stories of a collapse of the status quo and show the personal attempt of an individual to change his or her position in relation to the social and/or cultural environment. Since they all employ an Irish background and folklore as their stories' immediate backdrop, in a general sense they could be considered as significant comments that Synge makes about traditional Irish identity of which the rural setting is so representative. Set outside of the idealized Aran, in Wicklow and Kerry,¹⁰ they could be viewed, perhaps slightly *avant la lettre*, as state-of-the-nation plays, whose major impact was to affect the nationalistic stereotypes in thinking about the iconic identity of countryside Ireland—the motherland of Irishness. Formally and thematically the comedies may lie far away from Shaw's socialist drama, yet in terms of the summary criticism of the country's institutions, in particular of the church and of the general condition of society, they come close to *Candida*, *Heartbreak House*, or even *Mrs Warren's Profession*, especially in the use of personal satire.¹¹ Synge challenges the normative vision of Irish identity, shows it in conflict and in collision with the more ancient, spiritual Gaelic energies, which can be observed at work with varied intensity in all of the plays from *Riders* to *The Playboy*; adding a special edge to the local, Irish variety of modernist literature.

Synge always places a protagonist—or a pair of protagonists—in conflict with their social milieu, which becomes his most productive model for telling the story of challenged and challenging “otherness.” What Synge is really interested in throughout the varied stories he tells in drama may be seen as a complex process of creating a social outsider or outcast and observing his/her fate among the characters who easily and painlessly identify with the norm of social conduct and who make up the bulk of his theatricalized images of Irish life. Almost every Synge play privileges the tramp with some special status, yet other types of protagonists also have a strong impact on the static social structure.

In Synge's plays, the iconic image of Irish society is challenged by protagonists whose demands go beyond what the system is ready to offer to them. In *The Shadow of the Glen*, Nora wishes for a life away from her cold marriage, in *The Tinker's Wedding*, Sarah dreams about a real wedding, and in *The Well of the Saints*, the cured beggars expect their oddity and maladjustments to be accepted. In each of these cases, Synge explicitly stresses the unusual position in which his protagonists find themselves struggling against the

social norm or prejudice or against the traditional *morés* of a conservative, hierarchical society. It is the test in how Irish society manages otherness, and it is the test that Irish society fails through and through.

The Well of the Saints and *The Tinker's Wedding* depict the alienation of the chief characters from accepted reality and their move towards an alternative life. In *The Well*, Synge's comic reversal shows the blind outsiders as an ordinary element of the village landscape and those cured as an oddity. Therefore, the alienating principle remains as the two protagonists are placed in a position to comment on the external world as disabled as well as enabled characters. The blind protagonists are equipped with an exquisite sensitivity to sound and smell, and Synge misses no opportunity to show their superiority over the sighted characters. Their unique position as subtle observers of humankind and nature obviously alienates Martin and Mary from the rest of the village. The community perceives their condition of blindness as unbearable and inhuman and decides to arrange for the blind to be cured by the Saint—without consulting those concerned.

The second part of the play grows even more absurd and comical as it offers a particularly biting criticism of traditional Irish society. Martin and Mary, now cured, are rejected by that society for their harsh comments about the villagers' life and morals. They cannot adjust to what the rest of the community take for granted, and what seemed a tragic fate of the blind, now looks like a paradise when compared with the conditions of life offered to them as able members of society. The society's crude conduct, vanity, and cruelty cannot but fuel resentment and revive a dream of returning to the sheltered and simple existence of the blind. Synge makes it clear that although the villagers can look, they do not see, nor understand the world around them. Driven by superficial faith in good looks, like Molly or Timmy, these characters do not want to hear about the true ugliness of their world. Martin's and Mary's return to darkness, comic and absurd as it may seem, has also a tragic dimension because it is only in the "paradise regained" of blindness that they are fully able to appreciate what is denied to the rest of the—sighted—population; that is, the true beauty and sincere tenderness of the natural world and their renewed love. As Mary comments:

There's the sound of one of them twittering yellow birds do be coming in the springtime from beyond the sea, and there'll be a fine warmth now in the sun, and a sweetness in the air, the way it'll be a grand thing to be sitting here quiet and easy, smelling the things growing up, and budding from the earth. (96-97)

As Martin and Mary plan their departure, their senses are aroused by the memory of the beauty of nature which they once felt without seeing any of it and now long to connect again—through their disability—with the depth of delicate experience which remains completely unattainable to the rest of the community.

A significant conflict underlying most of the scenes in Synge's plays is exactly the tension between rationality or common sense—always presented as oppressive—and some form of free-spirited independence, no matter how futile. Thus, *The Well of the Saints* represents a vocal presence of the ordinary majority: that is, the people stereotypically associated with rational opinion and common sense. It is these people who finally reject the cured beggars for what they say and how they judge the village and its inhabitants. Seeing the world as gloomy and judging everyone by their looks is what Martin and Mary do with such an intensity that no-one else can accept their bleak vision of the world. They are, therefore, rejected in a gesture of communal decision-making, exactly as they were cured by the same spontaneous initiative of the community. The village women and men, in assessing and judging the couple, voice the opinion of the majority which stands for conventional, limited sensitivity and for the appropriateness of social conduct and norms. While at the end of the play Martin says that all he saw in the world was “villainy and hell” (100), the Saint remains adamant that the two beggars are insane in rejecting a chance for a permanent cure: “No man isn't a madman, I'm thinking, would be talking the like of that, and wishing to be closed up and seeing no sight of the grand glittering seas . . .” (100). The play ends in a way similar to other plays by Synge with the theme of an impossible redefinition of the social order: that is, with the departure of the rebellious protagonists who are unable to integrate into the rest of the community. Martin and Mary, therefore, against the persuasive Saint who attempts to break apart their marriage, decide to stay together and leave the village: “Come along now and we'll be walking to the south, for we've seen too much of every one in this place, and it's small joy we'd have living near them, or hearing the lies they do be telling from the grey of dawn till the night” (104).

The Tinker's Wedding, although a short and relatively simple play in comparison to the other two, contains a clear, telling image of social deprivation. Sarah and Michael, wandering tinkers who are trying to get married and pleading with the priest for the sacrament, are bidding for social empowerment and equality. They are denied the ceremony for purely

economic and social reasons: they cannot pay and are of a lower social rank, unfit to receive the full rights of an ordinary person. Synge's straightforward story offers a harsh social criticism of the cleric who eagerly drinks the beggars' porter but deems himself too good to administer the holy sacrament to them. The final scene where they tie him up—clearly not a realistic presentation of Irish society—communicates, under the disguise of farce, the need to liberate people from strict social norms. Sarah, Michael, and Mary are touched with exceptional poverty and left with no choice but to seek the charity and mercy of the cleric. They may also be rude, unruly, and drunk; yet, the priest does not for a single moment display any Catholic sympathy free from pecuniary interest. The very fact that at the end of the play the characters flee, leaving the priest as "*master of the situation*" (60), indicates a corruption of the social order which marginalizes the weak and the poor. The tinkers in quitting their participation in the system of depravity and injustice complete a telling tale of the collapse of social and religious norms.

In *The Shadow of the Glen*, Synge probes into the workings of a conservative society and its ruthless imposition of social and marital laws perhaps in the most drastic and provocative way. Although the play shows the life of a small handful of characters, it gives an insight into a vital debate between tradition and modernity in Irish culture. Despite narrowing its plot line to the confined domesticity of a married life, its evoked universe of social and ethical values expands across a vast area of issues regarding rationality and spirituality, myth and reality, freedom and confinement, rebellion and submission, resting on a latent structure of Gaelic folklore.

The play, which tells the story of a loveless marriage in a world dominated by traditional morality and hierarchy, presents Nora as physically oppressed by the written and unwritten laws of married life. Her husband's stick, which he hides under the bed sheets, stands for the "fair" and "rightful" method of implementing the sacred vows of marriage as seen in his explanation to the Tramp: "it's a long time I'm keeping that stick, for I've a bad wife in the house" (8). Nora, in turn, knows her own value, making it clear that in spite of her unhappy marriage she is not going to accept an ordinary offer of a few good lambs from Michael, a potential suitor. Her answer demonstrates her determination to keep away from all proposals that diminish her value: "and if it's a power of men I'm after knowing they were fine men, for I was a hard child to please, and a hard girl to please [*she looks at him a little sternly*], and it's a hard woman I am to please this day, Michael Dara" (11). Synge dramatizes the moment in the life of his female character in which she is ready to follow a path of independence, projecting a different,

modern concept of social morality. Finally, as she goes away with the Tramp, the only man who offers a life which challenges social norms, she turns into a remarkable rebel who stands against the imposed system of moral principles of the day and who clearly follows in the footsteps of Ibsen's Nora.¹²

The tension between modernity and traditional Irish culture framing the discussion about the condition of Irish society in *The Shadow of the Glen* generates many possible readings. Significantly, P. J. Mathews's interpretation of the play foregrounds the implicit debate between what he calls "alternative Irish modernity" and the "oppressions of metropolitan patriarchy" (144). Through Nora's radical gesture of rejection and disruption of the patriarchal order, Synge—in Mathews's view—attempts to "retrieve and energize the liberational possibilities of Gaelic culture" (139). Nora stands here in opposition to "the metropolitan values," that is, capitalistic and patriarchal doctrines represented by her husband (140). In this sense Synge taps into the spirituality and sensitivity of Irish folk culture through "forthright female sexuality" (138). While showing a rejection of the capitalistic philosophy which "restricts women to domestic space" (143), Synge forms an alternative possibility for creating a specifically Irish aesthetic of modernism which defies many "bourgeois enlightenment values" (143).

Although it is really difficult to hear in *The Shadow of the Glen* audible echoes of what Mathews calls "metropolitan values" (139) or patriarchal capitalism (unless one sees in Dan Burke an agent of social and economic modernization of Ireland, to which Mathews devotes a considerable portion of his argument [137]), yet it becomes more understandable in his broader perspective of pointing to continental—that is, British colonial—imposition of Victorian bourgeois values including the restriction of female rights which, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Irish were adopting even in the countryside. The significant and pronounced opposition which the play establishes lies in Synge's clearly presenting Nora as a rebel against the local marital imprisonment, and through that, "warning against . . . the uncritical acceptance of enlightenment values" (143). She does carry the independent spirit of the Gaelic tradition, which stands against the moral and physical confinement imposed by the Victorian conventionality into which Irish Catholic society had morphed.¹³ Along with the vagabond tinkers in *The Tinker's Wedding* and the beggars in *The Well of the Saints*, Nora remains the character who should be considered as the real dynamic protagonist in Synge's drama; a protagonist who goes out of the trodden path of a married woman, or a woman in general who embodies a pre-revivalist, Gaelic spirit of independence and who strives to make her own choice about the kind of

life she wants. It is a pattern of social rebellion similar to the one depicted in other Synge plays. Sarah getting married to Michael in *The Tinker's Wedding* and Martin and Mary temporarily gaining their sight and thereby bringing in a fresh perspective in *The Well of the Saints* destabilize conventional patriarchy alien to the Gaelic tradition and introduce an element of unaccountability by the very fact of being odd and different in an extraordinary way. With the redefined selves of such protagonists in it, the world turns into an unknown universe, whose principles cannot accommodate the otherness of the now-mutated characters. Its figures of authority, the Priest, the Saint, or the husband, become lost in trying to bring it back to the accepted norm, and in doing so they also unwittingly reveal their own weaknesses (or wickedness) and spiritual instability or void.

Unready for social change

There is a clear line of continuity of themes and modes of presentation between *The Playboy of the Western World* and the earlier plays such as *The Tinker's Wedding*, *The Well of the Saints*, and *The Shadow of the Glen*. All of Synge's dramatic works may be considered among others as exercises in social and cultural philosophy. In the center of these reflections one finds a character who unselfconsciously engages with the task of restructuring and redefining the social and cultural order. As much as *The Aran Islands* projected an ideal society focused on cultivating creative poetic imagination and physical health, Synge's dramatic protagonists must resist the pressures of institutional, religious, and social constraints. Christopher Murray sees in these works a progressive story of emancipation which especially in *The Playboy* shows a "marginalized figure [who] finds voice and gesture to revolt against oppressive circumstances" (64). Yet, the talk of emancipation of such a character places the focus solely on an individual, whereas Synge's visions of social and cultural change are usually designed to exert a sweeping effect on the whole society or community. While depicting the failure of society to follow the reformatory spirit does not really defuse the initial energy of the rebellious gesture, Synge's dramatic images of a potential social rebellion most of the time paint a pessimistic image of a society unready for such change.¹⁴

All of Synge's protagonists go through stages of acceptance and rejection by social norms and institutional structures, testing their own power to rebel and exercising their own free spirit against the bulwark of social prejudice, religious stigma, pagan dogma, and cultural rejection. Told through comic interludes, Synge's plays ultimately offer tragic stories of individuals

activating the potential for redefining themselves and their society. They end up either in exile or in self-imposed seclusion. Irish society in Synge's drama tragically fails to oppose its restricting normativity and hypocrisy, disconnected from the vital energies of the past and rejecting the prospect of the future renewal.

The Playboy, as well as the rest of Synge's plays, dramatize a confrontation between an individual and the social, cultural, and religious milieu, where he or she is often an unhappy member, not to say victim. In more philosophical terms, these plays are Synge's attempt to start a dialogue between the romantic spirit of free will and a concept of self which is limited and controlled by social norms—a world divided between Nietzsche and Ibsen; a view of humans besieged by modern culture to the detriment of their soul and spirit as well as humans consumed by social forces epitomized by figures representing the Church, the law, the state. All of Synge's protagonists are at some point offered a glimpse of a complex, solid self, which they discover for themselves and reveal to the world.¹⁵ It is precisely this concept of the free "self" that the structure of Synge's contemporary Irish society denies and refuses to accept. If, then, it is true to say, as Grene does, that plays like *The Playboy* have the structure of a Bildungsroman (139), one has to add that they also tell the story of social and communal maturation which, most of the time, however, fails or proves wanting.

Probably the most compelling, radical, and spectacular narrative of such a personal maturation, Christy Mahon's personal growth in *The Playboy of the Western World*, takes place under the watchful eyes of both the state, represented by the legal police system, and religion, represented by priest, bishops, and Pope. In a variety of ways these two institutionalized value systems structure the play's world and the protagonists' thinking. Religion, Catholic morality, and the iconic figure of a priest practically determine the lives of the characters and are a mentally dominating factor in their decision-making. The characters' imagination swarms with fearful references and allusions to Catholic morality and conduct, or to the possible reaction of the local priest.

Images of primitive, pagan culture permeating *The Playboy's* world and the imaginations of its protagonists are as ironic and sterile as those of Christianity. No true opposition between Christianity and paganism exists in this play.¹⁶ For Synge, paganism neither offers an alternative for the sterility of institutional religion, nor does it seem to represent an older, Celtic spirituality deposed by Catholic orthodoxy. In *The Playboy*, both pagan and Christian worldviews suffer from striking spiritless decadence and produce

sick, grotesquely deformed images of perversity and desire. Initially presented as comically entertaining, they swiftly change into pure acts of barbarity. For instance, in one of the last scenes of the play, Pegeen burns Christy's leg with a sod taken from the fire, forgetting all about Christian mercy and the right of a fair trial. In general, the inner streak of primitive brutality elicits laughter when presented in the form of semi-realistic, semi-supernatural stories. Yet, when the underlying and dormant barbarity resurfaces for real and aims at physical violence regardless of the ten commandments or any legal procedure, Synge's vision acquires the power of a devastatingly biting critique of an entire society both in its Celtic and Christian incarnations, where these distinct forms of cultural identity merge through the underlying energy of animalistic violence.

Towards the end of the play, there appears a hostile and uncontrolled energy which overcomes the entire community, offering an ultimate moral assessment of Irish society. Gearing up for the lynching of the demystified Christy, the villagers turn into a mob. They are an uncontrolled, volatile, and ruthless body of agents who—sparked by an idea of crooked justice—cooperate in organizing a public execution.¹⁷ Out of a loose group of individuals they instantaneously form a unified collective in which everyone spontaneously finds his or her task that they perform in an orchestrated manner. Significantly, this elusive but powerful structure of violence replaces the usual religious or legal systems. Pegeen Mike stands in the forefront of these actions as an unofficial leader whose persuasive power dominates over others because her need for bloody revenge and her wounded self-esteem give her in the eyes of the others a supreme right to control the mob. It is only now that we see how superficial the powers of the Church and the state are and how latent brutality and barbarity have been a regular presence in the life of the villagers throughout the play.

Paradoxically, turning into the “enemy of the people”—as some critics argued pursuing a similarity with Ibsen's drama—plays out well for Christy. Unlike in Ibsen's social drama, where the protagonist Thomas Stockmann ends up broken by the hatred of his own neighbors and former friends, Christy's expulsion from the village opens a path into unconstrained, unknown territory. To some extent, with all due differences, Christy's gesture of leaving the village is similar to Ibsen's Nora slamming the door on her husband in *The Doll's House* (and to Synge's own Nora in *Shadow*). It is a gesture of radical disruption of the social order and a hopeful opening for future life for which there are no scripted scenarios. As much as Nora was to become an undefined character—not a divorcee, not a wife, not a spinster—

so Christy is going to lead the life of a free man uncatalogued by any rules of the land. In this very general sense, he may be viewed as an image of the free spirit defined by Nietzsche. A spirit which defies all social orders and chooses his own path away from the moral or religious laws of his society.

Conclusion

Synge, dramatizing the practical impossibility of any challenging opposition to the standing social order and showing the domination of the patriarchal, Catholic system of values, conveys an encrypted critical opinion about supporting Irish Catholic identity in a new political state. In his plays, every attempt at freeing oneself from the system, which had assumed a patriarchal Victorian format, is naturally checked by the set of social norms represented by authority figures. The driving force behind rebellious change in Synge's drama is most often a female character. Synge empowers women to do the social work of change, while, significantly, it is married or holy men who stand in their way.¹⁸ Women voice criticism of the system: Pegeen finds it difficult to succumb to a conventional marriage despite bitter disappointment with Christy's character¹⁹; Nora is unable to bear her marriage and therefore leaves her house with a stranger; while Sarah and Mary also have to flee if they want to continue the life they chose instead of leading the life chosen for them. In the light of the social changes concerning women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and voiced among others by playwrights such as Ibsen and Shaw, these female departures aptly illustrate Synge's social criticism.

In all of Synge's plays, apart from *Riders to the Sea* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, the plot develops towards a moment in which the community rejects the individuals who have been perceived as different and who threaten the social order. *The Well of the Saints* ends with the departure of the protagonists and with the Saint inviting Molly and Timmy to receive blessings on a conventional, Catholic marriage. *The Tinker's Wedding* shows no wedding at all but a Priest who from the very beginning of the play does not hide his social and religious criticism of the couple who want to be married. Here, as well as in *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy*, the narrated story ends with the departure of the protagonists. Their decision to leave the local community means that the homogenous social order is going to rule without any challenge. The inadequacy of the social morality and common conduct of people and institutions which surround the protagonist is represented in *The Riders to the Sea* in its most universal version. In spite of the community's attempts to help and assist Maurya, she feels spiritually and socially

abandoned and has to rely on the strength and stamina of her own unbreakable self. If there is any one, singularly powerful image which Synge's drama leaves his readers with, it is the figure of a lonesome individual exposed to the perils of untrodden paths of soul-searching and of looking for a new home. This is the image with which so many modern Irish plays are impregnated.

University of Łódź, Poland

Notes

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the relation between Synge and Shaw see: Murray, 81-2.

² On the subject of Synge's social politics see, for instance, Murray, especially 64-88; Roche, *The Irish Dramatic Revival 1899-1939*, especially 53-75, and P. J. Mathews, especially 137-45.

³ Nicholas Grene claims in general that *Riders* is Synge's most complete and perfect creation (41-58).

⁴ Declan Kiberd draws a comparison between Malinowski and Synge, pointing out that both *The Aran Islands* and Malinowski's accounts of his ethnographic research in the Western Pacific offer a stylistic mixture of "documentary field notes" and a "personal diary" (104, 107).

⁵ It echoes some of Matthew Arnold's ideas about the spiritual superiority of Celtic culture over philistine, middle-class civilization. Naturally, Synge was far more competent to pass judgment on Irish people having first-hand experience of the life in the West of Ireland. On Synge's polemics with Arnoldian visions of the Celts see M. C. King, 84, 86.

⁶ Synge's sharpness in rendering the polarity between continental and island lives is intensified by the fact that Western industrialized civilization reached the West of Ireland through the mediation of English colonial domination.

⁷ On Synge's inspiration by the writings of Marx and the socialist thinker, writer, and artist William Morris see Alex Davis, 41. On Paris encounters with socialism and on reading Marx and Morris see M. C. King, 80.

⁸ This is not to say that Synge was a communist. His ideas should be read in a more general context of earlier socialist philosophy, which had not yet morphed into a much more sinister incarnation of the totalitarian, Stalinist state.

⁹ Nicholas Grene calls them "unhappy comedies" (146-60).

¹⁰ Grene connects changing the setting from the Arans to Wicklow and Kerry with their critical and bitter vision of Irish society (41).

¹¹ On the subject of Synge's Shavian satire see Murray 81.

¹² Anthony Roche interprets the ending of the play by making a comparison to Ibsen's *Nora* (*The Irish Dramatic Revival* 60).

¹³ Synge is known for his interest in and appreciation of premodern literary and aesthetic ideas proposed by such writers as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Gustave Flaubert, and Charles Baudelaire (King 80). The contrast between pre-modernist Gaelic spirituality or anarchy and Victorian religiosity belongs to the same skepticism towards patriarchal Irish

society expressed in his plays.

¹⁴ In terms of explicit social engagement, a number of critics point to the similarities between Ibsen's plays and Synge's drama, which are evident despite the declared skepticism which the author of *The Playboy* expressed towards the work of the great Norwegian. Compare Murray, 69-73 and Deane, 144.

¹⁵ As such, they follow a modernist scenario of discovery which, amid a number of narratives and possible theatricalizations of the self, as depicted, for instance, in Pirandello's famous *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, ultimately tracks a path leading to essential definitions.

¹⁶ Anthony Roche in his recent monograph devoted to Synge elaborates on the opposition between Christianity and Paganism. He sees significant differences in the representations of these two worldviews by Synge. Yet, my argument remains that no matter how differently the two are represented, they are comparable in terms of their lack of spiritual depth (*Synge*).

¹⁷ This is how Elias Canetti defines the mob in his *Crowd and Power*.

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion on the female and male protagonists in Synge's drama see King, 85-86.

¹⁹ Roche's recent interpretation of Pegeen's role at the end of the play would suggest that she benefitted from knowing Christy in growing rebellious against her own father, and in intending to remain so after the departure of the romantic lover. Roche sees in her an "unmanageable revolutionary," who will not be cured and will in some way cultivate her opposition to the static social order (*The Irish Dramatic Revival* 75). I find this argument unconvincing. Her final words—"I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World"—sound as a final seal of despair. Also, her now certain and swift marriage to Shaun Keogh represents an official and holy pledge of truce between her and local patriarchy.

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