UNIT 11: J. M. SYNGE: *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 Reading the Play

11.3.1 Major Themes

11.3.2 Major Characters

11.3.3 Language

11.4 Critical Reception

11.5 Let us Sum up

11.6 Further Reading

11.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

11.8 Model Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- explain the major themes that the playwright has dwelt upon in this play
- analyse the themes as the basic embodiment of Irish country people
- describe the different characters of the play which are based on the Irish people of the Aran islands
- point out the riots that the play survived in its first production
- discuss the play as one of the best plays depicting the Irish temperament
- read the play, *The Playboy of the Western World* in its wider context with reference to its reception

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is a continuation of the previous unit. We have discussed in the preceding unit the life and works of the famous Irish playwright, John

Millington Synge and his play, *The Playboy of the Western World.* You have already been acquainted with the context of this play which has as its background a village comprising an Irish peasant community. Also, we have dealt with a detailed summary of the play in the previous unit. In this unit, we shall move into a more detailed kind of study. First of all, the major themes that the play encompassed shall be dwelt upon. In a play, different types of characters exhibit varied personalities. However, while reading this play, you must note that Synge has designed his characters by recollecting his past experience of life spent in the Aran Islands. Hence, they are based upon the folks, particularly the country people, of the Aran Islands. This community, Synge admitted, was very imaginative and hence in order to capture their imagination, he used the language that they spoke. Since Synge was well acquainted with their language, large portion of the play is influenced by it. In the Preface to this play, Synge asserted that the language of the peasants, which has a poetic flavor, captured his mind to a large extent. Apart from Synge's use of language in the play, this unit will also provide you with a better understanding of the play with respect to the kind of reception it received.

11.3 READING THE PLAY

The following sub-sections shall deal with the themes and characters of the play. In dealing with the themes, you will also gain a deeper understanding of the play in its Irish context.

11.3.1 Major Themes

Following are the major themes of the play:

Representation of Communal Life: While reading the play, you must have noted Synge's representation of community life in Ireland, particularly of Irish peasants. As the title of the play suggest, it is about the people of the 'Western World' or western part of Ireland. Though set in the twentieth century, the lives of those dwelling in this part of the world are still isolated. Barely do we find in the characters any modern ways of lifestyle. Their occupations seem

to be confined to agricultural works to a large extent. However, it is to be noted that the Catholic Church has hold over the people; Shawn Keogh can be cited as an example of such a type. For a person like Shawn the supreme authority is vested upon the Church or a father of the Church like Father Reilly. Ironically, there pervades a fear for ghosts among these people who are very superstitious in nature. The people are not very rich and lead their lives in a simple way. Items like eggs, chicken, etc. are valuable for them and hence used as gifts. This reminds us of Sara and the three other girls who came to meet Christy, the playboy, with such gifts in order to show their respect towards him. The people are very enthusiastic when it comes to drinking or merriment. The community celebrates their otherwise boring life by participating in sports. As a whole, the community life that is depicted in the play is very interesting to behold, with their varied and unique manners and beliefs that they hold.

Story-telling as a Mode: The play revolves around the possible murder committed by Christopher Mahon. The peasants considered him to be a brave fellow for it was not easy to kill one's father and escape from the police at the same time. The narration of events by Christy led to his popularity in Mayo. Through the story telling aspect, Synge has been able to focus upon the "popular imagination" of these Irish peasants and the "richness of their nature". Christy's story of his father's murder took new courses as he told and retold it several times in the play. The peasants of Mayo led a tedious and monotonous life which is shaken by Christy's vivid narrative. His poetic talks are enough to enchant the women folks of the village. His oral excellence, rather than his deed, is what the peasants adored. The community in the play participated in the oral Irish imagination that has come down to them through the ages and one in which the Irish culture showed fineness of spirit.

Glorification of Violence: In the play, the act of murder has earned reverence in a certain way. However, this idea of glorifying a criminal is vague and at times **absurd**. One of the characters in the play



Absurd: illogical



Gallous: highly spirited
Stereotypical: an image or an idea which has become fixed; a conventional image
Subversion: cause the downfall of

exclaimed that there is a great difference between a "**gallous** story and a dirty deed". Christy, who was presumed to have killed his father, was adored by the villagers for his bravery. He was made a hero by the villagers. Their concept of heroism was unconventional in the sense that orally excelled ones were considered heroes such as in the case of Christy. It must be noted that the idea of heroism is closely related to bravery as such. Ultimately a 'slow learning' person like Christy won a race in the sports competition which encouraged him mentally to find his real self. In fact, the play can also be interpreted in terms of Christy's search for his identity.

Synge's Depiction of Irish Women: Synge's women characters have been seen to violate the norms associated with a dignified Irish woman. In the representation of Pegeen as well as Widow Quin– the two main women characters in the play, Synge has changed the **stereotypical** figure associated with women. Pegeen's love for criminals, Widow Quin's robust nature, their flirtatious habits, etc. reversed the conventional image of Irish women. This has in fact, led to serious accusations on Synge.

Subversion of the Stereotype: One of the chief themes of this play is **subversion** of the stereotypical notion of Irishness. This is related to the wild reception of the play. Ireland has always been associated with its culture which is rich in myths and fantasy. In fact, writers of the Irish revival aimed at reconstructing this historical past of their rich heritage. Synge in this play has outraged them by reflecting upon the crude nature of Irish peasants who are far away from civilized or refined nature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. How is the community life represented in the play?

Q2. Mention some of the themes of the play, *The Playboy of the Western World.*

Q3. How is the idea of heroism portrayed in the play?

Q4. Synge has emphasised upon the 'popular imagination' of the peasants in this play. Discuss briefly.

11.3.2 Major Characters

J. M. Synge, while writing the play, was influenced by the islanders. By now you must have been able to relate his characters with the people of the Aran Islands with whom he was very familiar. As such, in the play Synge aimed at the representation of the common Irish people. In this section we shall have a close look at the important characters of the play.

Christy (Christopher) Mahon:

Christy is a very interesting character. In the play, he is shown to have escaped after murdering his old father. He ended up at a place called Mayo in the shebeen of Mister Flaherty. He was young and there is a duality attached to his personality. When the play opens, he was a dirty, tired and 'queer dying fellow' who won the sympathy of the villagers. But gradually people disliked him for he was proven to be a liar. The villagers were charmed by Christy's story of his father's murder. In the play, we found that Christy never left a single chance to narrate the events of his father's murder. His story telling was so poetic that women were attracted towards him. Throughout the play, he described how he killed his father with a spade. He became a popular figure in Mayo and even won a race in the sports competition. He was admired by all the women but his interest was laid on Pegeen Mike, the daughter of the shebeen's owner. This image of Christy was created by the villagers of Mayo. On the other hand, Christy's father held him to be a foolish fellow who was good for nothing. As the play progresses, Christy emerges as a confident young man which initially he was not. He was the "Playboy of the Western World" who tricked everybody with his charismatic story. You must note that the word 'Playboy' have different connotations.

But in case of Christy, his playing with others' imagination is emphasised. His two opposite faces is a pleasure to watch and read. At the end of the play, Christy gained enough confidence to chase after his father with a spade in front of the villagers. This throws light to his aggressive nature. However, he did not kill his father this time rather asked his father to obey his commands. Therefore, he left Mayo with his new found confidence and justifies the title of playboy associated with him.

Pegeen Mike:

She is a young peasant girl and is described as 'a wild-looking but fine girl, of about twenty'. She is the daughter of Michael James Flaherty, the owner of the shebeen where most of the action took place. As the play opened, Pegeen was busy writing letter to a dealer listing items for the shebeen and also for her approaching marriage with Shawn Keogh. She was unconventional in her attitude to ask Shawn to accompany her for a night alone before their marriage. Though independent, it is paradoxical that it replicates her fear of staying alone. She is courageous by nature and loved to flirt with Christy. Also, her romantic idols are mostly criminals. She liked to be pampered. The most interesting thing that her character depicted is the love of adventure. As such, she was impressed by Christy's story about the murder of his father which opened new perspectives for her to discover. Unfortunately, she began to hate Christy for lying to her all the while and accused him in front of the mob. She even tied Christy with Shawn's help and cursed him. But Christy's charming talk was missed by her as he left their village. As a whole, being an Irish peasant girl she loved Christy and regretted for losing him.

Michael James Flaherty:

He is the owner of the shebeen in Mayo where the play is set. Father of Pegeen, Mister Flaherty is concerned about his daughter and a very easy going kind of person. He enjoyed social functions like attending someone's wake and was a popular 'jovial publican'. Like

his daughter, he was impressed by Christy and hence offered him the job of a potboy in his shebeen. He was a sympathetic and kind-hearted person. However, religious at heart, he advised that Christy should be hanged for his deed so that he and his daughter who sheltered Christy are not damned.

Shawn Keogh:

Painted as a religious man, Shawn Keogh is afraid of committing any crime. The Church seemed to hold his life. For him every act has a religious significance. He is framed as a God-fearing and religious person and hence rigid in nature. However, he is a very self controlled person who wanted to marry Pegeen. It is very ironic to note his faith in God on the one hand and his fear of supernatural beings on the other. Though initially he was Pegeen's choice for marriage, it changed due to the coming of Christy. Perhaps his timid nature was not preferred by Pegeen. But in terms of loyalty, he had been able to impress Pegeen as well as the readers. He remained with his love, Pegeen, till the end of the play. Naturally, he suffered from a complexity when Pegeen preferred Christy to him. As a whole, he was submissive and hence unable to challenge Christy.

Widow Quin:

She is often compared to Chaucer's Wife of Bath. As her name suggests, she was a widow who is rumoured to have murdered her own husband. Her children also died. Unlike Christy, the community showed no sympathy to her. However, Widow Quin had a liking for Christy and wanted him to accompany her. According to her, they would make a nice couple since both of them were assumed to be murderers. After her failure of persuading Christy, she took to blackmailing him. This proved her to be a cunning and clever person who never lost any opportunity. As an example, it may be cited that after the discovery of Christy's truth, she asked for gifts in order to hide his secret being revealed to others. She disrupted the development of any kind of intimacy between Pegeen and Christy.

Mahon:

Mahon, the father of Christopher Mahon was an old and rough person. Christy's whole story revolved around his father's murder. However, Mahon appeared at a time in Mayo when Christy's popularity increased extremely. Throughout the first act he was presumed to be dead. However, in the second act Mahon convinced the villagers with his spirited talks about his son who is a liar and good for nothing. But finally it was he who saved his son from being hanged and took him away from Mayo.



LET US KNOW

Kobbé in his article "J. M. Synge's Master-Piece Produced in America" thus reflected that "the people in Synge's play happen to be Irishmen, but in character they are of the world at large." His characters are mere representations of human emotions in general.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Who is the 'playboy' of the Western world and why is he so called?

Q6. What is unconventional about the female characters of the play?

Q7. Compare the characters of Christy with that of Shawn Keogh.

Q8. Do you think the play has been able to mirror Irish sentiments?

11.3.3 Language

Language forms an important aspect of this play in the sense that the playwright has borrowed numerous words from the Gaelic speaking people residing in the Aran islands. As such the play echoed the rustic language of the countryside people. Synge has especially used this language which is spoken in the western part of Ireland. In

fact, it is the language of the play that has exposed the Irish vocabulary that is very essential for understanding the Irish mindset. Synge's choice of the Irish terminologies was due to his attachment with the language as well as the people who spoke such language. For him, the Irish imagination that is reflected in the play has close connection with the language. The Irish language is very rich and has a poetic quality that is essential for the enjoyment of the play. In his Preface, Synge noted that "every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple" and it is in Ireland where exists "a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender".

English was the language of the colonizer and hence the Nationalists opposed its use. They were particularly concerned about the Abbey theatre which was formed out of depicting the Irish culture. Thus, Synge redefined the language to fit into his characters– the ones taken from rural Irish background.

On the whole, the language of this play is rich and vibrant. It has a poetic overtone which captured the Irish minds. Inclusion of Irish phrases and words attributed a raw texture to its language. Synge has very well complemented the themes with his use of language.

11.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The *Playboy of the Western World* was first staged in 1907 at the Abbey theatre in Dublin. Associated with the reception of the play is the playboy riot. You must be interested to know that this play by Synge created rows when first performed. The Dubliners found it disturbing and many phrases in the play were declared offensive. Most importantly, with a **cult** hero it hurt the Nationalists' sentiments. The riots can also be seen in terms of the staging of the play at the Abbey theatre which is generally considered to uphold Irish 'idealism'. In matching with the Nationalists' conception of the use of English language which was the language of the colonizer, Synge modified the language to suit the Irish temperament. Large number of protestors accused Synge of **dismantling** the Irish identity. These protesters



Cult: someone popular with a particular community

Dismantling: take to pieces

rejected Synge portrayal of violent Irish people. It was only through administrative interruption that the theatre was controlled.

It must be mentioned that after the playboy riots, the Abbey theatre was condemned. Particularly, the word "shift" triggered chaos. This term demoralized the Irish audience because the dignity of women was hampered by it. In America also, it received critical reviews. In New York, "the theatre was a scene of such disturbance on the part of the Irishman whose feelings seemed honestly if mistakenly outraged, that the greater part of the first act became a dumb show because inaudible of the tumult, that prevailed in the auditorium" (Kobbé, "J. M. Synge's Master-Piece Produced in America"). Some critics are of the view that Synge was hurt much by the riots. However, W.B. Yeats condemned the rioters who overlooked such an Irish genius as Synge. Yeats held Synge as one of the important voices of Ireland.

It was after Synge's death that the play was reviewed to be one of the best plays denoting Irish literature. Yeats, Gregory were proud of Synge and his vivid narration of Irish sentiments.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q9. To what extent do we find the use of Irish phrases in the play?

Q10. Comment of Synge's choice of language in his play, *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Q11. Where and when was the play staged for the first time?

Q12. What happened during the first staging of the play?

Q13. Write a short note on the playboy riots.



11.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, various themes have been discussed in order to acquaint you with the issues that were Synge's concerns while writing this play. The characters that have been based on real life people of the island expose the raw Irish disposition. For Synge one's true character can be found in the

country people. So through the characters in this play Synge attempts at reflecting the Irish nature in its purest form. After reading this unit, you shall hence be able to relate to Irish culture and ways. An important aspect that we came across in this unit is Synge's use of language. In fact, in the preface to the play Synge himself confessed the influence of the Gaelic language that the people of Aran island spoke. By now you have also gathered idea about the Irish language spoken by the peasants. Most importantly, the riots associated with this play have added to your understanding regarding its reception amongst the wider public. As a whole, after going through this unit you have expanded your knowledge in terms of Anglo-Irish literature, particularly drama.



11.6 FURTHER READING

1) Hoare, John Edward. "Ireland's National Drama". The *North American Review*, Vol. 194, No. 671 (Oct., 1911), pp. 566-575.

2) Kobbé,Gustav. "J. M. Synge's Master-Piece Produced in America". *The Lotus Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Dec., 1911), pp. 66-71.

3) Stapleton, Michael. (1983) *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

4) Synge, J.M. *Riders to the Sea & The Playboy of the Western World*. Ed. By R.K. Kaul. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

5) Tenorio, Encarnacion Hidalgo. (1999) "The Play boy of the Western World: The Subversion of a Traditional Concept of Irishness?" *Journal of Literary Studies,* 15:3, 425-458.

11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: This play is about the people of the 'Western World' or western part of Ireland. Though set in the twentieth century, the lives of those dwelling in this part of the world are still isolated. Barely do we find in the characters any modern ways of lifestyle. The people

are not very rich and lead their lives in a simple way. The people are very enthusiastic when it comes to drinking or merriment. The community celebrates their otherwise boring life by participating in sports. As a whole, the community life that is depicted in the play is very interesting to behold, with their varied and unique manners and beliefs that they hold.

Ans to Q No 2: Some of the themes of the play, *The Playboy of the Western World* are representation of community life, story-telling as a mode, glorification of murder, depiction of women, subversion of the stereotype, etc.

Ans to Q No 3: Their concept of heroism was unconventional in the sense that orally excelled ones were considered heroes such as in the case of Christy.It must be noted that the idea of heroism is closely related to bravery as such.

Ans to Q No 4: Through the story telling aspect, Synge has been able to focus upon the “popular imagination” of these Irish peasants and the “richness of their nature”. The peasants of Mayo led a tedious and monotonous life which is shaken by Christy’s vivid narrative. His poetic talks are enough to enchant the women folks of the village. His oral excellence, rather than his deed, is what the peasants adored. The community in the play participated in the oral Irish imagination that has come down to them through the ages and one in which the Irish culture showed fineness of spirit.

Ans to Q No 5: Christopher Mahon is the ‘playboy’ of the Western world. He is so called because there is a duality attached to his personality. When the play opened, he was a dirty, tired and ‘queer dying fellow’. As the play progressed, Christy emerged as a confident young man which initially he was not. He was the “Playboy of the Western World” who tricked everybody with his charismatic story.

Ans to Q No 6: Widow Quin was a cunning and clever person who never lost any opportunity whereas Pegeen was unconventional in her attitude to ask Shawn to accompany her for a night alone before their marriage.

Ans to Q No 7: Painted as a religious man, Shawn Keogh is afraid of committing any crime. The Church seemed to hold his life. For him every act has a religious significance. He is framed as a God-fearing and religious person and hence rigid in nature. However, he is a very self controlled person. On the other hand, Christy's father held him to be a foolish fellow who was good for nothing.Christy never left a single chance to narrate the events of his father's murder. His story telling was so poetic that women were attracted towards him. However, both of them shared a common feeling foe Pegeen Mike.

Ans to Q No 8: Yes.Synge through this play attempted to present Irish sentiments in its pure form.

Ans to Q No 9: In the play, Irish phrases have been used to a large extent.The playwright has borrowed numerous words from the Gaelic speaking people residing in the Aran Islands.

Ans to Q No 10: Synge's choice of the Irish terminologies was due to his attachment with the language as well as the people who spoke such language. For him, the Irish imagination that is reflected in the play has close connection with the language. The Irish language is very rich and has a poetic quality that is essential for the enjoyment of the play. In his Preface, Synge noted that "every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple" and it is in Ireland where exists "a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender"

Ans to Q No 11: The play was staged for the first time in 1907 at the Abbey theatre in Dublin.

Ans to Q No 12: This play by Synge created rows when it was first performed. *The Dubliners* found it disturbing and many phrases in the play were declared offensive. Most importantly, with a cult hero like Christy it hurt the Nationalists' sentiments. The riots can also be seen in terms of the staging of the play at the Abbey theatre which is generally considered to uphold Irish 'idealism'. It was only through administrative interruption that the theatre was controlled.

Ans to Q No 13: The *Playboy of the Western World* was first staged in 1907 at the Abbey theatre in Dublin. Associated with the reception of the play is the playboy riot.Large number of protestors accused Synge of dismantling the Irish identity. These protesters rejected Synge portrayal of violent Irish people.



11.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Analyse the major themes of the play, *The Playboy of the Western World.*

Q2. In what ways did the Irish peasantry influence the play, *The Playboy of the Western World* by J.M. Synge*?* Discuss.

Q3. Comment on Synge's use of language with reference to the play, *The Playboy of the Western World.*

Q4. Attempt a critical reading of the play, *The Playboy of the Western World* situating it in the context of Anglo-Irish drama.

Q5. Give a character sketch of the major characters of the play, *The Playboy of the Western World* by J.M. Synge.

Q6. What do the 'playboy riots' refer to? Do you think it has contributed to the popularity of the play?

Q7. Write a note on the critical reception of the play, *The Playboy of the Western World* by John Millington Synge.

Q8. Describe the influence of the play in upholding the ideals of the Irish Dramatic Society.

***** *** *****