CHAPTER V

The Playboy of the Western World--Role-Playing of a Master Builder

The Playboy of the Western World displays greater development in stagecraft and literary qualities than The Well of the Saints. In the previous chapter the thematic and philosophical argument was pursued in harmony with its theatre potential in terms of movement, space and time. Along with these basic concepts of theatre performance, The Playboy of the Western World emphasizes another important aspect of drama--the possibility of building up a character based on the resources of the subconscious.

Cyril Cusack, the renowned actor of Synge's plays, especially of The Playboy of the Western World, stated: "in his craftsmanship, in his sense of theatre, in his imagination and observation, in his desire and striving for identification with reality Synge is the greatest of the Irish dramatists." Synge has made use of all theatre devices for the creation of The Playboy of the Western World. Here theatre devices are issuing out of a philosophy of life which is Synge's

own. It is not easy to disengage the theatre elements from Synge's vision of life in any of his plays. His vision is modern as well as old. It may be grotesque and satiric or tragic or comic, or all these woven together where "the precisely achieved structure holds together the different modes of action in a complex and resonant whole."²

In The Playboy of the Western World the real and the unreal merge to give artistic pleasure and when they are divorced it is glaringly cruel and painful. Pain and pleasure are inextricably intertwined to create a comedy unusual and unprecedented in world theatre, whose dramatic success is due to the authenticity of personal feelings and the sincerity of their expression.

The Playboy of the Western World projects Synge's idea of theatre and drama better than any other play:

All art is a collaboration, and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the story-teller's or the playwright's hand, as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time.³

This expresses his fundamental attitude to drama which is an orchestral creation. "Synge's comments upon his personal participation in orchestral music indicate how open he was to the collaborative dimensions of the art-work itself."⁴ Synge

has embodied in this work strange and different strands of the concept of hero, myth-making, comedy, the process of composition and the elements which go to make the infrastructure of the play.

Myth-making

The genius of Synge is to be found in the creation of a dramatic situation gradually developed into the stature of a myth. In Riders to the Sea he is not creating a myth. The mythical content of the life of the Aran people in confrontation with the sea has been superbly dramatized. Maurya is representative of both local and universal motherhood always trapped in the inevitable calamity and catastrophe of life. To some extent the playwright's sense of theatre lies in detecting and identifying the character of Maurya which is mythically great. But in the case of The Playboy of the Western World, the mythical situation is entirely a creation of the writer. The source he collected from the Aran islands is just a skeleton based on a narrative by an Aran islander. Synge himself tells us about this source:

An old man on the Aran Islands told me the very tale on which The Playboy is founded, beginning with the words: "If any gentleman has done a crime we'll hide him. There was a gentleman that killed his father, and I had him in my own house six months till he got away to America." 5

Out of this ordinary thin anecdote Synge has built up a fabulous

edifice with multiple storeys. The structure, design and finish are all his own.

Christy Mahon's development into a gigantic hero is close to any myth shared by all mankind. This myth-making is made possible with an understanding and agreement reached between the audience and the playwright.

Myth, as is well known, can resolve human contradiction and renew vitality. But when it is presented in a distorted and inverted way it helps us to understand ourselves in an ironic and paradoxical situation. The outcome of such an approach is not traditional adoration. On the contrary, it will cause immense pleasure (because of the strange re-shifting of the mythical element) and pain (because of the personal and satiric involvement in understanding the cause of inversion). Synge's play is a bold attempt at placing the modern Irish peasant and his personal and national attitudes against the age-old "mythological tales, the Heroic cycle, the Fenian cycle, adventures, voyages and visions." He is not in complete correspondence with every aspect of the Irish past which he depends upon. He has imbibed the spirit and used it for the artistic purpose of the drama that he has created.

Concept of hero and society

According to Declan Kiberd The Playboy of the Western World is a modern drama to be understood as a parody of the

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Cuchulain cycle. In his book *Synge and the Irish Language*, Kiberd aptly points out Synge's motive of this mock-heroic venture. He holds that if "Synge depicts these farmers and publicans as folk very much removed from the heroic past, he allows Christy to retain some elements of the glamour, valour and lyricism of the epic heroes."7 Synge evoked the greatness of the saga life, in order "to mock the pettiness of the contemporary peasant and the portentous bearing and blind violence of the ancient protagonists. This ambiguous two-way irony is at work also in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Wasteland."*8

There are two aspects implied in the statement; Synge pricks the hollowness of the contemporary peasant thereby making him understand his own place in Irish history; and the other aspect is the reference to Synge's attitude to violence and non-violence in the modern social and political life of Ireland. In *The Playboy of the Western World* he is presenting the Irish folk as appreciating the violent and brutal heroes of the past. They appear to be enamoured of the ancient period represented by heroes committing inhuman cruelty or indulging in reckless activities. In a play which is meant to be anti-heroic, Synge presents the idea of heroism with its own inner contradictions.

To write a parody of a nationally accepted value of life is not to disgrace either nationalism or the system of

8 Ibid.
the moral code. Christy becomes great and is received in the village because of two of his qualities not to be found among themselves: bravery to commit an unusual crime and the felicity with which he glorifies that crime. The Mayo girls come running to listen to his narration of how he killed his father with a loy. Marcus Quinn is also appreciated for his maiming of ewes. Similarly Uaneen Sullivan "knocked the eye from a peeler" and "the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits." The playwright with ferocity and agility points out the contradiction and paradox in upholding an ideal of violence which debilitates the moral strength of the people. Violence developed as a cult to be respected by a nation must be exposed and satirised. This is quite contrary to the contemporary norms preached and propagated by staunch nationalists like W. B. Yeats. For most political revolutionaries, heroic violence was acceptable. When they revived the Gaelic culture and mythological past they did not object to the elements of violence. Nicholas Mansergh, the renowned historian, justified Synge's depiction of violence with an ironic purpose in the play. The Irish peasant is known for his spirit of revenge. Man becomes accustomed to brutal scenes and as "those who have read the opening scene of The Playboy of the Western World will recall, revenge even on helpless animals might in certain circumstances be referred to with pride."  

10 Declan Kiberd, Synge and Irish Language, p. 113.
Shawn is the only character who does not approve of Christy's violence and gloating over it. The ordinary, poor, timid and cowardly man mentally satisfies himself with the heroic and murderous acts of his great heroes because he is incapable of committing any crime. Synge sees a definite dichotomy and dishonesty in this dual approach. But the nationalists of the Irish movement refused to take up this challenge of pointing out to the people their own timidity and weakness. Synge takes up the challenge of telling the nation how and where it goes wrong. The heroes of the past Synge has reduced to ordinary peasants and out of them he creates dignified and independent individuals. Cuchulain is an anchor to which he can relate his characters and with that parallel of brutal greatness in mind, Synge creates Christy with some virtues of the past and an ironic subtlety in the very cult of the hero.

Christy's relation with the Cuchulain myth need not be accidental. Synge, as we have already seen, drew much on the heroic and ancient Ireland. Declan Kiberd lists the books from a note-book of Synge used in 1898-99. These show how deeply Synge was interested in heroic literature in the mythology of Europe. His special interest in the Cuchulain saga also is clear from the list:

- The Cuchullin Saga
- For the birth of Conachar
- Wooing of Emer

Hull
see Rev. Cel.VI, 173, 182, IX, I.
Rev. Cel.IX, 442
Siege of Howth  Rev. Cel.VIII 49.63
Goudor Etudes de Mythologie Gaulois 1886
Tain Bo Cuailgne see Zimmer Kel. Stud. O'Curry.

(Compare Chuchullin's cutting of an oak sapling using but one foot, hand and eye with the initial feats in folk tales. \textsuperscript{11})

The list shows that Cuchulain inspired Synge to have a vision of the modern Irish peasant in juxtaposition with the popular characters of folk poems and tales. Synge also used Lady Gregory's "Cuchulain of Muirthemne" almost as "Part of my daily bread!" Synge's contemporaries saw Cuchulain as a positive example for emulation in modern political and social life. For Synge he is a mythical character to be seen in contrast to the timid and cowardly attitude of modern man. That is why Christy's character is delineated with distant similarities to the distorted dignity of Cuchulain. Like Cuchulain Christy is looked at with fear and admiration by the Mayo community. Cuchulain was a lad of prominence from his beginning onward while Christy is found cowering in terror in a ditch. Cuchulain's community and its men were afraid of him because of his strength, elegance and heroic speeches, all loved by women who were attracted to him. Christy in contrast is forced to marry Widow Casey by his father on monetary grounds. Cuchulain is initiated into a warrior, attired in king Conchubor's

\textsuperscript{11} Declan Kiberd in \textit{Synge and Irish Language}, p. 108.
borrowed arms, "he defeats the three brave sons of Nechtan and returns with their three heads as trophies." Christy on the contrary, appeared in the same form dressed in the wedding suit of Shawn who lent it to him to send him off. He later defeats his opponents at the local sports and returns with three trophies.

Declan Kiberd finds close similarity between Emer and Pegeen also. The latter is as chaste and deft in needle work as the former. Both of them are surrounded by girls subservient to them. Both Emer and Pegeen take pride in the covetable background of their men. To some extent both Cuchulain and Christy are raised to the level of gods. Of course, Christy's position is shaky quite often. Violence and sex, perhaps in different degrees, are two vital points common to both:

It's Pegeen I am seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself maybe, from this place to the Eastern World? (Plays, II, p. 167)

It is very interesting to note that in Lady Gregory's version of the Cuchulain exploits there is a reference to usages more provoking than Synge's "shifts". It is said that in order to appease Cuchulain's anger after the victorious battle the Ulstermen sent thirty of the most beautiful virgins naked to meet the hero and because of his respect for womanhood he bowed before them. But the latter-day admires of Cuchulain could not put up with females in "shifts" and consequently they caused riots which became an event in the history of world

12 Declan Kiberd in Synge and Irish Language, p. 108.
theatre. Another point of interesting similarity with Cuchulain is Christy's negotiating a narrow gap in the horse-races and winning the match finally. Old Mahon almost like a chorus in the unit tells us the excitement of seeing the sports and its hero, "look at the narrow place. He'll be into the bogs! /With a yell./ Good rider! He's through it again!" (Plays, II, p. 141).

In this mock-heroic and comparative point made by Kiberd, he comments on the danger of a fanatic approach of seeing a very good complex dramatic work, like Synge's, as being solely inspired by a single source. That is to limit the range and multi-faceted meanings of a masterpiece. Synge must have drawn profusely on the Bible, Pagan mythology, day to day reports from newspapers, his direct experience with the native people and their gossip. All these source materials are transformed into something novel in his vision. Consequently, as Kiberd points out, it is not a question of "debt" or influence but of creative "points of contact" when Synge's Playboy of the Western World and its sources are discussed.

The idea of violence prevalent in Irish mythology and its usage in the modern social life of the people have been satirised by Synge through Christy's character. This is the idea projected by Kiberd. At the same time the same philosophy of violence is upheld in the play according to Norman Podhoretz. In a study

13 Declan Kiberd, Synge and Irish Language, p. 121.
entitled "Synge's Playboy: Morality and the Hero" Norman Podhoretz justifies Christy's violence and adventures. There are three principal murders mentioned: Widow Quin's murder of her husband, and Christy's "murder" of his father twice. These murders are necessary to bring out the true self of the characters and the play's meaning. In a closer analysis of their reasons, Christy attains maturity and awareness of his dignity after the murder of his father. "Consciousness, maturity and self-realization were bound up with revolt against the father, and Pegeen with her sure earthy instinct senses this."¹⁴ Synge has grasped "the paradox on which civilization (according to the myth, at any rate) seems to rest--individual achievement and communal progress depend on murder."¹⁵ Since murder is neither easy nor always possible one commits a symbolic act of murder. In fact Christy's "murders" of his father are all symbolic (and ritualistic in terms of the original Greek meaning of comedy).

Christy grows out of his cowardice and timidity into a hero through the symbolic savagery and the quality of his lyrical speeches. Once his identity has emerged he wants to protect it and be completely independent of his father or anybody claiming superiority over him. This is a movement from the primitive state of consciousness to a sense of civilization, but the poor Mayoites cannot cope with that grown up individual.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 70.
He is thrown out. According to Norman Podhoretz, Pegeen is the only person in Mayo who can perceive greatness but cannot rise to it, because of the social barriers. Her experience is really tragic. That also is a paradox and irony at which Synge wants us to evaluate the complexity of the work.16

The last statement of Podheretz in this study powerfully sums up the deplorable predicament and predilection of Pegeen and her concept of Christy: "the Christies are somehow taken care of, and so are the Shawns, it is the Pegeens who suffer most from the radical incompatibility of Héro and society."17

The hero concept presented by Christy can be vividly visualized and experienced in terms of the ritualistic comic hero, mock Cuchulain, leader of mock violence as well as mock-Christ. Many more parallels and allusions are possible. The mock-idea of Christ has to be considered in terms of the myth-making quality of the play. H. H. Maclean dwells at length upon the mock-Christ level of Christy. In the study entitled "The Hero as Playboy," he elaborates the archetypal quality including the name Christy, in association with Christ and different critical movements of his life.18

But a more acceptable inclusion of the Christ idea, if at all Christ is to be incorporated here, will be that of a

17 Ibid., p. 74.
mock-Christ. Howard D. Pearce has treated Christy in this way. According to him Christy's development in front of our eyes is very close to the life of Christ inverted. Christy comes into the Mayo group as a dejected and disappointed coward without any claim of dignity. In a day and a half he returns as a great leader or a poet or as an artist who can, if necessary, look down upon the whole of mankind wallowing in the mud. This sudden change may appear to be incredible. But the playwright has made it artistically convincing. The audience are convinced because of the credibility passed on to them by other characters through their interaction with and response to Christy. It seems Christy makes a subconscious comparison of himself with characters of the Bible. In the second act of the play when Pegeen lovingly teases and reproaches and threatens him, the innocent Christy, fearing the police, tries to leave her. "If there's that terror of them, it'd be best, maybe, I went on wandering like Esau or Cain and Abel on the sides of Neifin or the Erris Plain" (Plays, II, p. 109). Knowing Christy's enjoyment of the narration of his father's "murder" and the worshipful attitude he deliberately won from the Mayo girls, the audience derive a comic pleasure. Christ is considered to be the "jewel of the world" and this epithet is ironically used to glorify Christy who has murdered his father. Synge's purpose and the meaning intended are clear—to have a mock-image of Christy's violent grandeur.

It is actually the Mayo community which blows up the
image of Christy and carries him on their shoulders after his triumph in the sports. In no time the very same people turn on him as Christ's own disciple did at the last. One can cite any number of mock suggestions of Christ in the life of Christy. Hearing about the coming of Christy in Pegeen's shop, the Mayo girls rush to him next morning with presents of ducks' eggs, butter, cake, pullet etc. This may remind us of the gifts of the Magi brought to Christ. The betrayal is the most striking point common to both Christ and Christy. Christ was betrayed by the selfish Judas. Christy is thrown out or betrayed on account of the disillusion of Mayo community. Synge has worked up the rejection of Christy very dramatically. Once Pegeen falls out with him on his treachery nobody among his former admirers offers to rescue him. His final request is made to Widow Quin who volunteered to help him on previous occasions. But she also washes her hands off the matter saying that her share was done. Eventually Christy becomes a scapegoat. The idea of his becoming a scapegoat is also paradoxical. He is received into their fold with great enthusiasm. Pegeen, her father Michael James, Philly, Widow Quin and the girls have their own selfish and possessive motives for receiving him.

The Playboy of the Western World is basically a comedy with multiple facets of meaning. The frame of comedy holds these multi-dimensional modes of action in a complex and resonant whole. The comic mould is serious and wild which has great meaning, echoes or undertones of the ancient sense
of the genre. Comedy as well as tragedy has originated from primitive religion and culture. Sir James George Frazer made a thorough study of ritualistic performances and their roots in primitive beliefs and modes of life. In his book *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) he has logically substantiated his arguments in support of comedy taking its origin as a ritual form of the ancient Greeks:

Comedy and tragedy alike are traced to a pre-historic death and resurrection ceremonial, a seasonal Pantomime in which the old year in the guise of an aged king (or hero or God), is killed and the new spirit of fertility, the resurrection or initiation of the young king, is brought in. This site typically featured a ritual combat, or agon, between the representatives of the old and the new seasons, a feast in which the sacrificial body of the slain king was devoured, a marriage between the victorious new king and his chosen bride, and final triumphal procession in collaboration of the reincarnation or resurrection of the slain God.\(^\text{19}\)

According to this theory of comedy all art can be analysed and traced seriously to the ritual combat, death, resurrection and marriage ending in a victorious procession of at least the hero and his allies.

*The Playboy of the Western World* can be better understood from this point of view. Christy Mahon's fight with his father can be considered as a beginning for the entire action of the play. Old Mahon's resurrection is also comparable to the well-known resurrection in the ancient ritual. Christy by any

standard stands for the new spirit, creative and fertile. Old Mahon's coming back to life in the play proves that there was only a ritualistic fight. None of them had any intention or dark motive of killing each other. That was one of the many quarrels they used to have at home on personal and domestic grounds. At the same time they represent two different approaches or values (or seasons), old Mahon representing the old and Christy, the new. In the play the victorious Christy almost marries (their hands joined by Pegeen's father) a girl of his choice. Even though every detail of the ritual does not correspond with the events in The Playboy of the Western World, the total spirit wholly supports it. Old Mahon's happy return with his victorious son makes us relate the cycle of events of the play to the ancient ritual. Moreover the village community totally participates in the process. And the original concept of comedy (upheld by Aristotle also) gives importance to man as a social being, not as a private person alone, and comparatively involved in the changing or corrective function.

At the first production of the play following the notorious riot of the Dublin audience, Synge was interviewed by the press and he wrote a letter to them, explaining the meaning and the multiple levels of the play. He said:

The Playboy is not a play with a purpose in the modern sense of the word, but, although parts of it are or are meant to be extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it and a great deal more that is behind it is perfectly serious when looked at in a certain light. This is often the case, I think, with comedy, and no one is quite
sure today whether Shylock or Alceste should be played seriously or not. There are, it may be hinted, several sides to The Playboy. This is to show how serious Synge was about this great comedy the central structure of which is built up through the development of Christy's character and regaining of dignity through improvisation.

**Improvisation as an Organic Technique**

The quality of the play mainly depends upon the dramatic and theatrical method used by J. M. Synge for the gradual building up of the character of Christy and an atmosphere congenial to his development. Synge's idea of the stage and theatre performance is revealed in the relationship between the characters and the audience visualized and effectively executed in the play. The dominant device used is improvisation. It is used for creating some magical powers for the characters, for expanding the concepts of space and time, for developing dramatic situations and for associating the involved feelings of the audience. In modern theatre practice improvisation is employed as a training method for actors. It is a device to successfully tap the faculty of imagination of an actor in relation to other actors, objects, audience, space and time. It is creativity fully released. The creativity is to be displayed through discovering more and more within the actor.

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20 J. M. Synge in *The Irish Times*, 13 January 1907.
as an artist. According to Stanislavsky, the actor's inner self must be awakened and alerted. He must be in touch with his subconscious level of mind for creation. The higher he wants to rise, the deeper he must go in his subconsciousness. No one is able to go into the deepest level of one's consciousness, nor can one reach the highest points of imagination:

I prefer to stand on the heights and from there look out to the limitless horizon, trying to project myself for a little distance, a few miles, into that vast region still inaccessible to our consciousness, which my mind cannot grasp even in its imagination. 21

Here what the great Russian actor and director suggests is the source of imagination and consciousness to be always alerted before an actor creates a role. Improvisation is one of the methods used for such creation.

In The Playboy of the Western World Synge has, with a sure sense of acting on the stage and how an actor develops, created a character who develops a wonderful magical situation through improvisation. Christy Mahon improvises from a base and drab outline a lively story, a poetical and lyrical method of narration and a total atmosphere including his own stature as a great hero. It is almost the role of hero that he plays because he is not in fact born to be a hero by virtue of his qualities in the conventional sense. In modern society and in drama, especially in a democratic setting, anybody can become a

hero. Synge has created a new concept of hero also. Christy who hails from an ordinary background is unfortunately forced to strike a blow at his father. And then through its narration after some days he blows himself up into a superhuman character. From that state of almost inaccessible heights of glory and valour he is made to fall.

The technique used by Synge is to be appreciated in terms of theatre performance. It is the felicity with which Christy is shown growing bigger and bigger in the presence of the audience. Several ways are used for that development. There spreads in the Mayo village a very surprising, strange and unusual story of a wild young man (Christy) who could kill his father with a single blow. First the news is spread by Shawn for selfish and cowardly motives. Since Christy is staying the night with Pegeen, alone in her house, Shawn who is engaged to marry her after clearing some religious impediment cannot tolerate it. Naturally he secretly and furtively transmits this "unholy" affair to the Widow Quin first and then to other parts of the village. Those who hear the story take it at face value and eventually the whole village comes to know of it. It is they who make Christy a hero.

After having elevated Christy's image step by step and placed him somewhere near the gods he is pulled down from there. In certain respects this fact of pulling down the hero's character is comparable to Samson's fate. All the points of their life are not to be taken for point to point correspondence.
At the same time Christy's fall, even though he does not accept it like Maurya has had a telling effect upon himself and on the Mayo community. The tragic gloom which blights the beautiful Pegeen eternally cannot be overlooked. Christy's fall also is presented with a rare sense of probability. It has been achieved through his father's coming back to life and appearance at Mayo.

From the point of view of production and audience response there is some dynamic happening on the stage. Unlike in Riders to the Sea there is a tremendous change visibly taking place before our eyes. This dramatic dynamism is due to the special nature of the characters. Here is a character who discovers more and more as he recollects the incident with his father. The audience feel that he is really delighting both in narrating the murder and in acting it out. It is either a play or a game for Christy as he finds the giggling Mayo girls around him getting interested in the impossible act of murder really committed and vividly enacted by him. He feels more encouraged and so he adds more and more details thereby embellishing an ordinary event. The dramatic point to be noted here is the idea of a game developed with the full involvement of the group.

In the second act we see Widow Quin, Sara Tansey, Susan Brady, Honor Blake and Nelly Maclaughlin encouragingly sitting at his feet and listening to his fantastic narration and commenting upon it intermittently and delightfully. Actually these girls at that time represent different sections of the
audience who are by this time awakened and straining their senses of sight and hearing, alerting their imagination and ready to "suspend their disbelief," for the fullest enjoyment of what they witness. This means that the whole drama is conceived by Synge as a group game in which every player, at some point or other willingly suspends his or her disbelief. Shawn and Widow Quin are the two noted characters who do not fall into the imaginative traps before them. But Widow Quin forgets herself and in the moments of Christy's retrospective narration and improvisation she joins the rest with no reservation or doubt. She lets herself fly along with other innocent girls on the wings of Christy's heroic narration. They all contribute to the total creation of the play. The inspiration which impels them is Christy's inventive power and capacity of acting it out.

As Christy tells the girls his past experiences we feel that there is a kind of energy boiling up in him. We notice that there is a palpable change going on within his mind. Within a period of one day and a half, i.e., one full night and the next day before the evening, Christy completes his full growth from the timid, cowardly childlike character into an independent, knowledgeable, loving, fighting man declaring freedom for himself. The final stage of Christy is that of a man who can take decisions about his future.

A very interesting point about Christy's improvisation is that he is able to communicate very effectively with the audience. This is due to his complete involvement in what he
communicates. He has different moods and emotional variations to communicate. All these changes are felt by the audience really because at every shade of feeling he is drawing on his subconscious which, we feel, comes to enliven his creative exposition. A person who acts with his subconscious, intuitively, will be able to establish an emotional and imaginative understanding with his audience. If intuition takes him along the right path he will be able to go to any length freely. In the play Christy tries to get this feeling of intuition and therefore he is able to impose authority on a comparatively less inventive group of Mayo men and women. As far as the audience are concerned their interest lies not in complete submission of their critical faculty but in stimulating it with a sense of curiosity which is lavishly satisfied by the dramatic happening initiated by Christy.

Christy is always full of feelings and spirit. He comes close to the description of an actor by Salvini, one of the greatest Italian actors:

The great actor should be full of feeling, and especially he should feel the thing he is portraying. He must feel an emotion not only once or twice while he is studying his part but to greater or lesser degree every time he plays it, no matter whether it is the first or the thousandth time.  

Even though true feeling is to be evoked to justify the actor's portrayal with the help of the subconscious it is not always

within our reach to have access to it. Christy from the very beginning of his appearance and utterance shows a remarkable variation. In the first scene he reveals exhaustion of body and mind, fear of police who might catch him at any time and then finally a note of relief. According to the aural implications, Christy's gestures and movements and stage business—all will be carried out in effective unison with movement on the stage in relation to either the individuals or the groups. It is to be specially marked that Christy's exposition of the past events and the method do not fall into melodrama. The emotions expressed are substantiated by his narration and the justifiable encounter with his father. Thus the objective correlative is perfectly sound when we reason it out. It is the sense of Synge's stagecraft which has kept out cliches.

The structure of the play, as has already been pointed out, projects the improvised shape from within and a controlled and strictly reserved austerity of tightness from outside. The improvised nature has been tightly kept under control without slipping into emotional extravaganza. Even though it was called a comic extravaganza it is far more refined and poetically intense. Christy's beginning denotes an energetic flash of memory of the past. His mind is, it seems, full of sprightly and potentially fantastic ideas and images. We also feel that it is a store house of so many themes and visions. He is only twentyone years old. But his mind is revealing more than his age can normally do. It is due to the association of memories,
individual, collective, and racial. These collective experiences in consciousness become available for any dramatic occasion:

Every impression in some form or another remains in our memories, and can be used when needed. In such hurried or general descriptions we care very little whether what we transmit corresponds to reality. We are satisfied with any general characteristic or illusion. 23

The collected memories concealed deep in the consciousness will be effectively brought out through an external suggestion or sign. In the plays signs such as stimulating events, also would suffice. Most probably Christy's deep memories, wishes, desires and intentions all must have been roused or aggressively provoked by the physical clash with his father. Along with these may be a desire for freedom lurking in him.

Old Mahon is very oppressive and poor Christy is forced to work very hard because his brothers and sisters are all away from the family. 24 There could be in Christy's mind, as in the case of any other young man, an unfulfilled longing for love to be requited by a young girl. Being very timid and "lonely" with

23 Constantin Stanislavsky, An Actor Prepares, p.28.

24 Here the oppression of the old conventional value system, the political domination of an oppressive foreign force, the stale and banal approach of the established critics in theatre and arts suppressing and destroying the aesthetic freedom of a fresh and creative genius—all must be borne in mind. Quite contrary to Yeats' misleading statement that Synge could not think a political thought, Synge was essentially political.
his old quarrelsome father, he is really in search of a sympa­
thetic companion. In Pegeen, Christy sees such a nice girl
who is also starved for the company of a wild young man with
fantastic stories and felicitous expressions.

"If" and "Given Circumstances"

The external stimulii, according to Stanislavsky's theory
of acting and improvisation, will bring out the best creative
artist in an actor. In the case of Christy's improvisation two
more elements of theatre work together. They are "If" and
"Given circumstances." These go together working up the mind
of an actor for creation on the stage. "If" means a conditional
situation identical to that of the actor. This is an imaginative
expression to determine the process of acting in touch with
the subconscious. For instance, Christy personally must have
imagined himself to be in the place of a courageous bold young
man who can murder even his own father. If Christy were that
young man, he would have narrated with greater pride his epic
encounter with his father. In the personal life of Christy,
as has already been indicated, he is very weak, afraid of his
father, and he used to obey him quite unwillingly. Such a
person could never have raised a loy against his father who
was very domineering. If he did it, it was out of sheer help­
lessness and fear. This is to say, he was never strong either
bodily or mentally to carry out a murderous action, that he
so happily glosses over later. Naturally he has seen a series
of heroic incidents which can be connected and associated with
the base outline of external reality. These associations help
the actor to understand Christy's character more intimately.

Again from the production point of view, there are two
levels of "playing." That is, an actor has to "play" the role
of Christy who is "playing" the role of a murderer of his father.
Naturally the audience will be highly interested in knowing the
creative techniques with which Synge's "play" is developed. The
actor will enact what Christy has already enacted. In both,
there is action, motion and creative energy released. These
are the bases of a good work by an actor. It can be further
noticed that all the approaches have these two levels of critical
analysis. The double "play" or "game" is an uncommon technique
to be used either in Irish theatre or English. Christy develops
his situation on the assumption of a liberator and he acts as
a great hero who has fought valiantly and liberated himself from
a very fierce and oppressive force and whatever he does has an
inner justification. Again, to quote Stanislavsky, "all action
in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical,
coherent and real."25 And Stanislavsky also explains in rela-
tion to the same principle that "if" acts as a lever to lift
us out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination.

The principle of "if" works for the sake of establishing
an organic kinship between the actor and the person he is
portraying. As far as Christy's character is concerned he is

25 Constantin Stanislavsky, An Actor Prepares, p. 46.
an actor himself. The person who does the role in a production has to establish this kinship with Christy, the actor. The interesting point is that there are two actors connected by a heroic murder, in a fantastic world created by the first actor (Christy). It is Christy who adds colourful details which fill out the fantasy thereby providing it with point and engaging action. Here too the audience watch with enjoyment, and curiosity. Christy's creation is partly conscious and partly unconscious. Since the depth of the subconscious cannot easily be fathomed, the creative energy and force of memory supplied also cannot be assessed but it can be felt. It is proved in modern theatre practice that unconscious creativeness can be enlarged and effectively implemented through conscious technique. The primary condition for all this must be sincerity of emotion. The great Russian poet Pushkin explained in an article on drama that the fundamental life of drama is to be found in "sincerity of emotions, feelings that seem true in given circumstances, that is what we ask of a dramatist." 26

Pushkin has thrown up a very important expression in play-acting and improvisation. It is "the given circumstances" which is used to refer to all the circumstances that are given to an actor for the creation of his role. The actor is given a specific surrounding and a definite text with plot, characters, unities of action, time and place, the director's idea of all

26 Pushkin, quoted by Constantin Stanislavsky, An Actor Prepares, p. 50.
these, the stage sets, properties, sound effects and lighting. These are the factors supplied to the actor for a specific purpose. The actor has to respond to them. This approach is perfectly applicable to Christy's situation in which he improvises and creates. We have already seen the working of "if" in Christy's role and in his character.

What are the given circumstances for Christy? The physical background given to him is that of a country public house or shebeen, very rough and untidy. It is a village, on a wild coast of Mayo. The events of the first Act pass on a dark evening of autumn, the other two Acts on the following day" (Plays, II, p. 55). The peasants here have their wild fancy and imagination, as usual, on a particularly excited occasion. It also seems that they have been leading a monotonous life with no colour and a moment of freedom in which they can develop into the fullest glory. In the process of blossoming he improvises a broken series of images, something like a moving picture. The images created are drawn from personal, social and emotional memories. They come from within Christy. They create a corresponding mood, and arouse emotions, while holding us within the limits of the play designed by the playwright. These images firmly fixed in our visual memories are awakened and roused at will. Christy is in live contact with his deeper emotions which cause sporadic fear, delight, doubt, apprehension, hope, satisfaction, disappointment and relief. These expressions are possible because of the truth
in the feelings expressed by him. The audience will look for true and sincere emotional coherence in the anecdotes and associated feelings. The actor as is conceived by Synge must revive all the feelings he experienced in his own life. If that be the case, an actor will be able to show his feelings without effort, almost involuntarily pushed forward by an inner energy and indispensable charm satisfying their psyche.

Synge also has presented characters in wonderful contrast to one another. Shawn Keogh is a fat and fair young man fanatically religious and unduly God-fearing; Widow Quin is middle aged with her husband and children buried and happily forgotten; the girls giggling and waiting for Christy's imaginative narration have their own specialities which can be mutually contrasting. It is a congenial creative and sympathetic circumstance under which every one feels like freeing oneself from all the conventional and suppressive morality. Shawn Keogh is the only person who prefers to hold on to social and moral norms and realities.

Pegeen's father returns only very late next day when the fantastic exuberance of the story, mirth-making and the village sports are all over and Pegeen and Christy have by that time mentally become one because of their great mutual admiration. Here "if" is the beginning and the "given circumstances" the development. These are inseparable and always complementary. Christy's circumstantial awareness changes as he goes on narrating. It, being an improvisation, gets
quick response from the spectators also. Their response expresses itself indirectly through the reactions of the characters on the stage. Christy is able to take them along to a distant place, time and action thereby changing the circumstances themselves. In the narration Christy improvises dialogue, situation and the actual frightening mood also. Naturally in no time those who listen to him are transported into a different context. They transform themselves into real characters in the new given circumstances. Without their full participation unreservedly given Christy could not have continued his creative story.

In all these stages of Christy's narrative and dramatic developments the audience participate as if in a creative pageant. Synge's sense of the stage and its relation to the audience are unquestionably validated by his successful attempt to involve all the participants of the play—both performers and spectators. It becomes finally a unifying game where nobody remains a detached observer. There is a sort of creative pleasure in which new elements are discovered at every point. Christy's drama is "emotion recollected in tranquillity," to quote Wordsworth. Christy's is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It is spontaneous but its cause is to be found in an incident which took place days back. A period of eleven days has elapsed during which time the first impressions and its excitements related to the diabolic "murder" are settled in his mind. In this context Stanislavsky's idea of the impact of time on human experience can be considered very relevant:
Time is a splendid filter for our remembered feeling—besides it is a great artist. It not only purifies, but also transmits even painfully realistic memories into poetry.  

Yes, Christy's encounter with, and the unfortunate murder of, his father is realistically painful. In the play Synge has artistically given a gap of time long enough to relegate it into the subconscious or the unconscious level of his mind. The audience's curiosity is to find out how the painful and realistic experience of Christy is transmuted into their poetic experience on the stage in a language for theatre. Their curiosity is satisfied by Christy as an actor and character in "an infinite variety of combinations of objectives and given circumstances . . . which have been smelted in the furnace of his emotion memory."  

Movement and Composition

When the play is considered as a group game and composite work the visual beauty expected on the stage is different from that of an ordinary work. It requires clear and moving images represented through compositions and grouping on the stage. Synge has given scope for such a meaningful production. The play from the beginning till the end suggests motivated actions and pictures eloquent in themselves.

27 Constantin Stanislavsky, An Actor Prepares, p. 65.  
28 Ibid., p. 67.
Synge seems to have envisaged a theatre and drama calling for a highly imaginative collaboration from the audience. The Playboy of the Western World demands perfectly trained creative artists who are able to display a new drama and not the paraphernalia of physical presentation. There can be movement, projection of voice, expression of glory and success and group activity extended to a wild and fantastic level. While writing the play he must have seen in his mental screen the whole panorama of the action. The audience response must have also been thought of in relation to the production. His was a theatre which could permit the unrestrained expression of the native genius. The Abbey stage provided the potential for controlled as well as liberated movement and action.

Synge's plays are literary as well as original theatre pieces: whatever is spoken on the stage has a "gestic" quality and whatever is acted or done has a suggestive literary dimension. There are places in The Playboy of the Western World where the audience are intimate with the events on the stage. Synge arranges the characters and scenes accordingly. His characters use the space in all possible ways. The audience get beautiful and picturesque images of small or large groups spatially arranged in attractive compositions. In a sense a director of his plays will normally find it easy to devise stage groupings and related choreographic patterns.

All these points can be specifically substantiated with one or two examples from The Playboy of the Western World.
For instance, let us consider the first entry of Christy in Michael James' shebeen. We have seen just prior to it Pegeen complaining to her father that she is all alone when he goes out. Shawn, being afraid of Father Reilly, cannot stay back with Pegeen alone in the house till their marriage is solemnized. Michael James, Billy and Jimmy want to leave the house to participate in Kate Cassidy's wake. On the stage their spatial relationship is indicated by Synge's suggestion and stage directions. For example, Michael is trying to force Shawn to stay in the house to keep his daughter company in his absence. When Philly asks Michael, "lock him in the west room. He'll stay then and have no sin to be telling to the priest" (Plays, II, p. 65), Michael immediately "getting between him and the door" (Plays, II, p. 65) compels Shawn to go into the room. The movement of Michael towards the door is here suggested. Shawn's frantic attempt to run away from the door is also meant. Pegeen can be at a little distance from the door, working behind the counter and keenly encouraging this teasing of Shawn and lovingly complaining to her father. Philly and Jimmy can briskly move forward in order to get hold of Shawn. In this hilarious and comic game of teasing and trapping Shawn, the frightened man wriggles out and suddenly comes back saying "the queer dying fellow's beyond looking over the ditch. He's come up, I am thinking stealing your hens" (Plays, II, p. 67). Then Shawn looks over his shoulder and appears to be terribly frightened and running in the room saying, "he's following me
now he runs into room and if he's heard what I said, he'll be having my life and I going home lonesome in the darkness of the night" (Plays, II, p. 67). At these moments the audience also are alerted and they seem to participate in this teasing game. It is now really a feast to both the eyes and ears of the audience. They follow clearly the playwright's purpose of establishing a foolish, cowardly and superstitious character in Shawn who runs away from his "love" whom he plans to marry after all the religious formalities are fulfilled.

The game reaches an abrupt end when Christy coughs outside and enters "very tired and frightened and dirty" (Plays, II, p. 67). The audience may enjoy themselves and laugh aloud thinking "Oh! poor Shawn was afraid of this frightened dirty young fellow!" On the stage Synge has envisaged the different and sudden responses of the characters to Christy. They may be anxious; some may be slightly taken aback and Shawn might be even trembling and like a rat in a trap, seeking a place to hide himself. Synge's sense of stagecraft is re-inforced by the grouping and contrasts. When Christy says in a small voice, "God save all here!" (Plays, II, p. 67) the slightly roused tension gradually declines and the whole group start communicating with him asking for his personal details and conditions. They together work like a chorus raising the doubts of the audience and eliciting answers for them. Shawn must have been far away from Christy, straining his eyes and ears from the farthest
place in the room to know who and what the new-comer is.

Here the playwright has definitely intended three points of interest on the stage. One is that of Christy gradually coming to the centre surrounded by Michael Philly and Jimmy. The second is the position or area of Pegeen separated from this group and at the same time involving herself with great interest in the conditions of the young man who must have specially watched her while taking a glass of porter from her. The third level is in fact that of Shawn quite disapprovingly and suspiciously watching all this in fear and restlessness. A good spectator must be able to interrelate these three areas of emphasis on the stage. It is not a mechanical grouping. It is required by the text and demanded by the motives of the characters.

This composition changes immediately with more discoveries of the newcomer's condition and all those who are mentally distant from him come closer appreciating and admiring him. Taking another scene will help the idea of groupings in this improvised scheme to be better established. When Widow Quin appears with her own selfish motive of taking Christy away home and, if possible, making him stay with her permanently, Pegeen does not let Christy go. The young man is now fought for and that is ironically a very good dramatic point. The playwright has with a rare sense of stage movement established a sufficiently interesting and creatively engaging grouping. Here also the motives of the characters make the design.
Pegeen and Widow Quin quarrel violently and wash their dirty linen in public. As they vie with each other for a young man their own character is revealed and their inner and dark motives disclosed. Widow Quin tells us with good humour that Pegeen would "go helter-skeltering after any man would let you a wink upon the road" (Plays, II, p. 89). Pegeen can at this point advance towards her breaking out into wild rage. Her own mind may be now caught up in conflicts. She may be afraid of Christy's awareness of her weakness now revealed by Widow Quin. That may result in his losing interest in her. On top of that if Widow Quin presents herself as an exemplary woman, wiser and more mature than herself, she might win the heart of Christy, which she cannot allow. Hers is a mixed feeling of latent love and admiration for Christy.

The visual quality of the play can be made perceptible only when these clashing interests suggested by Synge are taken note of by the spectator. For Widow Quin, all this is an event of fun and humour and if her attempt succeeds, a great achievement. Both of them seize Christy's arms and pull him towards them. Christy must have been surprised in the beginning. But as their fight progressed he must have taken more interest in it, maybe even by letting himself go towards each of them in turn as they pull. He is not expressive orally and only when Pegeen wants him to open his mouth does he do so. This pulling business with Christy at the centre and the two women on either side can have great variety of composition, poses
and movements on the stage. The entire space can become eloquent, echoing the cross-purposes at which they fight and it comes to an end only when Christy expresses himself in favour of Pegeen.

Similarly the whole play can be analysed in terms of clashing interest and their stage movements. All these movements are parts of the total design which is a creative improvisation.

The play revolves round Christy's creative improvisation. He improvises not only the details of the story but a new style of telling it which is very striking and dramatic. As he goes on improvising the encounter there are meaningful dialogues also invented by him. The village girls and the Widow Quin encouragingly supply him with food and drink, commenting on the incident approvingly and teasing and flattering him intermittently. Synge's sense of theatre production is discernible in Christy's command over the other characters and over the audience themselves. Christy's narration becomes successful because of its intimacy established with the audience. This is true not only in terms of physical nearness but also in the emotional attachment. Christy uses the whole space with the girls and Widow Quin around him. In the improvisation he takes up and brandishes his mug in place of the loy with which he hit his father. In the improvised dialogue with his father he can imagine a position for his father on the stage and run to him. He can also give imaginary gestures and suggestions of movements and supposed reactions to the angry utterances and advances of his father.
The whole unit of the play is thus very active with sudden and fresh responses of the audience and the Mayo girls. The characters on the stage have to briskly move when they give way to Christy and his father challenging each other with Christy finally hitting the wretched old man with a loy. The conversation which Christy improvises is potentially conflicting and dramatic. Referring to the fatal end of their quarrel Christy says impressively, "with that the sun came out between the cloud and the hill, and it shining green in my face. 'God, have mercy on your soul,' says he, lifting a scythe; 'or on your own,' says I, 'raising the loy!'" (Plays, II, p. 103). In this mock epic fight improvised by Christy the whole group can feel the terrible fall of Mahon with his head broken by a blow from Christy.

**Off-stage movements**

Synge's sense of stagecraft is also seen in the effective presentation of powerful group scenes of persons in absentia. For instance, in the third act, Christy's participation in the final events of the village sports is presented off-stage with its full impact communicated to the audience through the witnesses and keen observers on the stage. Jimmy, Philly and Old Mahon almost like a Chorus comment upon Christy's rapid progress defeating all, and declaring victory for himself. Philly suggests to Mahon against Widow Quin's idea of stopping him, "don't mind her. Mount there on the bench and you will have
a view of the whole. They're hurrying before the tide will
rise, and it'd be near over if you went down the pathway through
the crags below" (Plays, II, p. 139). The next stage direction
given by Synge shows his mastery over the medium as an effective
visual art. "Mahon \(^7\) Mounts on bench, Widow Quin beside him. \(^7\)
That is a right view again of the edge of the sea. They're coming
now from the point. He's leading" (Plays, II, p. 139). This
is a sort of running commentary meant for the audience. In
this extraordinary reported action the audience become one with
the characters on the stage sharing their anxiety, delight,
excitement and a final sense of victory by turns:

Widow Quin: He'd lick them if he was running races with
a score itself.

Look at the mule he has kicking the stars.

Widow Quin: There was a lep! \(^7\) Catching hold of MAHON in
her excitement. \(^7\) He's fallen. He's mounted
again! Faith, he's passing them all!

Jimmy: Look at him skelping her!

Philly: And the mountain girls hooshing him on!

Jimmy: It's the last turn! The post's cleared for
them now!

Mahon: Look at the narrow place. He'll be into the
boys! \(^7\) With a yell. \(^7\) Good rider! He's
through it again!

Jimmy: He's neck and neck!

Mahon: Good boy to him! Flames, but he's in!
\(^7\) Great cheering, in which all join. \(^7\)

Mahon: \(^7\) with hesitation \(^7\) What's that? They're
raising him up. They're coming this way.
(Plays, II, p. 141)
This type of commentary is reinforced by the aural effects produced from outside by the village gathering. Here the playwright demands much from the audience in response to the basic theatre elements supplied by him. The development of the character and the growing admiration of the village girls for him is picturesquely depicted through the excited and hilarious expressions of a small group on the stage.

**Christy's mask**

Christy has put on a mask to convince the Mayo people of his brilliant and heroic action. Either willingly or not, the whole group of characters also wear their own masks. The thinness and nature of the masks may vary. They all fall victims to the illusion created. But when the illusion is broken they happily throw off the masks. However Christy either fails to accept the state of broken illusion or cannot remove it. He can remove it only at the risk of his own existence. The mask has become real, an integral and indispensable part of his total being. When Mahon comes back to take revenge upon Christy the latter catching Mahon's stick, shouts in anger, "He's not my father. He's a raving maniac would scare the world." [Pointing to WIDOW QUIN] Herself knows it is true" (Plays, II, p. 161). The irony is that Widow Quin knows that it is not true. Christy completely depends upon the promise of the widow who has agreed to save him on his promise of "a right of way I want, ram, and a load of dung at Michaelmas, the time that
be master here" (Plays, II, p. 131). The pleasure of the audience and their dramatic enjoyment are enhanced with the awareness of the reality already supplied to them by the playwright. A great dramatic situation in terms of audience response and actor's creation is to be found here. They watch, with mixed feelings, Christy anxiously tightening his mask of the hero while the rest of the characters have all angrily thrown away their masks of absorbed and involved participation in this role-play. In the agony of this conflict with the mask and the man Christy attempts to murder his father. But it is not art because there is no role-play or improvisation in real murder. It smells of blood of the nearest and reminds one of Pirandello's Henry IV. The audience-response is creatively controlled by Synge through a sudden change in the attitude of the Christians around him. It is a type of dignified resurrection which takes place in him because he has confidence in his spiritual and physical capacities. He rises to the heights from where he can bless the Mayo villains with a sense of equanimity. "Ten thousand blessings upon all that is here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping life time from this hour to the dawning of the judgement day" (Plays, II, p. 173).

Even when there is resurrection in the total character of Christy, for an actor who has been improvising Christy's improvisation it is a terribly difficult moment. It may affect his psychological status also to be pulled down mercilessly
from the sublime heights of glory to the abject point of contempt and ridicule. This is because the mask has become the man or the actor has become the character. Their identification has become so inextricable that the forcible and brutal severance effected by the rest of the characters is almost a death-knell. It appears to the audience as balloon-burst of disillusionment and the person of Christopher Mahon suddenly resolves itself into a dew. Cyril Cusack is of the opinion that the agony of this "fall" or movement as an actor of the title role of The Playboy of the Western World for several years is intolerable:

It is here that, as an actor, I find the part less than satisfying; here, where the playwright in reach of himself is confronted with a void which is made the play's resolution. It is liberation, but a false one, of the artist in flight from reality; who again we are invited to pursue into the mists in THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN and THE WELL OF THE SAINTS. This may be acceptable as a poetic reality within the experience of the playwright but it falls short of universality.29

Cusack, as an actor, tries to find out the reason of this downfall of the great illusionary character of Christy created by Synge. The actor's problem as he has felt himself is quite obvious. It depends upon the total style of production and the vision of characters conceived by the director and the actors. They must be able to visualize the playwright's conception as well.

Cyril Cusack's criticism of the dramatic experience that "it falls short of universality" is not sound and substantial. And his argument that

Synge, dying so young, had not absorbed fully into his work the nature of the Irish people—only so much as could accommodate his quickening genius; perhaps it was for this reason he did not reach full maturity as a universal dramatist, has also been invalidated. This evaluation by an actor is comparable to another assessment by an equally great actor of *The Playboy of the Western World*. Eamonn Keane who had wide experience of playing in the works of Synge, especially in the role of Christy Mahon, thought along with Yeats that "the play held so much of the mind of Ireland; and that it was the strangest, most beautiful expression in drama of that Irish fantasy." According to Keane, Synge, "with his extraordinary selectivity aided by an uncanny theatrical timing, turned the simple folk-tale into what is, for me at least, the most momentous experience on every conceivable level, since Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* . . . Synge's Ireland was 'an Ireland neither of fact nor of fiction but of a creative revelation.'"

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32 Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.