

John Millington Synge. (1871 – 1909). *The Playboy of the Western World.* (1907).

Summary

Preface

The author explains the origins of the marked language that he employs in this as well as in his other plays. He heard all of the uncommon words and sayings actually used by Irish peasants to whose speech he always paid great attention. He believes that vivid folk imagination, still alive in Ireland, is the source of poetry as well as a means of presenting reality in a work of literature. Reality is especially important on the stage: 'In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple.'

Persons

Christopher Mahon (called CHRISTY): a naturally timid thin young man of about twenty.

OLD MAHON: his father, a squatter [= a farmer occupying land to which he has no legal claim].

MICHAEL James Flaherty: a fat jovial middle-aged widower, a publican [= pub keeper].

Margaret Flaherty (called PEGEEN): his daughter and barmaid, a brisk girl of about twenty, wild but fine.

WIDOW QUIN: a curious widowed woman of about thirty, self-sufficient but lonely and fond of gossip.

SHAWN Keogh: her cousin, a young fat and fair farmer, kind and harmless, but cowardly and dependent.

Philly Cullen and Jimmy Farrell: small farmers.

Sara Tansey, Susan Brady and Honor Blake: village girls.

All of the characters are unrefined peasants, coarse but vital.

Setting

The play takes place in a rough and untidy shebeen [= country pub] in an isolated village on the wild coast of Mayo, a county in the north-west of Ireland. Act I passes on an autumn evening, Acts II and III the following day.

Act I

Pegeen Prepares to Marry Shawn: Pegeen sits at the table in the pub writing a letter. It is an order for her wedding gown, shoes and hat. Shawn, her husband-to-be, enters the pub. He feels awkwardly on finding Pegeen alone. Pegeen does not think of Shawn highly, it was her father who arranged the marriage and who is to profit from the bargain. Pegeen is annoyed with her father because he is to leave her alone in the pub this night. There is a wake for the deceased Kate Cassidy and her father is going to attend. Shawn worries about Pegeen a little because he just came across a strange man lying in a ditch and moaning. Pegeen scolds Shawn for not making sure that the man is not hurt or in need of help. Shawn is frightened when Pegeen warns him that he will bear the responsibility if the stranger dies.

Pegeen Scolds her Father Michael: Michael, Pegeen's father, and some other men enter the pub. Pegeen immediately starts scolding her father for leaving her alone after dark. Michael does not fear for his courageous daughter, she would surely defend herself with her sharp tongue. Pegeen goes on counting the possible dangers for a girl alone, from the lustful harvest boys to the tinkers [= wandering gypsies] camping near the village. Michael suggests that Shawn stay with Pegeen to protect her. Shawn is terrified by the prospect, he fears the condemnation of Father Reilly. Shawn thinks that it is improper for a man to remain alone with an unmarried girl, even if she is just about to become his own wife. Michael attempts to hold Shawn back by force, but he flees. In a minute Shawn returns, retreating from the stranger in the ditch of whom he is afraid.

Christy Introduces Himself as Parricide: The stranger himself enters the pub. It is Christy, weak and weary with eleven days of walking. He asks for a glass of porter and inquires whether peelers [= police] often come to these parts. Michael assures him that they do not. His question raises curiosity among the men. Christy admits that he is actually searched for by police but he hesitates to confess his crime. The men try to guess the deed. Finally Pegeen blames Christy for lying about his being a criminal and Christy, hurt, declares that he killed his father. Flattered by Pegeen's amazement, Christy describes how he halved his father's skull with a loy [= spade]. The men listen to the story with respect. Pegeen persuades his father to employ Christy as a pot-boy [= barman] and promises Christy to hide him from police.

Pegeen Exchanges Shawn for Christy: Michael is satisfied to leave his daughter under the protection of such a brave man and leaves with the other men for the wake. Shawn does not go to the wake, he generally prefers staying at home rather than drinking out with other men. He offers to stay with Pegeen to protect her. He thinks that there is no harm in staying with her now, as they are no more alone. Pegeen refuses to have him and banishes him from the pub. Pegeen readily attends to all Christy's needs to make him feel comfortable. She flirts with the surprised Christy who has had no experience with women as yet. Christy ventures to ask Pegeen whether she is married and to his relief, she denies. Christy tells about his father whom he describes as a violent and tyrannous drunkard. It is the first time that someone is interested in talking with him:

CHRISTY: [very confidentially]: Up to the day I killed my father, there wasn't a person in Ireland knew the kind I was, and I there drinking, waking, eating, sleeping, a quiet, simple poor fellow with no man giving me heed.

Peegen and Widow Quin Fight over Christy: There is a knock on the door. Christy, startled, clings to Peegen. It is Widow Quin who learned the news of Christy from Shawn and Father Reilly. She comes to lead away Christy and lodge him for the night in her house. Widow Quin suggests that she would make Christy a good company because she is like him. Christy wonders whether she, too, killed her father. Widow Quin actually hurt him with a rusted pick, and he died of blood poisoning. She destroyed her husband and buried her children. She admits that it was Father Reilly who sent her to separate Christy from Peegen. Peegen is unwilling to give Christy up. There is a row at the end of which Christy prefers to stay with Peegen. Alone with Christy again, Peegen denies that she is to marry Shawn and calls Widow Quin a liar. Christy lays down to sleep satisfied:

CHRISTY [He settles his bed slowly, feeling the quilt with immense satisfaction.]: Well, it's a clean bed and soft with it, and it's great luck and company I've won me in the end of time, two fine women fighting for the likes of me till I'm thinking this night wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by.

Act II

Christy Entertains His Female Admirers: Christy wakes up bright and cheerful. He washes himself in front of a mirror, pleased with his own reflection. Four village girls, Susan, Honor, Sara and Nelly, enter carefully the house. They heard the news of Christy from Shawn and came to see the curiosity. Christy hides from them in the inner room and goes out meekly only when he is discovered. The girls present Christy with choice food which he accepts with his usual shyness. Widow Quin enters. She orders the girl to make Christy a good breakfast and invites Christy to tell her his story. Christy explains that he killed his father because he wanted him to marry the ugly and ill-reputed Widow Casey. The women are impressed by the narrative, and Christy is flattered.

Shawn Attempts to Bribe Christy: Peegen enters. She is angry to see the company. She harshly orders the women out, treating Widow Quin with special scorn. She tells Christy that there are no news of murder in the papers. There was however an article about the hanging of a man. Peegen elaborates on this sorrowful fate. Christy is miserably frightened. Peegen warns him against chatting with girls who could tell the tale. She is obviously jealous but finally takes mercy on him, promising that he is safe as long as he avoids girls. Shawn enters. He calls Peegen off for an invented errand. Alone with Christy, Shawn offers him a half of a ticket to the Western States and his best clothes if he leaves Peegen alone. Christy, with a newly gained arrogance, proudly refuses.

Widow Quin Bargains with Shawn: Widow Quin enters. Shawn, desperate about losing Peegen, offers her a wealth of stock if she contrives a scheme to win him Peegen back. Widow Quin promises to do so. She plans to marry Christy herself so that Peegen would be free for Shawn. The bargain is closed, and Shawn happily leaves. Christy reappears in Shawn's clothes which Shawn let him try on in case he should change his mind and accept his bribe. Christy spots a man coming and recognizes his supposedly dead father. Seized by terror, he hides himself. Old Mahon enters. He inquires from Widow Quin after his son. He describes Christy as a lazy, clumsy and useless creature. He shows Widow Quin the ugly wound on his head which Christy caused him. Widow Quin is amused and sends Old Mahon away in a random direction.

Widow Quin Bargains with Christy: Widow Quin assures Christy that Peegen will not have him when she learns the news that Christy did not kill his father perfectly. Christy is on the verge of tears. Widow Quin offers herself for a wife, but Christy desires Peegen only. Widow Quin agrees to keep the secret. She will help Christy in exchange for stock and benefits to provide by Christy when he becomes the master of the house. If Old Mahon returns, she will tell everyone that he is not Christy's father but a lunatic. Christy is content with the bargain. Some girls run in and announce that there is a sports competition held outside and that Christy should take part. On making sure that Peegen is there, too, Christy leaves with the girls to accompany her.

Act III

Old Mahon Recognizes Christy: Christy wins all the competitions in racing, jumping or dancing, which boosts his self-confidence. Old Mahon reappears in the pub, not having caught up with his son. The two men present there, Jimmy and Philly, become suspicious when they hear that Old Mahon was wounded by his own son. Widow Quin manages to convince them that the man is insane from his wound. Old Mahon tells about his son who was always a pitiful simple-minded boy, tortured and laughed at by others. Cheering is heard outside as the villagers celebrate Christy, 'the champion Playboy of the Western World'. Old Mahon recognizes Christy, but Widow Quin orders the men to hold him, which they do. Old Mahon seemingly accepts that he is mistaken and leaves the pub.

Christy Proposes to Peegen: Christy won all the competition prizes but he seeks Peegen as the crowning prize. The couple talks amorously to each other, elaborating on the promised joy of love-making. Peegen is ready to marry her brave hero at once. Her father returns from the wake drunk. He is frustrated by Peegen's decision to marry Christy rather than Shawn. Shawn himself is desperate but he does not dare to fight with Christy. Neither does Michael. Christy threatens Shawn with a loy and makes him flee from the pub. On seeing that he is helpless, Michael consents with the marriage and gives the couple his blessing:

MICHAEL: A daring fellow is the jewel of the world, and a man did split his father's middle with a single clout, should have the bravery of ten, so may God and Mary and St Patrick bless you, and increase you from this mortal day.

Christy Kills Old Mahon Again: Old Mahon reappears in the pub and confronts Christy. Widow Quin fails to save the situation this time and Christy is revealed as a liar. Pegeen, bitterly disappointed and enraged, dismisses the fallen hero. Old Mahon starts to beat Christy who blames his father for faking death, calling him a liar himself. Old Mahon is about to lead Christy away, but Christy threatens him with a loy. He chases his father off stage, there is a great uproar, and Christy returns to announce that he killed his father again. Widow Quin urges Christy to run away with her and save himself from the gallows. Christy refuses, hoping to win Pegeen back with his deed.

Old Mahon and Christy Depart: The law-fearing men decide to give Christy in lest they should get in trouble themselves. Pegeen approves of the decision and helps the men bind Christy with a rope. Christy resists with a newly won pride and courage. Intent on dying a heroic death, Christy bites Shawn's leg. The men call Pegeen to burn Christy's leg in order to pacify him, and she does so. Old Mahon crawls into the room quite alive and startles everybody. He releases Christy and is about to depart with him. Christy reverses the situation, making as if he were leading his father and not the other way round:

OLD MAHON: [...] but my son and myself will be going our own way, and we'll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo, and the fools is here. (To Christy, who is freed.) Come on now.

CHRISTY: Go with you, is it? I will then, like a gallant captain with his heathen slave. Go on now and I'll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal and washing my spuds, for I'm master of all fights from now.

Shawn approaches Pegeen with relief, but she boxes his ears and concludes the play with her lamenting the loss of 'the only Playboy of the Western World'.

Analysis

Language: The language of the play is remarkable not only for the use of some regional lexical items but also and especially for the highly marked syntax. In general, sentence condensers are preferred to dependent clauses and verbs with *-ing* endings are exploited in contexts where these forms would not come in question in standard English: 'If I am a queer daughter, it's a queer father'd be leaving me lonesome these twelve hours of dark, and *I piling the turf with the dogs barking, and the calves mooing, and my own teeth rattling* with the fear'. Abundance of cleft structures is normally used: '*It's* above at the cross-roads *he is...*' [= He is at the cross-roads...]. Also, reflexive pronouns are commonly used in non-reflexive function: 'Where's *himself*?' [= Where is he?]. Another peculiarity is the occasional periphrastic form with *after* used in the function of present perfect: 'Aren't we *after making* a good bargain...' [= Haven't we made a good bargain... ?].

Comedy: The play may be described as a subversive comedy with slightly more serious undertones. It is a romantic comedy in that it deals with the confusions of young lovers and obstacles posed to their relationship. The normally expected happy ending however does not take place. The play does not conclude with the reunion of Pegeen and Shawn but with Pegeen grieving the loss of her ideal man. The play comically exposes the folly of women who are attracted to heroes. It puts on its head the notion of a heroic deed in making a self-proclaimed parricide hero in the eyes of the villagers. The women, not only Pegeen but also Widow Quin and the other girls, are being especially foolish in their pursuit of Christy, but also the men are naïve enough to respect Christy for his deed. The folly of the villagers is further increased by the fact that they are not deceived by a clever trickster, but by a simpleton who manages to deceive even himself.