

The Playboy of the Western World/ Riders to the Sea

John M. Synge

Curriculum Unit

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Introduction

The short life and brief career of John Millington Synge was one of the brightest lights in the Celtic Revival, a literary movement which was not only the fruit of Irish literature, but also one of the seeds of modernism. An educated, middle class intellectual with interests in philosophy and music, Synge met William Butler Yeats (later a Nobel laureate) who advised him to turn from things continental toward things Celtic and Irish. This led to Synge's visits to the Aran islands and the western, Celtic parts of his native Ireland. He quickly learned to love the music of the language he heard spoken: Gaelic and a distinct brand of Celtic Anglo-Irish. He also found, in listening to the tales and legends of the fishermen and horse breeders, that these people held the traces of a Celtic philosophy that had all but disappeared. It was from these visits that Synge heard stories that he shaped into *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Riders to the Sea*.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge brings to the stage Christy Mahon, outlaw and man of passion, who learns that a man can be what society wants him to be, and that once he has changed, he cannot go back to the person he once was. Synge also gives theater the lively and headstrong Margaret Flaherty, "Pegeen Mike," who loves her playboy so much that she will challenge the whole of her family and community to accept her beliefs, only to lose her playboy when she learns that for a thing to be real and true, it must be in actuality the thing we imagine it to be. The love of these two is set against the closed society of the simple people of County Mayo, complete with publicans and lusty widows and wimpy bachelors. This wild tale of tall tales and brave deeds, either done or described, would be easily classified as a perfect comedy, except that the two lovers are fated not to wed, and Pegeen's lament at the end leaves the audience with a bittersweet feeling.

In *Riders to the Sea*, Synge produced perhaps the most compact and singularly devastating one-act tragedy ever written. From the moment the play opens with its hushed tones, its dim turf fire, and its covert bundle of clothing, the audience, aware of the technique of foreshadowing, knows that Maurya and Nora and Cathleen must face the fact that Michael died in a storm at sea. Synge turns the tragic torque up even tighter as the audience watches young Bartley, who must now be "the man of the house," head out to transact horse business, and ride off (according to Maurya) with Michael's ghost. Perhaps in no other work produced during the Celtic Revival has the bleak and difficult lifestyle of the Irish peasant been so poignantly presented.

Although Synge died young (only thirty-eight), he left readers with six plays (of varying length and completion); a book of poems; memorable records of the Irish people and characters of the Aran islands, Wicklow, Connemara, and West Kerry; and a wealth of articles on art and theater. Even more, with Yeats and Lady August Gregory, he helped to establish the Abbey Theater, Ireland's great national theater, which helped launch the careers of Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, and Brian Friel, and which continues to present Synge's plays to the world.

Lesson 1

The Abbey: The Irish National Theater

Objectives

- To examine the ritual origins of theater
- To explore historical background on the founding of the Abbey Theater
- To read Synge's ideas on Celtic theater
- To draft a document outlining the goals of a national theater

Notes to the Teacher

Theater, like poetry, seems to have had its origin in ritual. Primitive cultures no doubt acted out songs, prayers, and poems to the gods to bring on good hunting or crops, mourn loss, or celebrate birth. In western civilization, the Greek theater is the first to rise out of ritual into art.

The Greek playwrights wrote comedies (*komos* means festival) as part of the celebrations for Dionysus, god of fertility, in the spring. Also staged were tragedies (*tragos* means ritual sacrifice of a goat). The comedies, like the early tragedies, involve *agon* or debate, hence protagonist (the first speaker) and antagonist (who argues against). In the early Dionysian festivals, a group of citizens, called the chorus, sang hymns in praise of the gods and/or abused the bystanders in the *theatron* or "seeing place" where the plays were staged. Later, the chorus came to represent statements of civil or social commentary upon the conflicts (comic or tragic) between the protagonist and the antagonist.

Aristophanes (448–380 B. C.), Athens' greatest comic playwright, wrote in a style called Old Comedy. Old Comedy exaggerates, ridicules, and parodies—through cheap and obvious symbols—stock characters and situations, especially mocking politics, philosophies, and social conventions. Old Comedy uses high comedy through high intellectual (witty) laughter at folly and pretention; it uses low comedy (common and vulgar) through gags, slapstick, clownish physical activity, and farce. The New Comedy which followed made fun of manners and actions, much like modern sitcoms.

The structure of a typical Aristophanic Comedy involves the following: *prologos*, where the problem is sketched out; *parados*, where the cho-

rus opines upon the problem; *agon*, where debate between protagonist and antagonist occurs; and *parabasis*, in which the chorus leader criticizes the crowd and airs his view. Aristophanic critic Douglas Parker cites the technical excellence of these plays for their tight formal unity, economy of movement, realism of characterization, and range of feeling. Since there is hardly a comic playwright that is not indebted to Aristophanes and the New Comedy, students will recognize these elements at play in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*.

The Playboy of the Western World was first acted, as part of a general Celtic Revival at the Abbey Theater in Dublin, Ireland on January 26, 1907. Begun as the Irish Literary Theater (1899–1901), reformed as the Irish National Dramatic Company (1902–1904), the Abbey Theater established itself (since 1905) as the principal Irish theater group. As such, it was part of a movement to bring to Ireland "Irish" plays, those which retold the Celtic legends, and those which presented the Irish peasants in a favorable (and romanticized) light by creating a distinctively national literature; by drawing from Irish history, legend, folklore, and native literary models; by presenting Celtic and Irish plays; by presenting Irish characters, atmosphere, ideals, and color; and by creating a taste for sincere and original drama. While the (traditional) plays of Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats were well received by Dublin audiences, Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* drew criticism from church and commoner alike, mostly for its "misrepresentations" (i. e., nonromanticized) view of the Irish peasantry.

Procedure

1. Begin by introducing the idea of ritual—perhaps by discussing birthday parties, Thanksgiving, or a winter festival: Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa. Ask students whether they view these as typically American or generally universal rituals. Share information as needed on Greek theater and *The Playboy of the Western World* as both a romantic and a modern play.

2. Focus the lesson by asking students to identify particular cultural aspects invented (or perfected) in America (football, rock and roll, rap, basketball, jazz, baseball, movies). What do they say about us as a nation? How do we feel when we believe someone is mocking these things?
3. Distribute **Handout 1** and allow students time to complete the activity. When completed, have students share their responses with the class.
Suggested Responses:
 1. *a seeing place*
 2. *festival*
 3. *ritual sacrifice of a goat*
 4. *the first speaker in a debate*
 5. *the second speaker in a debate*
 6. *where the problem is sketched out*
 7. *where the chorus offers an opinion upon the action*
4. Distribute **Handout 2**. Allow students time to complete the activity. When completed, have students share their responses with the class.
Suggested Responses:
 1. *The Gaelic League, an association for the preservation of the Irish language; a movement for the development of agriculture; a new intellectual ferment which is creating a literature*
 2. *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry, William Carleton, 1828*
 3. *The Literary Theatre*
 4. *During an Irish language play, the whole audience (the Gaelic League) sang "the old songs of the people" in Irish.*
5. Distribute **Handout 3** and allow students time to complete the activity. When completed, have students share their responses with the class.
6. Distribute **Handout 4** and allow students time to complete the activity. When completed, have students share their responses with the class. It may be interesting to draft this as a statement or manifesto which can be used to form judgments upon plays, books, television shows, movies, videos, etc.

The Playboy of the Western World/Riders to the Sea
Lesson 1
Handout 1

Name _____
Date _____

The Language of Theater Is Rooted in Ritual

Directions: Research, using a standard or etymological dictionary, the origins of the following theater terms.

1. Theater

2. Comedy

3. Tragedy

4. Protagonist

5. Antagonist

6. Prologue

7. Parody

The Playboy of the Western World/Riders to the Sea
Lesson 3
Handout 11

Name _____
Date _____

Identifying Archetypes

Directions: Using the text of *The Playboy of the Western World*, complete the following chart on archetypal patterns.

Archetype	Character	Supporting Details
Hero		
Hero who dies young		
Old king		
Foreigner/outsider		
Outcast		
Temptress		
Earth mother		
Star-crossed lovers		
Trickster		
Scapegoat		
Task		
Journey		
Birth/rebirth cycle		