

The Playboy of the Western World



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. M. SYNGE

J.M. Synge was born to John Hatch and Kathleen Traill Synge in a Dublin suburb. With his father dying soon after, Synge was brought up by his devoutly religious mother alongside his four siblings. He was homeschooled due to poor health. Initially wanting to be a musician, Synge studied music theory, as well as Irish history and language at Dublin's Trinity College. In 1893, he moved to Germany for further music study, but stage fright hampered his musical ambitions. Later studying at the Sorbonne in Paris, Synge met his lifelong friend, poet W.B. Yeats, who famously instructed him to "give up Paris" and spend time on the Aran Islands off Ireland's West Coast, in order to express a life that has never found expression. In 1897, he had a swollen gland removed back in Ireland; this was an early but undiagnosed indication of Hodgkin's disease. After following Yeats' advice and studying the people of the Aran Islands, Synge began writing plays. He was heavily involved with the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, which was set up by Yeats and others to give artistic expression to specifically Irish culture. Synge's sixth play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, was controversial in its attempts to portray rural Irish life and language, causing riots in its first performances due to the perception that it was unfairly degrading to the Irish people. Soon after, he was engaged to actress Molly Allgood, who played Pegeen Mike in the same play. It was during the writing of this play that Synge's health deteriorated. He died aged 37 in a Dublin nursing home.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ireland, now partitioned into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (the latter of which remains a part of the United Kingdom), is an island with a turbulent history. The nineteenth century saw Ireland officially absorbed into the United Kingdom, though much of it had been under English rule going as far back as the twelfth century. Accordingly, there was—and to a degree, still is—huge tensions between those who wanted to be part of the U.K. and those who fought for Irish independence. These tensions were and are intimately linked to religious divide between Catholics and Protestants, though these do not map onto the political scenario neatly and precisely. The mid-nineteenth century in Ireland saw the Great Famine, resulting in around one million deaths, mass emigration and further antagonism between Ireland and its English rulers. From the 1870s onwards, the Irish Home Rule movement sought to give Ireland autonomy within the context of the British parliament. By 1907, much of Ireland generally believed itself to be ready for self-rule and to be disassociated

from the British Empire. Ultimately, there were many competing ideas and visions for Ireland's destiny, which in part explains the desire of Yeats, Synge and their contemporaries to develop a cultural tradition specifically centered around Ireland's history and its peoples.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The foremost influence on the language of *The Playboy of the Western World* has to be the Irish people themselves. In the preface to the play, Synge was keen to stress that there are only "one or two words" within the text that he hadn't heard "among the country people of Ireland." As part of the Irish Literary Revival—also known as the Irish Literary Renaissance and nicknamed the Celtic Twilight—Synge shared the ambitions of many of his peers to contribute to a specifically Irish literature allied closely to political nationalism and the Gaelic literary heritage of Ireland's past. The revival thus had twinned purposes of bringing the mythic literature of the past into full view *and* giving voice to the contemporary political situation. The play's attempt to render a realistic portrait of Irish life can also be considered part of the wider move in European theater, by playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, away from melodrama towards a dramatic experience closer to real life. W.B. Yeats' work was of great influence on Synge, who followed Yeats' suggestion to spend time amongst Irish rural communities to help create a literature specific to them. Synge is now generally considered the foremost playwright of his generation, with *The Playboy of the Western World* looked on as his masterpiece. Brian Friel's 1980 play [Translations](#) makes for an interesting counterpoint to *The Playboy of the Western World*; it too concerns an Irish village community and centers on issues of language, Irish history, and English colonialism (though technically Ireland was only ever a kingdom, not a colony). Both Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht expressed that the play had a strong influence on their own work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Playboy of the Western World*
- **When Written:** 1905-1907
- **Where Written:** Ireland
- **When Published:** First performed in January, 1907
- **Literary Period:** Irish Literary Revival
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** A pub on the West Coast of Ireland
- **Climax:** Christy Mahon tries to kill his father, Old Mahon.
- **Antagonist:** Old Mahon, Pegeen Mike

- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Starting a Riot. The first performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* caused a riot among the audience, who objected to the principle that Irish English—the set of English dialects spoken in Ireland, in which the play is written—could ever be anything other than the language of the country’s English oppressors. They also objected what they saw as a degrading depiction of Irish rural life and its perceived sexual indecency.

True Tales. Many of the stories alluded to by characters within the play are tales that Synge had himself heard amongst the Irish people. For example, the moment in which Pegeen Mike accuses Widow Quin of having reared a black ram at her “own breast” was based on a story told to Synge by a landlord in West Kerry.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Playboy of the Western World takes place in a run-down pub in the countryside of the North West of Ireland in the early 1900s. The pub’s young barmaid, Margaret Flaherty, better known as Pegeen Mike, is making a list of items she needs for her upcoming wedding to Shawn Keogh, her second cousin. When Shawn comes into the pub, Pegeen tells him of her worry of being left alone in the pub all night—her father, the pub owner Michael Flaherty, is going to be at a wake. Shawn is too afraid of what the local priest, Father Reilly, would think if he were to stay overnight with Pegeen, especially as he needs permission from the priest to approve their wedding between cousins. Pegeen berates him for being so god-fearing, and Shawn makes things worse when he lets slip that, on his way over, he heard what sounded like a young man “groaning wicked like a maddening dog” in a ditch. Pegeen is exasperated that Shawn was too cowardly to investigate.

Soon, Michael Flaherty comes in with his friends, Jimmy Farrell and Philly O’Cullen. The three men are about to go to the wake, an occasion that will last all night and involve a lot of drinking. Pegeen tells her father of her fear of being alone during the night. Michael, Jimmy and Philly try to convince Shawn to stay over, who dodges past his future father-in-law and runs out of the pub.

Shawn soon returns, scared that the man from the ditch is chasing him. That man, Christy Mahon, comes in. He is tired, frightened and dirty, and on the run from the law. Michael, Jimmy, Philly and Pegeen interrogate Christy about the nature of his crime, which he eventually reveals to be patricide—murdering his father. He explains that he killed his father by striking him over the head with a **loy** when they were in a potato field. Assuming that he must have had good reason

to kill his “da,” the locals are mightily impressed by Christy’s courageous deed. Sensing an opportunity, Michael offers Christy the vacant job of “pot-boy,” which will mean Pegeen has someone to keep her safe overnight. Michael, Jimmy and Philly go to the wake. Shawn, now worried about Christy’s presence in the pub, offers to stay—Pegeen tells him to “go on then to Father Reilly.”

Left alone, Christy tells Pegeen more details about his life and the murder of his father, describing a life of rural drudgery and his father’s tyrannical character. During this conversation, she calls him handsome, and the two develop an attraction towards each other. Soon enough, Widow Quin, a thirty-year-old woman who killed her husband, arrives at the pub. She has instructions from Father Reilly and Shawn to take Christy with her back to her house, an idea that Pegeen fiercely resists. The two women squabble over Christy until he eventually insists that he will stay at the pub. Widow Quin leaves, and Christy, in his first comfortable bed for a long time, feels “great luck” at his new situation, wishing he had killed his father sooner.

Act Two takes place the next morning. Christy, still thinking about the attentions of Pegeen and Widow Quin, admires his face in a looking-glass. Four local village girls, Susan Brady, Sara Tansey, Honor Blake and Nelly McLaughlin, come to the pub, excited to catch a glimpse of the young man who killed his father. Christy tries to hide, but they find him and give him gifts from their farms. They notice the looking-glass, which he is trying to hide behind his back, laughing that “them that kills their fathers is a vain lot surely.” Widow Quin comes in and tells the village girls to make Christy breakfast. At Widow Quin’s and the girls’ request, Christy tells the story of how he killed his father, using a chicken bone as a theatrical prop and evidently enjoying the attention. Pegeen comes in and shoos Widow Quin and the girls away. Feeling jealous, she teases Christy by convincing him that the village girls, who she says are often in contact with the “peelers” (local police), might cause the law to come after him. He resigns himself to leaving the pub and moving on, lamenting how he’ll “not be waking near you [Pegeen] another dawn of the year till the two of us do arise to hope or judgment with the saints of God.” She finally gives in and reassures him that he will be safe at the pub. Shawn comes in with Widow Quin and gets Pegeen out of the pub by telling her that her sheep are misbehaving. With Pegeen out of earshot, Shawn offers Christy a one-way ticket to America and his best clothes in exchange for Christy leaving the pub forever, fearing that Christy will get in the way of his marriage to Pegeen. When Christy takes the clothes but refuses the ticket, Widow Quin hatches a plan with Shawn for her to marry Christy in exchange for a reward from Shawn consisting of a ram, a cow, and right of way across his property.

Just as Christy is swaggering around in his smart clothes and enjoying his newfound status, he spots his father, Old Mahon, wounded but not dead, wandering near the pub. Christy

frantically hides behind the door as Mahon comes in and asks Widow Quin if she has seen his son, who he describes as a “fool” and the “laughing joke of every woman.” She buys Christy some time by saying she thinks she saw him heading to the coast to catch a boat, sending Mahon off in that direction. Christy begs Widow Quin not to tell Pegeen that his father is still alive. She suggests that he marry her instead of pursuing Pegeen, given that they have murder/attempted murder in common, and promises him a good life. Christy is steadfast in his commitment to Pegeen and asks Widow Quin to help him; she agrees to keep his secret in exchange for provisions from the pub when he marries Pegeen.

Act Three takes place later on the same day. Jimmy and Philly are in the pub discussing Christy’s victories at the village games and sports, and point out how often he mentions his murderous act. Just then, Old Mahon returns. He shows the two men his head wound and explains that it was his son who hit him, arousing Philly’s suspicion. Widow Quin enters, shocked to see Mahon again. She tries to convince Jimmy and Philly that Mahon is a madman who, having earlier said that his wound was inflicted by a “tinker,” changed his story on hearing about Christy Mahon. This persuades Jimmy, but Philly still suspects that Old Mahon might be Christy’s father. Mahon hears cheering outside, which Widow Quin explains is for “a young lad, the champion playboy of the western world.” Mahon takes a look outside, sure that the man in question is Christy; Widow Quin points out that he must be going mad, as he had earlier described his son as a loser—certainly not someone who would be winning the affections of an entire village. Mahon is temporarily convinced that he has gone mad and leaves; Jimmy and Philly go after him.

Christy comes in, surrounded by a crowd of admirers including Pegeen and the village girls. The crowd gives him prizes for winning their sports games. Pegeen gets the others to leave so that Christy can have a short respite from their attentions. Christy, buoyed by his success, convinces Pegeen to marry him, using poetic language to conjure an image of their future together. Michael enters, drunk from the wake and supported by Shawn. After some hesitation, he is convinced by Pegeen and Christy that they should marry, especially by the thought that his grandchildren will become “little gallant swearers” rather than “puny weeds” like Shawn.

Just as Michael joins Pegeen and Christy’s hands together to celebrate their engagement, Mahon comes in for a third time, followed by the crowd and Widow Quin. He runs at Christy and starts beating him. Christy tries to convince everyone that Mahon is a lunatic stranger, but they don’t believe him. They quickly turn on him for having deceived them, with Pegeen especially dismayed at Christy for being “an ugly liar.” Christy, increasingly desperate, chases Mahon out of the pub with a **loy**. Outside, he deals him another blow, thinking that this one will be fatal. The crowd, led by Michael, are concerned that Christy

has now committed murder within their community, and that this will attract unwanted attention from the “peelers” (the police). They decide to hang Christy and bind him in rope. Pegeen, still furious, threatens Christy with fire. Christy fights back aggressively and bites Shawn’s leg.

As Christy is being pulled toward the door, Old Mahon crawls back into the pub. He asks why Christy is tied up, to which Michael apologetically replies that they have to take care of Christy themselves to ensure the safety of the wider community. Mahon loosens Christy’s ropes and insists that his son will be leaving with him. As they leave, Christy states boldly that, from now on, he will be the “gallant captain,” and his father the “heathen slave.” Christy wishes blessings on the pub community, saying that he will “go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day.” With Christy gone, Shawn tries to talk to Pegeen about their engagement, but she just hits him around the head. She pulls a shawl over her and breaks out into “wild lamentation,” crying out after Christy: “I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only playboy of the western world.”



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Christopher “Christy” Mahon – Christy Mahon is the central character of the play. He arrives at Michael Flaherty’s village pub on the run from the law, hoping he can find shelter. When he reveals his crime—the murder of his tyrannical father, Old Mahon, with a **loy**—he quickly wins the respect of the local community, who view him as a kind of heroic and mythic figure. Michael offers him a job as a “penny pot-boy” at the pub, thus placing in front of Christy the promise of a better life, one that the young man is keen to live in the company of Pegeen Mike. As everyone eagerly asks Christy to tell his story, he grows in confidence, his speech shifting from clipped, nervous sentences to more ornate and rich passages of poetic description. When he sees, to his horror, the figure of his father coming into the pub, Christy hides before getting Widow Quin to help him keep the secret that his father isn’t dead. When Widow Quin manages to get rid of Old Mahon, Christy relaxes back into his new life, becoming more of a hero in the villagers’ eyes by competing in and winning their village sports and games and constantly retelling his murderous story. His transformation is complete when he convinces Pegeen Mike to marry him, seducing her with beautiful words and the promise of their future together. This fortune quickly turns, however, when Old Mahon returns again and attacks him. The revelation that Old Mahon is not dead quickly unravels Christy’s heroic status, making the villagers—including Pegeen—try to kill him. He puts up a strong fight, showing that at least part of his transformation is genuine. This is confirmed by the play’s ending, in which he departs with Old Mahon, insisting that now

he will be the “captain,” and his father will be “the heathen slave.” He even thanks the villagers for aiding him in finding courage and bravado. The play’s title refers to Christy, with *playboy* suggesting all at once a kind of trickster/actor, someone who is successful athletically, and someone who has a “playful” spirit.

Pegeen Mike – Pegeen, whose full name is Margaret Flaherty, is the forthright and attractive young barmaid at the village pub, and the daughter of Michael Flaherty. When the play opens, Pegeen is engaged to wed her second cousin, Shawn Keogh, though clearly finds his cowardice and religious anxieties exasperating. When Christy Mahon arrives, Pegeen is impressed by the bravery of his deed (killing his father, Old Mahon) and seduced by his way with words. She competes with Widow Quin for Christy’s affections, insisting that Christy stay at the pub to allay her fears of the long, dark night, especially as neither Shawn nor her father will be there. Pegeen has a romantic side to her character, often mentioning and mythologizing storytellers and poets. This contributes to her falling for Christy, who seems in every way the opposite kind of man to Shawn. Accordingly, she persuades her father to let her marry Christy rather than Shawn. Ultimately, though, this romanticism also masks naiveté: she turns on Christy when it turns out that his father, Old Mahon, is only injured, not dead, even though Christy quickly proves himself capable of the very same violence that so enamored Pegeen in the beginning. The difference, of course, is that Pegeen likes the mythical story of Christy’s father-slaying much more than the reality of having the violence take place right in front of her. When it is revealed that Christy’s father is still alive, Pegeen is furious at Christy for his dishonesty and joins in with the villagers’ attempt to hang the newcomer. But when Christy leaves with his father, boasting that from now on he *will* live the kind of romantic, vagrant life that the villagers believed him to lead, Pegeen quickly laments his loss, throwing a shawl over her head and crying after Christy as he returns to the mysterious wider world from which he came.

Widow Quin – Widow Quin is a woman of thirty years who acts as a kind of rival to Pegeen Mike. Not much is told about her past, but the audience does find out that she killed her husband and has had to bury her children. She displays a certain lustiness towards Christy Mahon when he arrives, feeling that they have (justified) murder in common. She plays an important role in the play, being the first character to discover that Old Mahon is in fact still alive. She is also crafty, making two deals within the course of the play. The first of these is with Shawn Keogh, who offers farm animals and turf in exchange for her trying to marry Christy and thus remove him as a rival for Pegeen’s affections; this fails. The second deal comes when she agrees to keep Christy’s secret that Old Mahon is still alive in exchange for similar rewards as and when he gets married to Pegeen. As part of this, she tries to convince

the locals that Old Mahon is a madman who only thinks Christy is his son because he has heard the story of Christy’s deed. This, of course, fails too, when the villagers come to believe that Old Mahon is who he says he is.

Old Mahon / Christy’s Father – Old Mahon is Christy Mahon’s father. Christy thinks that he has killed his father with a blow to the head, and describes him as tyrannical, rude, and a drunk. Before too long, though, Old Mahon turns up at the village pub, looking for his son. His description of Christy is just as disparaging as his son’s of him—he thinks Christy is a loser, too lazy to work, and too shy to speak to women. Old Mahon is hell-bent on revenge against his son for striking him over the head with a **loy**. He is temporarily convinced that he is mad when he sees the man he thinks is Christy seemingly doing well at sports and confidently enjoying the admiration of the village—which he views as totally out of character for his son. Soon enough, though, he realizes that the popular “playboy of the western world” *is* Christy and attacks him, receiving another blow to the head. His paternal instincts kick in when the village turns on Christy, leading him to free his son from the ropes that bind him and call on them to leave the “villainy” and “fools” of the small village community. As the father and son depart, Synge hints at one key difference between their old life together and their future. Christy now insists that *he* will be the “gallant captain” to his father’s “heathen slave,” signaling a possible reversal in which of the two men holds authority over the other.

Shawn Keogh – Shawn Keogh is Pegeen Mike’s fat and fair second cousin. At the start of the play, he is due to marry her, waiting only on special dispensation from the local priest, Father Reilly, to give permission for the two cousins to wed. He is cowardly and god-fearing, too scared to spend the night alone with Pegeen Mike when she expresses her worry at being left in the pub alone overnight. Feeling threatened by the new arrival, Christy Mahon—who seems to be brave, daring, and attractive—Shawn tries to convince his rival to leave by offering him a ticket on a ferry to America and some of his best clothes. He also tries to bribe Widow Quin to marry Christy to remove the threat to his engagement. His attempts to get rid of Christy ultimately fail, leading Shawn to cooperate with his fellow villagers, who are incensed at the fact Christy’s story of killing his father turns out to be false, in trying to hang the newcomer. When Christy eventually leaves the village, Pegeen makes it clear that she no longer wants to marry Shawn.

Michael James Flaherty / Pegeen’s Father – Michael Flaherty is the rotund and jovial owner of the village pub. He is absent from most of the play, attending a wake with his friends Philly O’Cullen and Jimmy Farrell. He is Pegeen Mike’s father and ultimately has authority over who she may marry. Though he is initially in favor her marrying her hapless second cousin, Shawn Keogh, Michael’s admiration of Christy Mahon’s heroic actions makes him change his mind in favor of the newcomer. When it transpires, however, that Christy has not killed his father, Old

Mahon, like he says has, Michael leads the villagers in an attempt to either hang Christy or turn him into the law. He does so out of a desire to protect his community from its own unwanted attention from the “peelers” (police), fearful of being “ruined” or hanged himself.

Philly O’Cullen – Jimmy Farrell is one of the regulars at Michael Flaherty’s pub, and a good friend of the owner too. When Old Mahon comes to the pub looking for his son, Philly begins to suspect that the man is Christy’s father and that Christy’s story about killing his “da” might not be true.

Sara Tansey – Sara Tansey is one of the four giggly young village girls who live near Michael Flaherty’s pub. They make an appearance in Act Two, eager to hear Christy Mahon’s fearsome story of killing his father, Old Mahon. Sara brings Christy a gift of duck eggs from her farm. Sara also tries to disguise Christy in her petticoat when the villagers turn on him in Act Three, but he refuses.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Father Reilly – Father Reilly never appears in the play, but is an unseen religious authority. He is the local priest, whom Shawn is eager to please in order to get approval for his proposed marriage to his second cousin, Pegeen Mike.

Jimmy Farrell – Jimmy Farrell is one of the regulars at Michael Flaherty’s pub, and a good friend of the owner. He is a farmer who lives nearby.

Susan Brady – Susan Brady is one of the four young and giggly village girls who live near Michael Flaherty’s pub. She and her friends appear in Act Two, eager to hear Christy Mahon’s impressive story of killing his father, Old Mahon.

Honor Blake – Honor Blake lives near Michael Flaherty’s pub and is one of the four giggling girls who is keen to hear Christy Mahon’s story of killing his father, Old Mahon.

Nelly McLaughlin – Nelly McLaughlin is one of the four young village girls who live near Michael Flaherty’s pub. She and her friends fawn over Christy Mahon and his gruesome story of killing his father, Old Mahon. Nelly gives Christy a hen from her farm as a present.



HEROISM

The Playboy of the Western World is a study on the nature of heroism and hero worship, as rough-and-tumble stranger Christy Mahon arrives in a small village in rural Ireland and is quickly deemed a hero, only to lose his status in a matter of hours. The play examines the way in which a hero is created—part myth, part reality—but also questions this process, showing it to be ultimately unstable and arguably quite fickle, at least within this particular rural Irish community. The play asks what constitutes a hero, considering the community’s capacity to buy into heroism and, by turn, to reject it when it no longer satisfies their standards.

The entirety of the play is set in a quiet country pub somewhere in a small village on the West Coast of Ireland. Synge uses the play’s opening to create a sense that this is a place crying out for a hero. The country pub is deserted, and the darkness of the approaching night is looming. Pegeen Mike, Michael Flaherty’s daughter, is scared of being left in the pub alone: “I’m asking only what way I’ll pass these twelve hours of dark, and not take my death with the fear.” This creates an imposing sense of fear that particularly emphasizes the isolation of the location. None of the men are willing to stay with Pegeen that night. Her father is going to a rowdy funeral wake nearby with the pub regulars, while her fiancé, the cowardly Shawn Keogh, is too afraid of the judgment of the local priest, Father Reilly, should he dare to be alone Pegeen before they are wed. To make matters worse, Shawn thinks he heard a “fellow” in a nearby ditch, “groaning wicked like a maddening dog”; he was too afraid to investigate. Through this set-up, Synge creates a kind of vacuum based on a lack of bravery into which a hero could enter.

The man outside turns out to be Christy Mahon, who comes into the pub and explains that he has been on the run for eleven days since “killing” his father, Old Mahon. The sense of mystery and danger, combined with his growing self-confidence based on the villagers’ attentions, fashions him into a hero. When Christy comes in, the pub’s elders—Michael Flaherty, Philly O’Cullen, and Jimmy Farrell—quiz him on why he’s on the run. They gleefully consider what sort of crime he might have committed, and, on learning that he killed his father with a **loy**, are impressed. Christy justifies the patricide on the grounds that his father was an immoral and oppressive figure. Michael subsequently offers Christy a job in the pub and asks him to stay the night to ease Pegeen’s fears of being alone.

Christy quickly wins the affections of Pegeen and Widow Quin, a woman who Shawn and Father Reilly send to the pub to try and lead Christy away, concerned that he will tempt Pegeen and put her engagement to Shawn at risk. The two women admire Christy, both for his physical appearance and what they see as his brave ability to mete out justice as he sees fit. Christy, emboldened by this veneration, takes part in the village games the following day, winning everything and securing his status as



THEMES

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the titular “playboy of the western world.” This quick transition from outsider to hero suggests that the community has a latent longing for a figurehead, somebody who embodies their values of independence, justice, and bravado.

However, Christy’s heroic status is short-lived, punctured by the arrival of his father—injured, but very much still alive. The community swiftly turns on Christy, angered by what they see as a betrayal. Synge therefore shows the village folk to be a fickle bunch, highlighting the instability of Christy’s heroic identity. Old Mahon comes looking for Christy, proving Christy’s story to be (accidentally) untrue. He paints his son as a distinctly *unheroic* figure—foolish, fearful of confrontation and too shy to talk to women.

Despite Christy’s attempts, with the help of Widow Quin, to pretend that his father is just a mad stranger, the village folk quickly change their mind about him (Pegeen included, who has since agreed to marry him instead of Shawn). Ironically, Christy then strikes another blow on his father’s head, again with a loy; this too fails to kill him. In resorting to violence for the second time, he demonstrates the exact behavior that had so impressed the village community. But this doesn’t bring opinion back around in his favor, suggesting that their initial hero worship was in part based on the mythical quality of Christy’s story—that it was removed from their own reality.

The play draws to a conclusion with the villagers trying to hang Christy, angered at his inauthenticity, though Old Mahon, again defying death, shields him from their wrath. As the father and son leave, Pegeen laments Christy’s departure—even though she has participated in the attempted hanging. Synge, then, presents her affections for him as being tied deeply to his air of mystery—now that he is leaving her world forever, his mystery is restored. In just twenty-four hours or so, Christy both acquires and loses hero status. Synge implies that heroism needs an element of fiction and mystery—unknowability—to function strongly, and that when these unravel so too does the hero’s status. Perhaps, then, heroism is a kind of paradox—the hero must seem like he can answer the community’s desires but never become too real; and there is certainly no room for doubt or inauthenticity in the hero’s story.



THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

The Playboy of the Western World is a rich and evocative-sounding play that seeks to highlight the poetry and musicality of Irish English (also known as Hiberno-English)—its rhythms, cadences, and capacity for simile and metaphor. J.M. Synge was committed to rendering Irish English in a way that would do it justice and be considered authentic, an intention that is clear in *The Playboy of the Western World*. This was part of an overall trend among artists in Ireland to portray their country with realism, spearheaded by the poet W.B. Yeats. Yeats famously told Synge to “give up Paris”—where

the two had met—and instead spend time on the Aran Islands (off the west coast of Ireland) to find the poetry undiscovered in rural Irish life. Ultimately, *The Playboy of the Western World* is a manifestation of two dual impulses in J.M. Synge’s work: firstly, to create art specific to Ireland and its people, and secondly to do justice to Irish English by distilling its living, breathing richness into poetic and dramatic forms. Thus, *The Playboy of the Western World* reveals the power of words to represent, entertain, and enrich people.

Synge is careful throughout *The Playboy of the Western World* to render the speech of its coastal community as faithfully as possible. He expressly states this aim in the preface, saying, “I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland.” He views his art as being a “collaboration” between the artist and the “folk-imagination,” stating that the “wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed compared with the fancies one might hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay” (all rural Irish communities). Synge’s play thus depends on an element of trust between the artist and society—the claim that the former can truly represent the latter. This is especially interesting in Synge’s case, as he did not have a rural upbringing.

Whatever opinion audience members have on this question of authentic representation, the play is undoubtedly populated with distinctly Irish English ways of speaking. As one example among many, the play makes frequent use of “I’m after” to indicate “I have just”—this is known as the “hot news perfect” in Irish English. Widow Quin, when she arrives at the pub, says, “I’m after meeting Shawn Keogh and Father Reilly below,” indicating that this has just happened moments ago. By advocating this approach to the language of a given community, Synge attempts to draw the audience’s attention to the power of language to shape and capture reality. The lives of those involved with the pub, he seems to say, are intertwined with the way in which they talk to one another.

But faithful representation of the community and the rendering of real life are not the only argument for the power of language in the play. Synge grants Christy Mahon with a lyrical gift in his speech—a command of the sensory elements of language and the accomplished use of imagery. This helps him win over the villager’s affections—in particular Pegeen Mike’s—and stands as an analogy for Synge’s desire for his audience to buy into the beauty and power of the rural Irish English way of speaking (though there is, of course, not one single definitive “way”). As Christy grows in confidence throughout the play, so too does his willingness to speak in a lyrical way; when he first arrives, his speech is more disjointed and abrupt. This, combined with his aura of heroism, has a powerful effect on Pegeen Mike, who falls under the spell of his words. Sensing his own verbal power, Christy asks Pegeen, “Isn’t there the light of seven heavens in your heart alone, the way you’ll be an angel’s lamp to me from this out.” This is the moment at which she agrees to marry him,

saying that “any girl would walk her heart out before she’d meet a young man was your like for eloquence or talk at all.” Talking, here, functions as a kind of seduction that reminds the viewer of “the gift of the gab,” a phrase denoting eloquence and skill with speaking. This is especially associated—sometimes to the point of stereotype—with Ireland and the Irish people. Whether the viewer agrees with this association or not, Synge makes the link between the rural Irish and the power of words. On that note, it’s worth remembering that Christy is not an educated man. He has spent most of his life wandering fields with his father, doing menial work. His gift for language, then, is presented as a kind of innate quality, again reinforcing this association between rural Irish life and lyricism.

The Playboy of the Western World is a beautiful-sounding play that is a deliberate attempt on Synge’s part to draw his audience’s attention to the artistic possibilities of Irish English. This is part of a wider argument that insists on the multi-layered power of language. If the play is effective in its intentions—that is, if it captivates its audience—then it too becomes an analogy for the argument contained within: that words are a powerful representation of the community that uses them. This approach wasn’t without controversy, however, as some of the play’s nationalist observers objected in its first performances that Irish English—as opposed to Gaelic Irish—could only ever be the language of Ireland’s English oppressors, rather than a true embodiment of something authentically Irish.



AUTHORITY

The Playboy of the Western World is a play of competing authorities. On the one hand, the villagers connected to Michael Flaherty’s pub seem to have their own sense of “what’s right.” But there is also the suggestion of religious authority in the background, coupled with a general suspicion of the police—the “peelers.” The relationship between Christy Mahon and his father, Old Mahon, also reveals a type of authority based on family (and one that Christy is eager to escape). Perhaps, then, this is why Christy wins over the hearts and minds of the community—because, in claiming to have murdered his father, he temporarily represents an authority on its own terms.

It’s fair to say that there is no single source of authority in the play. Synge shows the way in which different authorities compete with one another, without one in particular truly taking hold. The church authority, for example, is best exemplified by Shawn Keogh, who is god-fearing and won’t spend the night alone with his fiancé, Pegeen Mike, because the local priest, Father Reilly, might not approve. The other characters, though, are not like Shawn. They speak with a religiously informed vernacular—for example, through the common greeting “god save you”—but other than that don’t show any particular deference to Christian authority.

Furthermore, in celebrating Christy’s patricide (the killing of a father by his child), they portray a distinctly un-Christian sense of morality, which also applies to their heavy drinking. The church, then, is more a kind of symbolic presence in the villagers’ life, informing its traditions and language but not expressly exerting a definitive authority.

The characters are unified, however, by a disregard for the authority of the police. Such collective irreverence appears when the villagers take pride in sheltering Christy from the law. Ireland, at the time of the play’s setting, was a place of great tension. There were clashes between those that wanted to maintain the status quo as a part of the United Kingdom and those that willed Ireland to become independent. The police were known as the “peelers”—named after the English politician, Robert Peel—and represented English authority. By harboring Christy, the community around Michael Flaherty’s pub engages in a willful act of rebellion against what they see as the false authority of English rule. Furthermore, they see Christy’s willingness to take justice into his own hands as a symbol of their own disregard for the peelers.

Though this works out well for Christy initially, adding to his aura of heroism, it has grave consequences when it turns out that he hasn’t actually killed Old Mahon. Both to save face and to cling onto the promise of his new life, Christy then tries to kill his father again. At that point, the villagers, feeling that they have been deceived, take the issue of authority into their own hands and attempt to hang Christy. They are afraid that having the murder of Old Mahon take place in their own village will attract the peelers and ultimately land all them in trouble. Their attempt to hang Christy, then, represents their effort impose their own authority to sidestep the police.

But Christy is not hanged because, even on this second attempt, Old Mahon is not dead. Ironically, he crawls back into the pub and saves his son from the wrath of the villagers, his paternal authority taking precedence. Though Christy had temporarily escaped Old Mahon’s paternal authority and seemed to have much better prospects for life—a steady job at the pub, marriage to Pegeen, the respect of his community—Old Mahon’s reappearance in turn undermines Christy’s newfound status. Old Mahon’s authority, then, wins this particular battle, as Mahon both prevents his son’s hanging—thus denying the villagers their authority—and reinstates his wandering life with his son. That said, when the father and son leave, Christy insists that he will now be the dominant of the two men, leaving the specific dynamic between them unresolved.

This Irish rural community, then, is shown to be a place of unstable authority. It’s not that the people aren’t looking to uphold social and moral standards, but that no source seems to be able to appropriately take control. While some critics see this as an implicit challenge to English authority, perhaps it’s more accurate to say that Synge shows the complex challenges

involved in questions of authority and independence, particularly in relation to Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The extreme reaction to the play's first performance should also be noted. When first shown in Dublin in 1907, the audience rioted. Though part of this was a reaction to the perceived indecency of the play, it was largely down to the nationalist view that the play in fact *supported* British dominance by attempting to demonstrate the power of Irish English as opposed to the Irish language itself (this was a line of criticism leveled more widely at the work Synge and Yeats more generally). *The Playboy of the Western World* thus became a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, attempting to give a faithful representation of competing authority in Ireland and accordingly feeling the consequences of that very same instability.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE LOY

A loy is a type of narrow spade traditionally used in Ireland for cultivating potatoes, an important crop on the island. As such, it represents Irish rural life and in particular the type of repetitive manual labor involved for inhabitants of the Irish countryside at the time of the play's setting. It is with a loy that Christy Mahon thinks that he kills his father, Old Mahon, by striking him over the head. The loy, then, is a stand-in for Christy's frustration at the drudgery and oppression of his former life, going from field to field with his tyrannical father. The humble farming implement thus transforms from a symbol of the mundane to a symbol of escape. The characters at the pub who hear Christy's story—Peggy Mike, Michael Flaherty, and others—are impressed not just by Christy's deed but the particular way in which he did it. They perceive a kind of bravery in Christy's willingness to take his destiny into his own hands, which is linked to his use of the loy as opposed to a gun or a knife—more conventional weapons. When Mahon returns—not dead, just wounded—to find Christy, his son again strikes him with a loy, trying to inflict the fatal blow that he had failed to deal earlier. In this sense, then, the loy also shows Christy's persistence in wanting to forge a new life for himself, the repetition of the method in the attempted killing echoing the repetitiveness of the loy's usual agricultural function.

and *Riders to the Sea* published in 1993.

Act 1 Quotes

☝☝ PEGEEN. Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet. Where will you find the like of them. I'm saying?

SHAWN (*timidly*). If you don't, it's a good job, maybe; for (*with peculiar emphasis on the words*) Father Reilly has small conceit to have that kind walking around and talking to the girls.

PEGEEN (*impatiently, throwing water from basin out of the door*). Stop tormenting me with Father Reilly (*imitating his voice*) when I'm asking only what way I'll pass these twelve hours of dark, and not take my death with the fear.

Related Characters: Shawn Keogh, Pegeen Mike (speaker), Father Reilly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the play's opening scene. Pegeen is talking with her fiancé and second cousin, Shawn Keogh. She is lamenting the boredom of village life, particularly as its best characters are no longer around. She expressly values these people for their bravery and their storytelling ability, highlighting that there is vacuum to be filled in the village life by heroism and powerful language. It also highlights the interplay of competing authorities in the community. Whereas Shawn shows deference to religious authority, Pegeen is more concerned with her personal physical safety—as opposed to her spiritual security. This creates the space into which a hero can arrive: Christy. Pegeen's mockery of Shawn's religious devotion exemplifies that she doesn't really want to marry him—it's just that there's no other viable alternative.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *The Playboy of the Western World*

●● SHAWN (*going to her, soothingly*). Then I'm thinking himself will stop along with you when he sees you taking on, for it'll be a long night-time with great darkness, and I'm after feeling a kind of fellow above in the furzy ditch, groaning wicked like a maddening dog, the way it's good cause you have, maybe, to be fearing now.



PEGEEN (*turning on him sharply*). What's that? Is it a man you seen?

SHAWN (*retreating*). I couldn't see him at all; but I heard him groaning out, and breaking his heart. It should have been a young man from his words speaking.

PEGEEN (*going after him*). And you never went near to see was he hurted or what ailed him at all?

SHAWN: I did not, Pegeen Mike. It was a dark, lonesome place to be hearing the like of him.

Related Characters: Pegeen Mike , Shawn Keogh (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Shawn tries to sooth Pegeen but ends up making matters worse, letting slip that he has heard the terrifying sound of a groaning man on his way up to the pub. This is precisely the kind of thing that is making Pegeen so afraid of spending the night alone in the pub—there is a vague air of sexual threat. Shawn, as her fiancé, ought to be her protector, but is too cowardly to even investigate the source of the noise. This deepens Pegeen's frustrations with Shawn and ultimately means that, when Christy comes along and seemingly displays the opposite kind of character to her fiancé, she will readily cast Shawn aside. Syngé is also gently mocking Shawn's overreliance on religion, showing that though it may be a source of authority it does not grant him any courage.

●● PEGEEN (*with a sign to the men to be quiet*). You're only saying it. You did nothing at all. A soft lad the like of you wouldn't slit the windpipe of a screeching sow.

CHRISTY (*offended*). You're not speaking the truth.

PEGEEN (*in mock rage*). Not speaking the truth, is it? Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of the broom?

CHRISTY (*twisting round on her with a sharp cry of horror*). Don't strike me. I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that.

PEGEEN (*with blank amazement*). Is it killed your father?

CHRISTY (*subsiding*). With the help of God I did surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother may intercede for his soul.

PHILLY (*retreating with Jimmy*). There's a daring fellow.

JIMMY. Oh, glory be to God!

MICHAEL (*with great respect*). That was a hanging crime, mister honey. You should have had good reason for doing the like of that.

Related Characters: Michael James Flaherty / Pegeen's Father, Jimmy Farrell, Philly O'Cullen, Christopher "Christy" Mahon, Pegeen Mike (speaker), Old Mahon / Christy's Father

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

When Christy arrives at the pub, he reveals that he is hiding from the "peelers," meaning the police. Michael, Philly, Jimmy and Pegeen enthusiastically quiz Christy, trying to tease out the nature of his crime. They are evidently excited to be harboring an outlaw, who appeals to their sense of rebellion. Christy doesn't immediately reveal what he has done, but when Pegeen raises the broom at him, she subconsciously reminds him of the confrontation with his father, consequently making him reveal his secret. Christy's appeal to God to "intercede" for his father's soul paints him as respectful and honorable, despite his capacity for violence. This makes the locals admire him; they assume that he would have had good reason to commit such a deed. This is therefore the beginning of Christy's swift transformation into a hero figure.

●● PEGEEN (*standing beside him, watching him with delight*).

You should have had great people in your family, I'm thinking, with the little, small feet you have, and you with a kind of a quality name, the like of what you'd find on the great powers and potentates of France and Spain.

Related Characters: Pegeen Mike (speaker), Christopher "Christy" Mahon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13



Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the first few moments when Pegeen and Christy are alone. The arrival of Christy has solved the problem of who will protect Pegeen during the long dark night, instantly positioning him in the role of heroic protector. Pegeen buys into this completely, conflating the perceived heroism of his murderous action with nobility and greatness. Of course, she couldn't be further from the truth: Christy comes from a life of impoverished rural peasantry, and his attack on his father was as much, if not more, borne of frustration as it was heroism. "Mahon" is an anglicized form of the old Gaelic "Mac Mathghamha," meaning "son of the Bear," carrying with it obvious connotations of bravery, physical strength, and sexual prowess. For that matter, Christy's first name is also meant to evoke heroism, linking him a little humorously to the figure of Jesus Christ.

●● CHRISTY (*going over to her, gradually raising his voice*). I've said it nowhere till this night, I'm telling you, for I've seen none the like of you the eleven long days I am walking the world, looking over a low ditch or a high ditch on my north or my south, into stony scattered fields, or scribes of bog, where you'd see young, limber girls, and fine prancing women making laughter with the men.

PEGEEN. If you weren't destroyed travelling, you'd have as much talk and streeleen, I'm thinking, as Owen Roe O'Sullivan or the poets of the Dingle Bay, and I've heard all times it's the poets are your like, fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused.

Related Characters: Pegeen Mike, Christopher "Christy" Mahon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

As part of the same exchange as the previous quote, this moment shows Christy growing in confidence in his new surroundings. With Pegeen showering him with praise, his speech develops from short, cagey sentences to a more florid, poetic style. Though he is describing a life of rural drudgery, his skill with the language lends it an air of mythology that informs his heroic aura. For his part, he is being truthful—he really hasn't got any prior experience with women. But because of the beauty of his speech, Pegeen assumes that this is just part of a practiced routine of seduction, which she naturally enjoys but also, at this stage, is a little wary of. Pegeen makes the link between good "talk" and capacity for violence, outlining that these are the kind of characteristics she—and the wider community—associates with heroism.

●● CHRISTY. [...] 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.

Related Characters: Christopher "Christy" Mahon (speaker), Widow Quin, Pegeen Mike

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the end of the first Act. Christy is lying in bed ahead of what will be his first good night's sleep in almost two weeks (he has been on the run for eleven days or so). As he lies in bed, he reflects on his almost unbelievable reversal of fortune: he has gone from living a life of oppressed peasantry at the hands of his father to suddenly having a new future open up before him, one in which is attractive and respected. He knows how important the story of his father's murder is to his newfound status, which explains why he won't stop mentioning it from here on out. But he does also set himself up for a fall, the phrase "foolish fellow" gently suggesting that he is being naïve in thinking that this longed-for future is a certainty. He has also become aware of the power of storytelling—of his own myth—and feels that he is now his own authority, having vanquished his father's paternal dominance.

Act 2 Quotes

●● CHRISTY (*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.

SUSAN. That’s a grand story.



HONOR. He tells it lovely.


CHRISTY (*flattered and confident, waving bone*). He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet.

[*He raises the chicken bone to his Adam’s apple.*]

GIRLS (*together*). Well, you’re a marvel! Oh, God bless you! You’re the lad surely!

Related Characters: Honor Blake, Susan Brady, Christopher “Christy” Mahon (speaker), Nelly McLaughlin, Sara Tansey, Widow Quin, Old Mahon / Christy’s Father

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes early on in Act Two, when four girls from the village come to see the man they’ve heard has killed his father. For a man who is supposedly trying to keep a profile, Christy is extremely forthcoming with the details of his story, willingly acting it out with a sense of drama and enjoying the attention that comes with doing so. He tells it well, imbuing his narrative with an aura of mythology, making use of pathetic fallacy to conjure a sense of grandeur, and switching up the rhythm of his sentences to build the action. The chicken bone serves as a prop, suggesting to the girls Christy’s allegedly animal, violent nature. The girls’ eagerness to hear the story—along with Widow Quin—demonstrates the importance of stories to the community. They serve to break up the mundanity of everyday life and paint a picture of a wild world beyond the confines of the village.


●● CHRISTY. I wish to God I was letting on; but I was lonesome all times, and born lonesome, I’m thinking, as the moon of dawn.

[*Going to door.*]

PEGEEN (*puzzled by his talk*). Well, it’s a story I’m not understanding at all why you’d be worse than another, Christy Mahon, and you a fine lad with the great savagery to destroy your da.

CHRISTY. It’s little I’m understanding myself, saving only that my heart’s scalded this day, and I going off stretching out the earth between us, the way I’ll not be waking near you another dawn of the year till the two of us do arise to hope or judgment with the saints of God.

Related Characters: Pegeen Mike, Christopher “Christy” Mahon (speaker), Old Mahon / Christy’s Father

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

When Pegeen Mike comes back to the pub to find Christy regaling the village girls with his story, she quickly shoos them away, jealous of them. To teach Christy a lesson, she convinces him that the girls will gossip about his story, and that information will eventually get to the police authorities (“peelers”), who, she says, will undoubtedly come to hang him before too long. For that reason, Christy makes the reluctant decision to leave the pub and stay on the run. Christy thinks he will be returning to his lonesome existence; Pegeen can’t understand why a heroic, poetic man like him would ever be lonely. This provides Christy with the opportunity to use language to deepen Pegeen’s affections for him. His imagery puts forth an idea that when he leaves, they will be separated forever, but linked by virtue of being on the same land mass. This appeals to Pegeen, and makes her want to ensure that Christy stays. It also increases the sense that the two are “fated” to be together, heightening his appeal.

●● WIDOW QUIN (*jeeringly*). It's true all girls are fond of courage and do hate the like of you.

SHAWN (*walking about in desperation*). Oh, Widow Quin, what'll I be doing now? I'd inform again him, but he'd burst from Kilmainham and he'd be sure and certain to destroy me. If I wasn't so God-fearing, I'd near have courage to come behind him and run a pike into his side. Oh, it's a hard case to be an orphan and not to have your father that you're used to, and you'd easy kill and make yourself a hero in the sight of all.

Related Characters: Shawn Keogh, Widow Quin (speaker), Christopher "Christy" Mahon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis


Later in Act Two, Shawn comes to the pub with Widow Quin to make Christy an offer. He gives him a ticket for a ship to America and some of his best clothes, hoping this will be enough to make Christy leave the village forever and thereby ensure that Shawn can marry Pegeen. Shawn displays further cowardice, having bought into Christy's hero myth completely—he won't inform against the newcomer because he thinks that Christy will come looking for him if he escapes prison. Shawn's final comment here is highly ironic, absurdly lamenting that he doesn't have his own father to kill and make himself a hero. Widow Quin's comment is a succinct formulation that describes the difference between Shawn and Christy—courage. Bravery, then, is once again linked with sexual attraction.

●● CHRISTY. From this out I'll have no want of company when all sorts is bringing me their food and clothing (*he swaggers to the door, tightening his belt*), the way they'd set their eyes upon a gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt. (*He opens door, then staggers back.*) Saints of glory! Holy angels from the throne of light!

WIDOW QUIN (*going over*). What ails you?

CHRISTY. It's the walking spirit of my murdered da!

Related Characters: Widow Quin, Christopher "Christy" Mahon (speaker), Old Mahon / Christy's Father

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This passage represents the high point of Christy's hubris. Just after he has tried on Shawn's clothes, he decides to keep them and offers nothing in return in terms of him leaving. He is deep into the fantasy of himself as hero, expressly linking it to the act of killing his father, and sees his new clothes as a way of visually demonstrating his newfound status. Of course, it's at this precise moment, when Christy is most enjoying his new world and identity, that Old Mahon seemingly returns from the dead. Though of course, Mahon was only wounded, and not killed, his reappearance does seem like an apparition for Christy, who genuinely thought he had killed Old Mahon. Thus, Christy's terrified calls to heaven are a comedic moment that underline that what is happening is all too real.

●● MAHON. I'd take a mighty oath you didn't surely, and wasn't he the laughing joke of every female woman where four baronies meet, the way the girls would stop their weeding if they seen him coming the road to let a roar at him, and call him the looney of Mahon's.

Related Characters: Old Mahon / Christy's Father (speaker), Widow Quin, Christopher "Christy" Mahon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

When Old Mahon comes into the pub, Christy covers behind the door—which isn't exactly heroic behavior. Widow Quin enjoys the tension in the air and gets Old Mahon to tell her more about his son's character and personality. Mahon describes Christy at length, as disparaging about him as Christy was earlier about his father. Essentially, he characterizes Christy as lazy, foolish and shy—distinctly unheroic traits. He especially highlights Christy's inability to interact with women, highlighting the gulf between Christy's old life and his fledgling new one. This thus sets up the remaining tension in the play, as the audience wonders whether Christy's secret will be revealed and whether he will have to confront his father again. Also interesting is the way that Mahon characterizes his son as a "looney"; Christy later tries to convince the locals that Mahon is in fact a madman, not his real father. In a sense, then, they are grappling for authority over what is real.


Act 3 Quotes

●● WIDOW QUIN (*taking men to the right stealthily*). Do you know what? That mans raving from his wound to-day, for I met him a while since telling a rambling tale of a tinker had him destroyed. Then he heard of Christy's deed, and he up and says it was his son had cracked his skull. O isn't madness a fright, for he'll go killing someone yet, and he thinking it's the man has struck him so?

JIMMY (*entirely convinced*). It's a fright, surely. I knew a party was kicked in the head by a red mare, and he went killing horses a great while, till he eat the insides of a clock and died after.

PHILLY (*with suspicion*). Did he see Christy?

Related Characters: Philly O'Cullen, Jimmy Farrell, Widow Quin (speaker), Old Mahon / Christy's Father, Christopher "Christy" Mahon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

When Old Mahon departs from the pub in Act Two, Widow Quin strikes a deal with Christy that she will keep his secret if he will reward her with provisions from the pub once he is married to Pegeen. Their plan is to pretend that Mahon is a madman, who has heard about Christy's story through the rumor mill and is simply incorporating it into his hallucinations. Jimmy and Philly have just encountered Mahon, who has told them that he is looking for his son who struck him over the head with a loy (a very specific weapon that links Mahon's story to Christy's). Though Jimmy buys into Widow Quin's diversionary tactics, Philly is a bit more savvy and starts to suspect that Christy might not be telling the truth. This, then, is an important moment in the unraveling of Christy's hero myth, which will ultimately lead to the village turning on him, stripping him of his newfound status.

●● MAHON (*putting his hands to his ears*). What in the name of God do they want roaring below?

WIDOW QUIN (*with the shade of a smile*). They're cheering a young lad, the champion Playboy of the Western World.

[*More cheering.*]

MAHON (*going to window*). It'd split my heart to hear them, and I with pulses in my brain-pan for a week gone by. Is it racing they are?

JIMMY (*looking from door*). It is then. They are mounting him for the mule race will be run upon the sands. That's the playboy on the winkered mule.

MAHON (*puzzled*). That lad, is it? If you said it was a fool he was, I'd have laid a mighty oath he was the likeness of my wandering son (*uneasily, putting his hand to his head*).

Related Characters: Jimmy Farrell, Widow Quin, Old Mahon / Christy's Father (speaker), Christopher "Christy" Mahon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis



This quote comes when Mahon returns to the pub for the second time, having given up on following Widow Quin's instructions. Christy, meanwhile, is winning all of the village sports and games, cementing his position as their hero by demonstrating his physical and athletic dominance. This is distinctly at odds with how Old Mahon thinks of his son—lazy and unaccomplished—which explains why he fails to recognize the racer as Christy. Or, more accurately, he tries to suppress his recognition because it doesn't fit with his perception of his son. Widow Quin mentions Christy's nickname which gives the play its title, which on the surface here refers to Christy's athletic ability but also carries connotations of deception and play-acting. She is definitely enjoying the situation, as seen by her "shade of a smile."

●● CHRISTY. It's little you'll think if my love's a poachers, or an earl's itself, when you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair.

PEGEEN. That'll be right fun, Christy Mahon, and any girl would walk her heart out before she'd meet a young man was your like for eloquence, or talk, at all.

CHRISTY (*encouraged*). Let you wait, to hear me talking, till we're astray in Erris, when Good Friday's by, drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap or sunshine, with yourself stretched back unto your necklace, in the flowers of the earth.

Related Characters: Pegeen Mike, Christopher "Christy" Mahon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after Christy returns to the pub following his successes in the village sports and games. Mahon has left again, and Pegeen has shooed away all of Christy's admirers so that he can get some respite (but really so she can have some alone time with him). Christy's confidence at this point is sky-high, and he decides to make his marriage proposition to Pegeen clear by using highly evocative and poetic language. This conjures a sense of Edenic bliss that is markedly different from Pegeen's everyday rural life of cleaning up after animals and serving drinks at her father's pub. In contrast, Christy's language whips Pegeen up into a kind of passion that ultimately culminates in her deep desire to jettison Shawn and marry Christy instead.

●● MICHAEL. It's many would be in dread to bring your like into their house for to end them, maybe, with a sudden end; but I'm a decent man of Ireland, and I liefer face the grave untimely and I seeing a score of grandsons growing up little gallant swearers by the name of God, than go peopling my bedside with puny weeds the like of what you'd breed, I'm thinking, out of Shaneen Keogh. (*He joins their hands.*) 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.

Related Characters: Michael James Flaherty / Pegeen's

Father (speaker), Shawn Keogh, Christopher "Christy" Mahon, Pegeen Mike

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when Michael Flaherty returns from the wake. He has been drinking all night and is in high spirits. As he comes in, he announces that Father Reilly has given permission for Pegeen and Shawn to wed, at which point Pegeen protests that she wants to marry Christy instead. Michael is initially reluctant, thinking that Christy is too rebellious to marry his daughter. But, giving it some thought as he does in the above quote, he sees two destinies for his family before him. If Pegeen weds Christy, Ireland will be populated by a heroic "gallant swearers." If she weds Shawn, Michael reasons, his grandchildren will be the first in a line of "puny weeds," distinctly uncourageous. This reasoning quickly leads him to the conclusion that he should approve Pegeen's marriage to Christy, expressly linking his decision to Christy's murderous act.

●● CHRISTY (*in low and intense voice*). Shut your yelling, for if you're after making a mighty man of me this day by the power of a lie, you're setting me now to think if it's a poor thing to be lonesome, it's worse maybe to go mixing with the fools of earth.

[*Mahon makes a movement towards him.*]

CHRISTY (*almost shouting*). Keep off...lest I do show a blow unto the lot of you would set the guardian angels winking in the clouds above.


[*He swings round with a sudden rapid movement and picks up a loy.*]

CROWD (*half frightened, half amused*). He's going mad! Mind yourselves! Run from the idiot!

CHRISTY. If I am an idiot, I'm after hearing my voice this day saying words would raise the topknot on a poet in a merchant's town.

Related Characters: Christopher "Christy" Mahon (speaker), Old Mahon / Christy's Father

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis


This quote comes when Old Mahon returns to the pub once again. This time, he's sure of Christy's identity, and the villagers are in turn certain of the dishonesty of Christy's account of his father's murder. The villagers turn on Christy, led by Michael and Pegeen, and want to have him hanged. This is in part because it lends the "story" of the play the kind of murderous conclusion that Christy's story turned out to be missing, but is also an effort to protect themselves and their community from the attentions of the law. Christy points out their hypocrisy, and has retained his grandiose poetic way of speaking as he threatens to finally deal his father a genuinely fatal blow. The crowd enjoy this spectacle, showing themselves to be bloodthirsty. Christy's use of "I'm after" is Irish English grammar to indicate something that has only just happened; he's saying that it's ridiculous for the crowd to call him an idiot having just moments ago held him aloft on their shoulders for his heroism.

☝ PEGEEN. I'll say, a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed. (*To Men.*) Take him on from this, or the lot of us will be likely put on trial for his deed to-day.

CHRISTY (*with horror in his voice*). And it's yourself will send me off, to have a horny-fingered hangman hitching his bloody slip-knots at the butt of my ear.

Related Characters: Christopher "Christy" Mahon, Pegeen Mike (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Just after Christy chases his father outside and deals him what seems to be a fatal blow—again with a loy—Pegeen aids the villagers in trying to either hang Christy or take him to the authorities. Ironically, Pegeen and Christy are linked by their disbelief at how quickly everything can change. For Pegeen, this is because Christy's story has turned out to be untrue and it is now essentially compulsory that she

participates in the villagers' attempt to enact their own sense of justice. For Christy it's because he can't believe how quickly Pegeen's attitude has changed—just a moment ago, she was expressing her love for him. Furthermore, having just dealt Old Mahon a seemingly fatal blow right in front of her eyes, he feels that he ought to be restored to his hero status. Pegeen expresses her realization that there is a great difference between murder in myth and murder in reality, questioning the worth of Christy's words and whether she was naïve to hold him in such high acclaim.

☝ CHRISTY. Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day.


[*He goes out.*]

MICHAEL. By the will of God, we'll have peace now for our drinks. Will you draw the porter, Pegeen?

SHAWN (*going up to her*). It's a miracle Father Reilly can wed us in the end of all, and we'll have none to trouble us when his vicious bite is healed.

PEGEEN (*hitting him a box on the ear*). Quit my sight. (*Putting her shawl over her head and breaking out into wild lamentations.*) Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World.

Related Characters: Pegeen Mike, Shawn Keogh, Michael James Flaherty / Pegeen's Father, Christopher "Christy" Mahon (speaker), Old Mahon / Christy's Father

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Ironically, it is Old Mahon who rescues Christy from death at the hands of the villagers. He insists on freeing Christy from the ropes and begins to take him outside, presumably to go back to their old way of life: itinerant peasantry. However, there's a crucial difference given that Christy has undergone a fundamental transformation of character. Having had a taste of life free from his father's authority, he has realized that he can play the hero and is not willing to go back to his previous subjugated state. That's why, even though they have just been trying to kill him, Christy essentially thanks the villagers for having taught him that the negative aspects of his character are not innate, but projected onto him by his father. He insists, now, that he will live the exact kind of life that the villagers thought he was

already living: the life of a hero. In just a few moments, Pegeen flips from love to anger to sorrow, dramatically lifting a shawl over her head and letting out wild cries.

Because her desire for Christy was partly based on his mythical aura, his disappearance back into the unknown restores his air of mystery and, accordingly, her longing.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

In a run-down country pub on the west coast of Ireland, Pegeen Mike, a “wild-looking but fine girl of about twenty,” sits writing a list of items she needs for her upcoming wedding to Shawn Keogh. Shawn enters, “a fat and fair young man,” and asks nervously whether Michael Flaherty, the pub’s owner and Pegeen’s father, is around.

Pegeen explains that her father has gone to a wake nearby and expresses her fear at being left alone in the pub all night. Shawn tells her that, when the local priest, Father Reilly, grants them permission to wed, she’ll not have to worry about the being alone in the darkness any longer. Pegeen teases him, wondering why the church authorities would pay any attention to their village.

Pegeen laments the lack of heroes in the community, asking where “now will you meet the likes of Daneen Sullivan” who “knocked the eye from a peeler,” or Marcus Quin, who would “tell stories of holy Ireland till he’d have the old women shedding down tears about their feet.” Shawn says timidly that perhaps it’s for the best that those characters are no longer around—Father Reilly wouldn’t appreciate their way of “walking around talking to the girls.”

Pegeen is annoyed by Shawn’s constant talk about Father Reilly, asking how she’ll “pass these twelve hours of dark, and not take my death with the fear.” Shawn offers to fetch Widow Quin, but Pegeen doesn’t want to spend time with “the like of that murderer.” Shawn, trying to sound soothing, says he’s sure that Pegeen’s father will stay with her.

Shawn adds that, on his way to the pub, he heard a man groaning in a ditch “like a maddening dog,” and that it’s probably for the best that Pegeen is on guard. Pegeen sharply questions Shawn, asking why he didn’t investigate. Shawn admits he was afraid of the “dark lonesome place,” and asks Pegeen not to mention his cowardly behavior to her father or his friends.

The rural setting creates a sense of isolation in which not much usually happens. Shawn is nervous because he is god-fearing and doesn’t think he should be alone with Pegeen Mike, his fiancée, until they are married.



Synge’s use of the looming darkness of night creates a kind of space into which a hero might enter and conquer Pegeen’s fears, acting as her protector. Shawn is the foil to any potential hero, displaying a cowardly disposition which will contrast with Christy on his arrival.



This is an early introduction of the power of language in the play, in this instance specifically of stories and myths. It shows that the village community in general is hungry for tales of heroism, especially those that relate to Ireland. Shawn links criminality and heroism together with sexual attraction, knowing that he cannot compete with the above and again appealing to religion as the true authority; Pegeen doesn’t share this view.



Pegeen is, in a way, deliberately testing Shawn’s character, who is failing miserably to show that he has any courage at all. Widow Quin can be assumed by the audience at this point to have killed the aforementioned Marcus Quin.



Shawn makes matters worse for himself, intensifying the sense of threat and fear that Pegeen is already feeling and highlighting the fact that he is even more scared than she is.



Michael, the pub's owner and Pegeen's father, comes in. He is a "fat jovial" man and is in the company of Philly O'Cullen, "who is thin and mistrusting" and Jimmy Farrell, "who is fat and amorous." All of the characters greet each other, saying things like "god bless you."

Michael asks if Shawn is going with him and the others to the wake, but Shawn replies that he is about to go home to bed. Pegeen complains to her father about being left alone all night; Jimmy interjects to say that a "fine, hardy girl" like her can handle herself. Pegeen says she's afraid of the tinsmiths camping in a nearby field, and of the soldiery "walking idle through the land."

Michael suggests that Shawn should stay the night. Shawn protests, fearing what Father Reilly and "the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome" would think of him spending the night alone with Pegeen before they're married. Michael is irate and, having heard about "a queer fellow above going mad or getting his death, maybe in the gripe of the ditch," insists that Shawn has to stay.

Shawn tries to dodge past Michael to exit the pub. Michael grabs him by the coat. Shawn, screaming, tells Michael to let him go or "I'll get the curse of the priests on you, and of the scarlet-coated bishops of the courts of room." He slips out of his coat and runs out of the door.

Michael holds up Shawn's coat, saying "there's the coat of a Christian man." He tells Pegeen that at least she won't have to worry about other women trying to take Shawn from her. Pegeen criticizes her father for not employing a "penny pot-boy" at the pub who would make her feel safer. Shawn puts his head back in through the door, complaining to Michael that the "dying fellow" is following him and he runs inside.

Christy Mahon comes in, "tired and frightened and dirty." He addresses the pub: "God save all here!" Christy asks if the "polis" often visit the pub; Michael says that they don't, relieving Christy. The locals start speculating on why Christy is on the run, asking if he has committed "larceny." Christy doesn't know what "larceny" is, but, on learning that it means "theft," he protests that he is the "son of a strong farmer."

Though the other characters are not as outwardly religious as Shawn Keogh, their speech is rooted in the Christian religion. "God bless you" is the usual greeting between them.



The wake that Michael and company will attend is not going to be a somber affair, but a raucous occasion with drinking that will most likely last until morning. The soldiery referred to is perhaps a reference to men returning from the Boer War, in which some Irish men went to South Africa to fight against the English authorities (who also have dominion over Ireland).



Here the audience gets a sense of the competing authorities at play in the village. Michael is trying to exert his authority over his future son-in-law, but Shawn is too afraid of religious judgment to assent to the demand. Michael's mention of the man in the ditch heightens the sense of danger, again creating more space for heroism to eventually emerge.



This is a slapstick moment that colors Shawn's character as buffoonish and leaves the audience in doubt of his devout religious beliefs.



Michael links Christianity to cowardice, which isn't to say that they go hand in hand, but that Christianity does not automatically make someone brave. A pot-boy is a boy or man employed by a pub or inn to take care of some of the chores. This neatly develops a reason for Christy to be invited to stay.



Christy arrives in a state of fear. He displays a lack of education in not knowing the word "larceny," which also emphasizes his youthful naiveté. His reference to his father as strong is ironic, given that the audience soon learns that Christy has killed his father. "Polis" means police.



Michael, Jimmy, and Philly continue to eagerly question Christy, wondering if he had “followed after a young woman on a lonesome night” or killed a bailiff or landlord in a dispute. Christy denies all of these, adding that he’s never heard of anyone committing the crime that he has. Philly calls him a “puzzle-the-world.” The locals come up with further theories—all wrong—including that perhaps Christy has been fighting against the English in the Boer War.

Pegeen doesn’t think Christy has done anything: “a soft lad the like of you wouldn’t slit the windpipe of a screeching sow.” She pretends to strike him with a broom, at which he reveals that he killed his “poor father” a week ago.” The locals are mightily impressed, assuming that he must have had “good reason” to do so.

Christy explains that his father was “a dirty man...old and crusty, the way I couldn’t put with him at all.” The locals try to guess how Christy killed his father. Christy tells them that he hit his father over the head with a **loy** in a potato field and then buried him. Michael asks where Christy killed him, to which Christy replies vaguely that it was “a distant place...a windy corner of high distant hills.” Philly nods at the appropriately evasive answer.

Pegeen, Philly, and Jimmy all agree that Christy would make an excellent pot-boy for the pub. Jimmy thinks the bravery of “a lad would kill his father” would make Pegeen feel safe. Michael offers him the job, promising “good wages.” Shawn tries to protest, but Pegeen shushes him. Christy accepts the job, happy to be “safe from the searching law.”

Pegeen, feeling that Christy must be tired, insists that he stays the night. Jimmy is happy that she will be safe and implores Michael that they should head to the wake. As Jimmy, Philly, and Michael leave, Michael asks Christy his name, before departing with the words “god bless you Christy.”

Shawn sheepishly asks Pegeen if she wants him to stay and keep her “from harm.” She sharply tells him to go off to Father Reilly and “let him put you in the holy brotherhoods and leave that lad to me.” She hustles him out of the door.

The locals at the pub are evidently intrigued by Christy and his need to escape from the law. Because they don't respect the “polis,” anyone who rebels against those authorities is likely to win their respect. The explicit mention of the Boer War situates the play in the early 1900s, but also carries with it a gesture towards the Irish conflict with their English authorities.



Christy perhaps doesn't intend to reveal his crime to the others, but Pegeen's striking gesture reminds him of his fight with his father and, out of instinctive reaction, it makes him confess what happened. Pegeen's comment highlights the fact that, though he is handsome, Christy doesn't exactly seem the type to commit murder.



The mention of the loy and the potato field gives a sense of the rural drudgery of Christy's former life, hinting that his murderous act was in part an attempt to escape that world as much as it was an action of frustration towards his father. The villagers don't take much convincing that Christy's actions were justified, partly because the violence is overshadowed by the mythic qualities of the story Christy tells—that is, Christy's deed is exactly the kind of thing that Irish poets or balladeers might have written about.



Christy is thus firmly placed in his role as hero, “saving” Pegeen from her fear of the long dark night. His act is directly equated with bravery, but it's ironic that he's the one to save her from her fear since he is also a confessed murderer.



The men can now go to the wake reassured that Pegeen will be safe under Christy's protection, which shows how their values are deeply anti-police and shaped by Irish mythology. Without those counterbalancing influences, Christy would be the type of person from which Pegeen would need protection.



This is too little too late for Shawn, who had earlier been adamant that he wasn't able to stay with Pegeen. She throws his religion back at him, much preferring to be in Christy's company than his.



As Christy looks at his blistered feet, Pegeen wonders if he had “great people” in his family. Christy says his family used to own “wide and windy acres of rich Munster land.” Pegeen calls him handsome, which Christy is surprised to hear. Pegeen thinks he’s feigning surprise and has been telling his story to “young girls or old” all over the “world.”

Christy insists that this is the first time he’s spoken about killing his father, telling Pegeen that she is “a kindly woman.” He says he’s “seen none the like of you the eleven days I am walking the world.” Nodding with approval, Pegeen tells Christy that she thinks, if he wasn’t so tired, his “talk” would be the match of any poet. She’s heard that poets are like him, “fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper’s roused.”

Christy asks Pegeen if she is single, and she pretends that she is not engaged to Shawn. He then talks more about his life, explaining that his father was bad tempered man. Up until now, continues Christy, nobody has really paid that much attention to him: “there wasn’t anyone heeding me in that place saving only the dumb beasts of the field.” Pegeen is surprised, thinking he would have been living like “a king of Norway or the Eastern world.”

As Pegeen brings him milk and bread, Christy gives her more of a sense of the drudgery of his life, which was full of “toiling, moiling, digging” from “dawn till dusk.” His only “joy” was poaching rabbits in the night. His father, continues Christy, was a terrifying drunk who had estranged himself from all of his other sons and daughters. He would never give Christy any peace, which is why Christy killed him. Pegeen assures Christy that his new life at the pub will be peaceful.

There’s a knock on the door. Christy is frightened that it’s the peelers, but it’s Widow Quin. Shawn had bumped into her and asked her to come and take Christy to her house. Shawn and Father Reilly, she explains to Pegeen, were scared that Christy would be causing Pegeen trouble. Pegeen points to Christy, who is quietly enjoying his milk.

Widow Quin is intrigued by Christy. She says, “it should have been great and bitter torments did rouse your spirits to a deed of blood,” and she notes that he looks more like he should be saying his “catechism” than “slaying” his father. Pegeen retorts that anyone can see that Christy is “fit to be holding his head high with the wonders of the world.”

This shows Pegeen’s tendency to mythologize Christy. There is a wide gulf between her assumption that he comes from a family of greatness and the reality that his existence has, until now, been that of mundane rural peasantry. The value of his “story” is apparent here.



This is the beginning of Christy’s courtship of Pegeen, which is intimately linked to his growing confidence. This confidence is exemplified by his speech—his sentences start to become longer and more poetic as he senses the grandeur that comes with his newfound status as a hero. Pegeen links his outlaw status directly with his poetic talk.



The speed with which Pegeen is willing to mentally dismiss her engagement to Shawn exemplifies how her engagement to him is based on convenience and the simple fact that there has been, until now, no one better around. She listens to Christy’s story in rapture.



Christy’s description of his father is later mirrored by his father’s description of him in Act Two. Here, Christy spells out the sheer boredom of life with his father, in which hunting rabbits was his only escape. It adds somewhat rational motive to his decision to slay his father.



The peelers are the police, so named because they were first instated in Ireland by the English politician Robert Peel. For this reason, the police are equated with English authority and accordingly despised. Widow Quin’s arrival is Shawn’s attempt to interrupt what he knows will be the growing attraction between Pegeen and Christy.



Widow Quin is right to point out that the image of Christy eagerly drinking milk is quite at odds with the idea of him as a heroic killer. Pegeen shows that her affections for him already run deep by talking about him in her own poeticized language.



Widow Quin again insists on taking with Christy with her, pointing out that it's "the like of you and me you'd hear the penny poets singing in an August fair." Christy asks if Widow Quin killed her father too, and Pegeen interjects to explain that Widow Quin hit her husband, Marcus Quin, over the head with a hoe; he died from tetanus as a result.

Widow Quin, annoyed by Pegeen, states that she, as a widow who has also "buried her children," is a better companion for Christy than "a girl the like of you [Pegeen] who'd go helter-skeltering after any man would let you a wink upon the road." She goes on, warning Pegeen that "there's great temptation in a mad did slay his da." The two women argue, both grabbing hold of Christy.

Scornfully, Pegeen insults Widow Quin with rumors about her—including that she "reared a black ram" at her own breast and that she's been intimate with a Frenchman in exchange for tobacco and a small amount of money.

Christy timidly insists that he will stay at the pub, as it is his duty as "pot-boy." Widow Quin suggests that, in that case, she will stay in the pub too. Pegeen forces her out; as Widow Quin leaves, she warns Christy that "torment will await you here if you go romancing with her like," deliberately letting slip that Pegeen is engaged to Shawn.

With Widow Quin gone, Pegeen insists that she isn't engaged, and that she wouldn't marry Shawn "if a bishop came walking for to join us here." She makes up a bed for Christy and wishes him a good night rest and goes to another room. Christy lies down, feeling "immense satisfaction" that he has a "clean bed" and "two fine women fighting for the likes of me;" he wishes he'd killed his father sooner.

Widow Quin feels an affinity with Christy because she, too, has committed murder (although Christy only thinks he has). She expressly links the act of murder with Ireland's mythic culture, correctly describing what both she and Christy have done as the kind of thing that would be immortalized by poets. Stories and poetry thus act as a kind of de facto authority within this rural community.



The audience doesn't learn anything further about Widow Quin's burial of her children, but the mention of it highlights her as an isolated figure. As Shawn has already done, she equates the ability to commit murder with a kind of personal strength, which she in turn implies is sexually attractive.



The "black ram" story, in keeping with Synge's desire for realism in the play, is based on a story told to him by one of his landlords. It paints Widow Quin as a kind of evil spinster undeserving of the archetypal hero, and speaks to the power of gossip and rumor in the rural Irish community.



Widow Quin tries to stir up trouble and destabilize Christy's growing affections for Pegeen. The timid way in which he insists on staying at the pub is intended as a direct contrast to his supposedly heroic deed, and hints that there might be more to the story than first meets the eye.



Christy lies in bed, sensing the honor and valor that, to his surprise, have come with the telling of his story. At this point, he doesn't realize that the blow he inflicted on his father was not fatal.



ACT 2

It's the morning after. Christy is cheerfully going about his duties as pub-boy, cleaning boots and counting up the glasses. He happily imagines spending the rest of his life at the pub, picturing a romantic life of drink, conversation and fairly easy work. He picks up the looking-glass from the wall and admires his reflection, thinking about Pegeen's comment about his handsomeness.

Four young village girls—Susan Brady, Nelly McLaughlin, Sara Tansey and Honor Blake—arrive at the pub. Christy gathers his coat and the looking-glass and hides in the inner room while the village girls search for him. They want to see a man who has “killed his father.”

The girls notice Christy's boots by the door, which Sara mischievously tries on. Just then, Honor looks inside the inner room and notices Christy. They call him out. He enters, hiding the looking-glass behind his back. They ask where Pegeen is, and he explains that she is tending to the goats.

The girls quiz Christy enthusiastically about whether he is the man who killed his father. Christy confirms this, while secretly trying to re-hang the looking-glass behind his back. The village girls present Christy with gifts: Sara has brought duck eggs, which she says are “the real sort;” Honor brought some cake to aid his “thin stomach;” and Nelly brought a hen, which she makes Christy feel the breast of.

As Christy dutifully admires the breast of Nelly's hen, Nelly notices the looking-glass behind his back. She exclaims, “them that kill their fathers is a vain lot surely.” The girls giggle, making Christy feel embarrassed.

Widow Quin comes in, having just entered Christy into all of the village's sports events taking place later that day. Surprised to see the village girls and their gifts, she instructs them to make Christy breakfast. She sits down with Christy and asks to hear his “story” before Pegeen comes back.

Christy is delighted by his new role as hero, but he also displays a vanity that suggests to the audience that he is not the pure hero that Pegeen and the others think he is. This moment allows the audience to see Christy on his own and get a deeper understanding of his psychology.



The arrival of the girls indicates that news of Christy's deed has got around, in turn demonstrating the power of story and myth—the community is crying out for this kind of event and feeding the spectacle.



Christy is self-consciously embarrassed by his vanity, sensing it to be at odds with the kind of hero the villagers perceive him to be.



Synge makes an ironic gesture towards the biblical story of Jesus. Christy's name aligns with Christ and the bringing of gifts is a comedic rendering of the nativity. Though the allusion is subtle, it leaves the audience in no doubt that Synge wants Christy to be considered in the context of the heroic archetype—best exemplified by Jesus Christ.



Christy is forced to feel the breast of the hen, again linking his heroic status to sexual prowess. Here, though, it's undermined by the discovery of the looking-glass, which puts his vanity on display.



The village sports will be an important part of Christy's ascension to being the villagers' hero. Widow Quin wants to hear Christy's story from its source, which gives him an opportunity to frame it in such a way that reinforces his hero status.



Christy describes how his father had recently ordered him to marry a hideous widow, whom he describes as “a walking terror from beyond the hills,” massively overweight and with a “blinded eye.” Christy, chewing on a chicken leg under the eager eyes of Widow Quin and the village girls, tells how he refused to wed this widow. His father had then called her “too good” for him and threatened to “flatten [him] out like a crawling beast” crushed by a wagon.

Christy concludes the story: his father had lifted his scythe up above his head and wished Christy “mercy” on his soul. Then, the fight ensued, with Christy quickly dealing the fatal blow using his **loy**. As he tells this, he uses the chicken bone as a prop. The girls call him a “marvel” and his story a “grand” and “lovely” one.

Sara says that both Christy and Widow Quin are heroes, and that they should get married. She pours them a drink and toasts to “the wonders of the western world.” At this point, Pegeen comes in. The girls “spring away from Christy.” Pegeen angrily dismisses them and Widow Quin, who reminds Christy about the “sports and racing” taking place at noon.

Now alone with Christy, Pegeen “imperiously” orders him to complete tasks around the pub. Trying to soften her mood, Christy picks up **a loy** and tries to tell her again about killing his father. She complains that she’s heard the story “six times” that morning and that, furthermore, he shouldn’t be telling his story to everyone who’ll listen.

Pegeen purposefully teases Christy, scaring him that that the village girls might tell his story to the “peelers,” who she says would take great joy in hanging him. Christy, increasingly concerned, puts his boots on, believing he had best be moving on again. Christy laments the lonely prospect of “passing small towns with the light shining sideways when the night is down,” and hearing lovers in ditches while “passing on with an empty hungry stomach failing from your heart.”

Pegeen calls Christy an “odd man.” He says anyone would be odd “living lonesome”; Pegeen points out that she has only ever lived with her father, but she’s not odd. Christy asks her, admiringly, “how would a lovely handsome woman the like of you be lonesome when all men should be thronging around to hear the sweetness of your voice.”

The archetype of the “hideous widow” has a fairytale feel to it, highlighting that Christy’s account is, if not fictionalized, certainly sensationalized for his audience (both in stage and in the theater). The chicken leg creates a sense of the fragility of life and man’s primal nature, both of which Christy needs to make his retelling effective.



Christy’s retelling makes for a powerful story, and he knows it. That’s why he acts it out as he speaks. The girls are evidently satisfied. The loy as a weapon symbolizes his transformation from oppressed peasant to heroic conqueror, being both the farming implement that he had to use every day and the item that he thinks has dealt a fatal blow his father.



As with the other characters before her, Sara links the capacity for violence with heroism. Her toast informs Christy’s nickname as the playboy of the western world. The “hero” will have a chance to symbolically prove his status by competing in the village sports and games.



Pegeen is annoyed with Christy for enjoying the affections of the Widow Quin and the village girls. He overplays his story, referencing it again in an attempt to win Pegeen over. The story, in a sense, is losing its power and must be replaced by something new (Christy’s poetic talk later on). She shows the same fortitude of character that earlier saw her dismiss Shawn.



Pegeen enjoys teasing Christy, giving her a temporary authority over him. Christy’s descriptions of what life will be like if he has to leave are again poetic and serve to soften Pegeen’s attitude towards him.



Christy flatters Pegeen, sensing his command over his language. The talk of “living lonesome” also subtly implies the opposite: living with someone. That is, it draws out the possibility of Pegeen and Christy being married.



Pegeen suspects Christy of pretending to be “lonesome” to win her affection, but he insists that “I was lonesome all times and born lonesome, I’m thinking, as the moon of dawn.” She’s surprised, considering he’s a “fine lad with the great savagery to destroy your da.” Christy tells her that his heart is “scalded” because he has to leave, “stretching out the earth” between them. “I’ll not be waking near you another dawn of the year till the two of us two arise to hope or judgment with the saints of God.”

Pegeen finally lets on that Christy is safe at the pub and that there’s been nothing in the newspapers about his father. Christy is deeply relieved and talks rapturously about having Pegeen’s company from now on.

Shawn runs in, accompanied by Widow Quin, and tells Pegeen that her sheep are “eating cabbages in Jimmy’s field.” She rushes out of the door to stop them. Having got rid of Pegeen, Shawn anxiously offers Christy a one-way ticket on a ship to the U.S.A, also offering up his best clothes. He wants Christy to “leave us in the peace we had till last night at the fall of dark,” explaining that he intends to marry Pegeen and can’t have a “clever fearless man” like Christy around.

Widow Quin also tries to convince Christy, letting slip the rumor that Pegeen intends to marry him. This makes Christy “beam with delight.” As Christy goes into the inner room to admire his new hat and coat, Shawn worries that Christy isn’t going to leave. He’s sure Pegeen will prefer Christy over him, which Widow Quin confirms: “it’s true all girls are fond of courage and do hate the likes of you.” Shawn says he would inform on Christy but is scared Christy will kill him.

Widow Quin makes a deal with Shawn: she will contrive to marry Christy if Shawn will provide her with a cow, a ram, right of way across his property, and the permission to cut turf on his land. Shawn eagerly agrees.

Widow Quin compliments Christy’s appearance as he comes back in: “it’d be a pity surely to have your like sailing from Mayo to the Western World.” She makes a sign for Shawn to leave her alone with Christy; he makes his excuses and goes out. Christy boasts of his life to come as a “gallant orphan,” insisting he will stay at the pub.

Christy employs beautiful poetry, both to develop his sense of despair at having to leave Pegeen and to increase her sympathies towards him. This also lends the conversation an air of finality or fate that will transform into the two characters’ feeling that they are meant to be together.



Having faced the possibility of leaving, Christy is emboldened by the news that Pegeen was tricking him. This renews his sense of freedom and confidence.



Shawn’s story about Pegeen’s sheep is a distraction tactic to help him get Christy alone. He wants to get Christy as far away from the village as possible, hence the offer of a one-way ticket to America. This also plays on the idea of Christy being the playboy of the “western” world, attempting to push him as far west as possible. Shawn knows he is no match for Christy’s heroism.



This is the first Christy knows for sure that Pegeen wants to marry him, and it only intensifies his desire to stay. His decision to take Shawn’s clothes is emblematic of his usurping of Shawn’s place as Pegeen’s love object. Widow Quin neatly sums up why Christy is the more attractive of the two men.



Widow Quin has an opportunistic streak, often looking for ways to improve her lot in exchange for favors. At this stage, Shawn will practically agree to anything to rid himself of the hero.



Christy has become so confident that he is able to take Shawn’s clothes without offering anything in return. This is a signal of hubris and ultimately hints at his downfall.



Suddenly, Christy staggers back, thinking he's seen the "walking spirit" of his father. Widow Quin looks out, seeing only a "tramper." Old Mahon comes in; Christy hides behind the door. Mahon asks Widow Quin if she has seen an "ugly young streeler with a murderous gob on him." Mahon wants to "destroy him for breaking the head on me with the clout of a **loy**."

Mahon takes off his hat and shows Widow Quin his bandaged head. She's impressed with the wound, which Mahon said was done by his "own son." She says that Mahon must have "vexed" and "tormented" his son greatly to make him "strike that gash." Mahon, offended, claims to have the "patience of a martyred saint," painting a picture of his son as lazy, foolish, and vain.

Widow Quin, with one eye on Christy, asks Mahon why his son was "so foolish"—was it because he "was running wild after the girls maybe?" Mahon explains that his son would hide like a frightened hare whenever girls were around. Furthermore, he adds, his son couldn't handle his alcohol and "would get drunk on the smell of a pint!" His son, he sums up, is the "laughing joke of every female woman."

Widow Quin gets rid of Mahon by saying she thinks she's seen the man he's looking for heading to catch a ship on the coast. Mahon goes out to follow her directions. She swings the door and looks at Christy, who is cowering in fear. Laughing, she calls him the "walking playboy of the western world."

Christy frets about what Pegeen will say when she hears about his father's visit. Widow Quin thinks she'll kick him out for being a "little schemer." Christy rages to himself about his father: "to be letting on he was dead, and coming back to life...coming in here and laying desolation between my own self and the fine women of Ireland."

Christy despairs to Widow Quin about the prospect of losing Pegeen's affection, who he says has "the love-light of the star of knowledge shining from her brow." Widow Quin rejects this "poetry talk for a girl you'd see itching and scratching." Christy says Pegeen is the kind of woman "fitted to be handling merchandise in the heavens above."

Christy is evidently surprised at the appearance of his father, indicating that the story has not been deliberately misleading. If anything, the disparity between story and reality just highlights Christy's youthful naiveté and, of course, undermines his heroic status. Mahon's mention of the loy makes it clear to Widow Quin that this is Christy's father.



Mahon offers the counter image to Christy's character, portraying him as the opposite of all the things the villagers think him to be. This to a degree reinstates Mahon's paternal authority; though he has not yet found Christy, he has started the work to undermine his son's false heroic status.



Mahon adds more detail to the description of his son. Everything he says paints Christy as boyish and distinctly unheroic. This also explains why Christy was initially so surprised to be described as handsome by Pegeen.



Widow Quin now has a degree of power over Christy, being the first character to know the truth about his story. Here, the use of "playboy" isn't intended as complimentary, more suggesting trickery or playacting.



Christy, despite the return of his father, is undergoing a genuine transformation in which he begins to feel more sure of himself. He sees his life as high stakes, knowing that he must vanquish his father or return to his old life.



Christy hasn't lost his poetic tendency, which again might well speak to his naiveté given that Pegeen is effectively the first girl that he has ever properly spoken to. Widow Quin highlights this directly, drawing a distinction between Christy's impressive use of words with what she sees as Pegeen's lack of merit.



Christy and Widow Quin hear people approaching the pub. Widow Quin hurriedly puts her proposition to Christy: that she has taken a “fancy” to him and wants him to live with her, where she can “tend” to him and he won’t have to worry about talking about whether he is a murderer or not. He instead begs her to help him win Pegeen’s heart, as the village girls clamor for him to come outside. She makes him promise that, if she helps him, he will give her “right of way” and a “ram,” to which he agrees.

Widow Quin offers Christy an easy way out of his situation by coming to live with her, but his lingering sense of the heroic gives him the confidence to refuse her proposal. Widow Quin makes her second deal of the play, showing her to be canny and opportunistic.



Widow Quin suggests that she and Christy pretend Old Mahon is a “maniac” and not Christy’s father. Susan, Sara, Honor and Nelly run in, calling for Christy to “come on the sports now.” He goes off, leaving Widow Quin to say to herself, “well, if the worst comes in the end of all, it’ll be great game to see there’s none to pity him but a widow woman, the like of me.” She leaves too.

Widow Quin is enjoying the drama of what’s happening, sensing that the events taking place are becoming a good story—no matter what the outcome may be. Despite his father’s return, Christy is still tasked with proving his heroism in the village games and sports.



ACT 3

Later on the same day, Jimmy and Philly converse drunkenly in the pub with nobody else around. They talk about Christy’s decisive victories in the village games and sports. As they complain about Christy’s constant bragging about his deed, Old Mahon passes by the window unseen. They wonder what will happen if Mahon’s skull is discovered in the ground, theorizing that it might be assumed to belong to an “old Dane.”

Jimmy and Philly’s conversation reveals the extent to which Christy is trading on his heroic story—he is beginning to overdo it and set himself up for a fall. The “old Dane” refers to bodies found in the bogs of Ireland, which can preserve bodies for a long time. The bogs are part of Ireland’s mythical culture.



As Philly and Jimmy talk more generally about skulls, Old Mahon comes in and instructs them to look at his. Triumphantly, he tells them it is the result of a blow from **a loy** by his own son, arousing Philly’s suspicion. Mahon explains that he has been receiving food and lodgings all over the county in exchange for his story.

This marks the beginning of the unraveling of Christy’s story. The loy is a key detail, being so specific as to clearly link Old Mahon’s story to the one told by Christy.



Widow Quin comes in, shocked to see Mahon again. She fetches Mahon a drink at his request. As he gulps it down, Widow Quin tries to convince Philly and Jimmy that Mahon is a lunatic “raving from his wound.” She tells them she met Mahon earlier, and that he originally claimed his head was injured by “a tinker;” he then changed his story, she says, when he heard about Christy’s deed. Jimmy buys the story but Philly is more suspicious.

Widow Quin tries to put her and Christy’s plan into action—to discredit Mahon by painting him as mad. Philly is a little more savvy than Jimmy and starts to question whether Christy has been telling the truth.



In an effort to demonstrate Mahon’s supposed madness to Philly and Jimmy, Widow Quin asks him how he is feeling. He complains in a maudlin but eloquent manner about his fall-out with his son, evidently missing him. Philly tells Jimmy that Mahon seems sane to him, and asks Widow Quin to get Mahon to say more about his son.

Like his son, Mahon has a certain power to his words. Because of Mahon’s eloquent explanation of what’s happened, Philly starts to believe him.



Widow Quin craftily asks Mahon if his son is “a great hand at racing and lepping and licking the world.” Mahon insists that Christy is “the fool of men.” He hears cheering outside and goes to look out the window; Widow Quin, “with a shade of a smile,” explains that the crowd is “cheering a young lad, the champion playboy of the western world.” Mahon, puzzled, thinks that the “lad” looks like Christy.

Mahon wants to go out and watch the mule race about to commence on the sands, in which Christy is participating. Widow Quin tries to get him to leave, but Philly settles Mahon on a bench with a good view of the race. All of them mount the bench to watch, marveling at Christy’s riding prowess; Widow Quin calls him “the champion of the world.” Christy wins, resulting in great cheer.

As Christy is carried on the villagers’ shoulders towards the pub, Mahon is astonished to realize that the race-winner is his own son. Widow Quin grabs Mahon and tries to convince him that he’s mad. Mahon’s certainty wavers as he tries to reconcile his opinion of his son with the evident worship of the villagers.

Mahon comes to agree that he must be mad on account of his head injury. He decides he’d better leave and Widow Quin shows him out. Philly casts doubt on Widow Quin’s motives and goes after Mahon to see for himself whether the man is “raving” or not. Jimmy follows Philly to protect him from Mahon, who Jimmy is sure is a “madman.”

Christy comes in, dressed in jockey’s garb, surrounded by admirers who include Pegeen and the village girls. The crowd gives Christy prizes for winning the race. Christy compares his sporting achievements, saying that they’re nothing compared to how he killed his father. Pegeen ushers the crowd out to let Christy rest; they go off to take part in a tug-of-war.

As Pegeen wipes the sweat off Christy’s face, he tells her that the prize he really wants is for her to agree to marry him in two weeks’ time. She thinks he’s being “daring” and doesn’t trust that he isn’t a womanizer. But he persuades her, speaking poetically. He asks her to imagine them strolling the countryside, “drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap of sunshine with yourself stretched back unto your necklace in the flowers of the earth.”

Widow Quin uses the fact of Christy’s newfound hero status as a way to convince Philly that Mahon is mistaken. She points out the difference between Mahon’s account of his son and the admirations of the village. The “playboy” here refers to Christy’s victories in the village sports, but still carries with it the suggestion of deception.



The games are a symbolic arena in which the village can seek out its heroes. All of the characters are engaged in this behavior, feeling an instinctive affinity with the winner.



Widow Quin’s strategy works, but only temporarily, playing on the incongruity between Mahon’s opinion of his own son and what he can see right there before his eyes.



The head injury lends credibility to Widow Quin’s insistence that Mahon is going mad. That said, Philly’s suspicions have intensified based on Mahon’s recognition of Christy. Philly’s desire to know the truth preempts the extreme reaction that the villagers will have later on when Christy is revealed to have been dishonest.



Christy’s attachment to his story by now has become comical for the audience, highlighting that he isn’t as heroic as the villagers think. Carried on the shoulders of his admirers, Christy now has authority within the village based on his heroic deed and sporting prowess.



Christy, his confidence soaring because of his victories, turns his attention to winning Pegeen’s heart. She is reticent to take his poetic “talk” at face value, believing it to be part of his general outlaw personality. Christy’s imagery evokes a deliberately Edenic scene, trying to get Pegeen to indulge in the idea of a utopian future together.



Pegeen, won over by Christy's "talk," asks why a man like him, with "such poet's talking, and such bravery of heart," is so interested in her. He says she has "the light of seven heavens in [her] heart alone." They both agree that "miracles" have brought them together. She agrees to tell her father that she wants to wed Christy when he returns from the wake.

Michael comes in drunk, supported by Shawn. He heaps praise on Christy but also chastises him for not giving his father a "decent" Christian burial. Michael slaps him on the back, saying that married men will have to watch out for him stealing their wives.

Michael announces to Christy that Father Reilly has given Shawn and Pegeen permission to marry, asking if Christy thought that "I'd leave my daughter living single with a little frisky rascal is the like of you." Pegeen fiercely states that it's too late—she wants to marry Christy.

Michael is horrified that Pegeen wants to marry a father killer. She says it would be a "bitter thing" to marry "the like" of Shawn. Michael asks Shawn if he has anything to say; is he not "jealous at all?" Shawn is afraid "to be jealous of a man did slay his da." Pegeen insists she doesn't want to marry Shawn.

As Shawn continues to try to persuade Pegeen, Christy intervenes aggressively. Michael is afraid of "murder in this place," and tells Shawn and Christy to go on to the "foreshore" if they want to fight. Shawn says he's too scared to fight Christy and implores Michael to do it. Michael, annoyed by Shawn's cowardice, pushes him towards Christy. Christy picks up **a loy**, causing Shawn to run out of the pub.

Christy appeals to Michael to let him marry Pegeen, asking why he would want a "quaking blackguard" like Shawn in his house at all. Michael considers his family legacy, deciding that he'd rather have "a score of grandsons growing up little gallant swearers by the name of God, than go peopling my bedside with puny weeds" like Shawn. He joins Pegeen's and Christy's hands together, approving their engagement.

Interestingly, though religion has not really acted as a moral authority at all, it does serve as a kind of a figurative authority. Christy links Pegeen's "light"—her beauty and character—to the ethereal light of heaven. This religious grounding informs their sense of fate bringing them together: "miracles."



Michael's mention of a Christian burial is ironic given that he has praised Christy for the expressly sinful behavior of murder. Like many of the other characters, he links what he sees as Christy's outsider status to sexual prowess.



Shawn has finally got the special dispensation required for him to wed his cousin, but has lost her affections in the process. His obedience to authority is contrasted with Christy's supposed rebellion, which has made Christy the much more attractive option for Pegeen.



Michael tries to get Shawn to live up to the values of the community; that is, he wants his future son-in-law to display the heroic characteristics of honor and a willingness to fight for his "property." In short, he wants Shawn to mete out his own justice, just as Christy is alleged to have done. Shawn, of course, is as cowardly now as he was at the start of the play.



Here a schism opens up between myth and reality. Michael—and by extension the village—is enamored by stories of violent deeds, but reluctant to have them take place where he lives. This would in part make them too real, and risk trouble with the "peelers." The loy is a symbol of Christy's original deed and his willingness to now act like a hero.



"Blackguard" is Irish English slang for a bad person, pronounced "blaggard." Michael is easily persuaded to approve Christy and cast off Shawn, thinking about his own legacy in relation to the land in which he lives. He would rather populate it with a host of heroes than people like Shawn.



Just then, Mahon rushes into the pub, followed by the crowd (including Widow Quin). He runs at Christy and strikes him down. Pegeen drags Mahon off, asking who he is. Mahon reveals that he is Christy's father, and though Christy tries to say that Mahon is mad, nobody believes him.

Pegeen is shocked that Christy has been lying: "and to think of the coaxing glory we had given him, and he after doing nothing but hitting a soft blow and chasing northward in a sweat of fear." Though Christy pleads with her, she tells Mahon to take him away; she doesn't want "the world" to see her "raging for a Munster liar and the fool of men." The crowd taunts Christy.

Christy becomes increasingly desperate, realizing that no one will help him—not even Widow Quin. Mahon tries to grab Christy, who tells him to "leave me go." The crowd is bloodthirsty for them to fight. Christy picks up **a loy**, threatening "a blow" that would "set the guardian angels winking in the clouds above." The crowd shouts, "run from the idiot;" Christy angrily points out how, just moments ago, they were celebrating him.

Christy chases Mahon out of the pub with **the loy**. After a great noise and "a yell" outside, Christy comes back in. Widow Quin hurries in too, telling Christy that the crowd is turning against him and he needs to escape before he gets "hanged." He insists that he won't leave Pegeen, who should be impressed with him again now that he has dealt his father a fatal blow.

Widow Quin implores Christy to go, saying there are plenty of other girls in the world. Christy replies stubbornly, "what'd I'd care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself maybe, from this place to the Eastern World."

Sara runs in and tries to disguise Christy in her petticoat to help him escape. Christy threatens the two women with a stool, insisting that he will wed Pegeen and be "a proven hero in the end of all." Widow Quin goes to get a doctor, fearing Christy is going mad.

Mahon comes back yet again, literally haunting Christy—but it's worse because he's actually alive. Christy tries to stick to the plan he has agreed to with Widow Quin, but it fails to convince the crowd.



Pegeen turns on Christy immediately when she realizes that Old Mahon is the father he is supposed to have killed. There is an element of spectacle in the scene, which is part of the same psychology that allowed the villagers to enjoy Christy's story in the first place.



Here, the scene of the original fight between Christy and Old Mahon is replayed. The only ostensible difference between the two is that in the first fight the villagers were not present, whereas now they are. Christy shows himself willing to strike a fatal blow on his father; that is, to do the exact deed that he had been rewarded for. Yet, faced with the deed in reality, the villagers are no longer appreciative; it has been shorn of its mythic value because it is no longer a story.



Though its offstage, it's clear that Christy strikes his father again. The crowd is bloodthirsty and wants justice, without having a clear sense of the parameters of that justice. In essence, they want to impose their own collective authority and Widow Quin knows that they will come for Christy and tries to help him escape.



Christy retains part of his new character, showing determination and bravery (and still a little naiveté). This is a famously controversial line in the play. Audiences at the first performances objected to what they saw as the indecency of the word "shifts" (female underwear).



Christy, trying desperately to retain his heroic nature, refuses to be disguised. He feels that, if he can kill his father, it will prove his heroism and win him Pegeen.



The men come back in. Philly confirms to Michael that Mahon is dead. Michael, fearing that the murder will get him and his community in trouble with the law, gives Shawn a rope to try and ensnare Christy so that they can then hang him. He's too scared to do it, so Pegeen takes the rope and drops it over Christy's head.

Michael explains to Christy that hanging him is "an easy and speedy end," necessary to keep the "peelers" away. Christy appeals to Pegeen, who says: "I'll say a strange man is a marvel with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed." She implores the men to take Christy outside.

Christy tussles with the villagers, insisting that if they take him to the gallows he'll "shed the blood" of some of them before he dies. Christy squirms around on the floor and bites Shawn's leg. He promises to come back and kill Shawn, thinking himself now on the side of "Satan," who he says "hasn't many have killed their da."

Mahon, still alive, crawls back into the pub. Christy, also on his knees, asks his father if he wants to be "killed a third time." Mahon wonders why the villages have tied up Christy. Christy explains that they're trying to deliver him to the "peelers." Michael apologetically explains to Mahon that their actions are necessary to prevent Michael from being ruined or hanged himself.

Mahon loosens the rope around Christy, insisting that they will be "going on our own way and we'll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo and the fools is here." Christy, now freed, says he will go with Mahon—but he will now be the "gallant captain," and his father the "heathen slave." He pushes his father out of the door, telling him not to speak. Mahon wonders again if he is going "crazy."

On his way out, Christy turns to the villagers, offering them "ten thousand blessings" for turning him into "a likely gaffer in the end of all." Now, he says, he'll "go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day."

This highlights the hypocrisy of the villagers, who now feel they have to kill Christy for doing the exact deed that they had earlier venerated him for. Pegeen is angry at Christy for his dishonesty, but also feels the pressure of the entire community expecting Christy to be killed.



Pegeen comes to the realization of the difference between stories and reality. She sees Christy's hero status as being inflated by his verbal dexterity, and is no longer impressed by his ability to act violently.



Christy puts up a strong fight, again emphasizing that he is not the meek and mild man that first arrived at the pub. In fact, he is becoming a genuine moral outlaw, feeling himself to be outside of the village community and aligning himself with the most notorious of outlaws, Satan.



Mahon comes back from the dead once again. Michael feels a kind of respect towards him based on them both being fathers and he absurdly tries to reason why Christy needs to die. The village is afraid of being in trouble with the peelers, and killing Christy, or turning him in, seems to be the easiest option for self-preservation.



Mahon exerts his authority by releasing his son, attempting to restore them to their former way of life. But Christy portrays an important change—he is no longer willing to be subservient to his father, symbolized by the way he pushes him out of the door. This disruption to normal reality again makes Mahon question his mental state.



Christy feels that he is fundamentally changed, determined to take on the heroic characteristics that the village had temporarily granted him.



Michael says, “by the will of God, we’ll have peace for our drinks.” He calls Pegeen to get them. Shawn goes up to Pegeen and says, “it’s a miracle Father Reilly can wed us in the end of all, and we’ll have none to trouble us when his vicious bite is healed.” Pegeen hits him on the ear, telling him to go away. She puts a shawl over her head and cries out wildly: “Oh my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only playboy of the western world.”

Pegeen, too, is fundamentally changed, no longer willing to settle for the boring future that Shawn represents. Because Christy has now gone, his mystery is restored; he has returned into the unknowable outer world from whence he came. This explains her sudden change of attitude, switching from anger to grief, and ultimately demonstrating that she does see Christy as a heroic figure.





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