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# **The Playboy of the Western World**

A Carnavalesque Reading

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**Title:** *The Playboy of the Western World – A Carnivalesque Reading*

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**Abstract:** A carnivalesque reading of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* is presented. Mikhail Bakhtin defines carnivalesque as a literary style that challenges authority and traditional social hierarchy through the use of humour and chaos, and he compares the carnivalesque in literature to the carnivals of popular culture. Several carnivalesque tropes apparent in *The Playboy*—inversion, subversion, grotesque imagery and ambivalent laughter—are examined, and a specific focus is placed on carnivalesque tropes in the language of the play and carnivalesque aspects in the action. Bakhtin's framework of the carnivalesque, with both its life-affirming and death-embracing aspects and its notable focus on the inversion of opposites, is utilised to provide a fruitful, and as yet little explored, avenue to understanding Synge's play. Such a carnivalesque framework positions this Irish play within the time-honoured tradition of European grotesque humour and provides a contrast to more traditional analyses.

**Keywords:** J. M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, Irish Drama, carnivalesque, grotesque realism, tragicomedy, laughter, language, symbolism

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Even more important is the theme of the mask, the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 39-40.

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## 1. Introduction

From the night of its first production in January 1907, Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* has divided audiences and critics alike. It may well be dubbed a comedy or a tragicomedy, but its novelty of plot and theme, its blasphemous and poetic speeches, and its modernist qualities obstruct such neat delineation. Its unpopularity with early audiences inspired rioting and widespread criticism, but the play is now regarded as a dramatic masterpiece, with John Millington Synge hailed as the most notable Irish playwright of his generation. Faced with such contrasting responses, the modern reader may experience *The Playboy* as a bewildering encounter in need of appropriate contextualisation.

An understanding of the carnivalesque influences on Synge's thinking may provide an alternative avenue to understanding the play. Surviving notebooks belonging to Synge reveal how he mapped the rising and falling action of the play, scene by scene, and used keywords such as “poetic”, “drama”, “comedy”, and “character” to capture the focus of the action (Saddlemyer, xii). Some of the individual scenes he conceived as “Rabelaisian”. In the scene between the Widow Quin and Pegeen, the two main female contenders for the playboy's love (1, 62), Synge's note to himself is: “Rabelaisian—to be very strong”. By “Rabelaisian”, he is, of course, referring to the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais and his most famous work *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a comedic, irreverent and satirical tale of two giants and their adventures. The reference to Rabelais points the way to Bakhtin's seminal *oeuvre*, *Rabelais and his World*, a controversial work written in the 1930s in Stalinist Russia, but published for the first time in 1965. In his book, the Russian critic, Bakhtin, seeks to reinstate Rabelais as a great writer and to have his writings and their contribution to literature reappraised. Bakhtin sees the carnival in Rabelais as representing an indispensable component of folk culture and the duality in life. Bakhtin's work could also be read as a revolt against a totalitarian regime that attempted to define literature and to prescribe the parameters of the novel for its writers.

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, as outlined in *Rabelais and His World*, celebrates life in all its manifestations. The term carnivalesque refers to a certain spirit that pervaded the medieval European carnivals. It has a strong

subversive element and a dynamic that tends towards chaos and flux. Carnival inverts the social order, elevating the low and degrading the high. All rank and class are levelled out during the carnival and the spectator becomes a participator. The carnival provides leeway for Man's less socially acceptable behavioural traits. In fact, according to Bakhtin, such traits should be celebrated. Therefore, a focus on the body and its functions is as laudable as any other display of human vitality. Indeed, what Bakhtin terms the "lower stratum of the body" plays a fundamental and regenerative role in carnivalesque texts, for it is here that new life or energy originates. "To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place" (Bakhtin 21). A raw life force is thus created that fuels the carnivalesque. Bakhtin wrote *Rabelais and His World* in praise of the Renaissance author's astute understanding of human nature and his unbridled embrace of the carnival grotesque. He analyses Rabelais' use of the carnivalesque and laments the demise of the communal spirit and the regenerating laughter of the carnival in modern culture. This combination of communal spirit and regenerating laughter is much in evidence in Synge's play, where the action largely takes place in a public house and the climax coincides with the fair day, a carnival platform *par excellence*.

This essay employs Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque as a theoretical framework in order to explore this less travelled avenue to understanding the play. The definition of the carnivalesque is based on the concepts mentioned above and is essentially a literary style that challenges authority and traditional social hierarchy through the use of humour and chaos. Four themes typifying carnivalesque texts—inversion, subversion, grotesque imagery, and ambivalent laughter—are examined; and whereas the first chapter is devoted to elements of the aforementioned themes in the language of the play, the second chapter focuses on tracing evidence of these themes in the action. The division into two chapters allows a varied description of carnivalesque features. This description is followed in each chapter by an attempt to sum up the evidence and argue for the value of a carnivalesque reading.

The complexity of the play has led to a plethora of interpretations over the decades. As an early twentieth-century modernist play, produced during the

colonial period, it has sparked historical readings such as Francis Bickley's<sup>1</sup> study of Synge in relation to his contemporaries and English-written drama. As a play on the revivalist stage, it has been subject to intense ideological and dramaturgical scrutiny. Renowned works on Synge's drama include those by Nicholas Grene<sup>2</sup> and Maurice Bourgeois<sup>3</sup>. Grene has furthermore discussed the play in terms of the Oedipus myth<sup>4</sup>, and Robin Skelton<sup>5</sup> has considered the play's Christian and mock-Christian themes. Toni O'Brien Johnson's<sup>6</sup> study of Synge's medieval grotesque is worthy of note, as is Bruce Bigley's reading of the play as a Bildungsroman<sup>7</sup>. Declan Kiberd's<sup>8</sup> and Vivien Mercier's<sup>9</sup> studies have examined aspects of the work against a background of Irish myth and story-telling. Gail Finney's *Women in Modern Drama* (1989) devotes a chapter to female characters in the play and discusses Synge's awareness of feminism (106). The above studies are a small sample of the varied work done on *The Playboy* to date.

A number of secondary sources are utilised for commentary on Synge's language and dramatic force, with a specific focus placed on carnivalesque themes. Two studies of particular importance to this essay are George Bretherton's *A Carnival Christy and a Playboy for all Ages* (1991), and David Butler's *Hamlet, Carnival and the Playboy of the Western World* (2012). These are notable for their carnivalesque angle. Most importantly, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* has functioned as the main secondary source, owing to its groundbreaking discussion and definition of the term carnivalesque.

This essay seeks to clarify what has been written on carnivalesque aspects of *The Playboy*, and to ascertain whether the play lends itself to a carnivalesque reading. Moreover, the argument is made that a carnivalesque reading of *The Playboy* is not only possible, but that it succeeds where other readings break down. Synge is viewed as including "Rabelaisian" aspects, not out of political or stylistic motives, but out of aesthetic and ontological ones. In her introduction to the

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement (London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1912).

<sup>2</sup> *The Politics of Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre* (London: Constable, 1913).

<sup>4</sup> "Synge's Playboy and the Eugenics of Language" (*Modern Drama*, vol. 51. 2008)

<sup>5</sup> *The writings of J. M. Synge* (Philadelphia: Bobbs, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> *Synge: The Medieval and the Grotesque* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> "The Playboy of the Western World as Antidrama" (*Modern Drama*, vol. 20. Uni. of Toronto Press, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> *Synge and the Irish Language* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

play, Ann Saddlemyer describes Synge's aesthetic as "a blending of romantic pantheism and ironic realism" (x). The harsh but plentiful references to the outdoors in *The Playboy*, and the subliminal importance that Irish people attach to land-ownership, underpin the play and set the scene for an unnatural occurrence: the murder of one's father. Interestingly enough, this story of a fugitive parricide harboured by locals in the west of Ireland was inspired by a factual event reported in the newspapers in Synge's day.

According to the carnivalesque principle, the boundaries between spectator and performer are erased, and this has famously been the case with *The Playboy*. *The Playboy of the Western World* can be regarded as a text about the power of language to create and mask reality, and about the impossibility of finding one single version of the truth. The mask veils conventional identity and reveals what is hidden and repressed—a fitting metaphor for human interaction during carnival time. One of the most convincing arguments for reading *The Playboy* as a carnivalesque text is the very duality of the play's nature, symbolised by the mask, which fits neatly with the topsy-turvy, antithetical carnival logic. In the light of this view, a carnivalesque reading can be seen as a fresh attempt to address the issue of interpretative difficulty, a conundrum expressed in the following comment by Patricia Meyer Spacks: "[...] *The Playboy* seems a work destined to be forever misinterpreted" (75).



## 2. Carnavalesque language in the *Playboy of the Western World*

Numerous linguistic features in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, contribute to a carnivalesque reading. In his study of Synge's idiom, Ronald Peacock writes of the "the exotic appeal of Synge's work" (101), and states that "[t]he basis of the comic here is a delicate and capricious mockery at the very idea of fine language" (103). The theme of ridiculing the high-flown and the pretentious is a classic carnivalesque trope, and emblematic of inversion of the high-low binary, the first of the four features to be discussed. Inversion in Bakhtin refers to the turning on its head of social roles, which creates both upheaval and comic release. R. Brazeau maintains that "[f]or Synge, language can, when it is romantically charged, disengage itself from reality and become the scene of myth making and hopelessly unfulfilled personal and communal desire" (158). Brazeau is alluding to another aspect akin to carnivalesque inversion, namely the conflation of fantasy and reality, which plays a key role in *The Playboy*, ultimately inviting a choice between two possible readings of the play's climax that will be discussed below. In short, the above views testify to the paramount importance of language in the play. Within the framework of a carnivalesque reading, this essay claims that Synge harnesses language and its inherent capacity for duplicity. The entire plot of the play is built on a lie—a parricide that has not, in fact, taken place—and the action is powered both by linguistic prowess, typified by Christy's sudden access to stunningly poetic language, and ambivalence, exemplified by the shifting speeches of the villagers in celebration and condemnation of Christy's misdeed. Even the title gives a nod to the speciousness of language; the word "playboy" in early twentieth century Ireland was an ambiguous term often synonymous with *hoaxer* (Felts 38-39). Bethany Felts in her essay, "What's in a Nickname? Christy as 'Playboy'", discusses the "disparate meanings" of "playboy", and suggests that Synge deliberately exploited the ambiguity. Felts also acknowledges Spacks' view that "the word 'playboy' is defined by the action of the drama" (Spacks 82).

Language in *The Playboy* is a communicative event that subverts authority, and this subversion, typified by a flouting of authority and convention, is highly carnivalesque. Synge's language is both anarchic and poetic at once. Furthermore, his gaelicised English is a bastardised form that deliberately deviates

from the standard language by incorporating rural Irish locutions e.g. “divil a one”, (meaning *none* or *no one*) and “beyond” (meaning *over there*), along with Gaelic rhythms and diction. Peacock sees this idiolect as limited, “a style, but one that was quite useless for the English drama, its basis being a speech of extremely local and ambiguously English character” (105-106). This essay maintains, however, that, in the construction of this idiom, Synge was doing something wholly carnivalesque; namely, he was creating a vernacular for his characters that deviated from the language deemed appropriate on the nationalist stage, and one which would allow the characters to run the full gamut of their carnival madness. As Bakhtin observes,

The walls between official and non-official literature were inevitably to crumble, especially because in the most important ideological sectors these walls also served to separate languages—Latin from the vernacular. The adoption of the vernacular by literature and by certain ideological spheres was to sweep away or at least weaken these boundaries (72).

In his preface to the play, Synge remarks that “[...] in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form” (40). In fact, Synge’s idiom is entirely successful, not only in the context of a carnivalesque reading, but also in the context of the modernist theatre, with its elements of realism, naturalism, surrealism, and symbolism.

Vocabulary plays a key subversive role in the play, conjuring up shades of interpretation with both denotative and connotative meanings. In the second chapter, the symbolism behind the choice of the word “loy”, to describe the weapon used by Christy, will be considered, which Synge deliberately chose over the more generic term of *spade*. It is safe to assume that vocabulary choices were taken extremely seriously by Synge, as is evidenced by his notebooks and his meticulously revised earlier drafts.

The use of the progressive and the gerund are striking in the text and they contribute to the whimsical, carnival mood by denying the text the rigidity and solidity offered by more straightforward finite verb forms. George Watson remarks that “Synge’s syntax largely creates what may be called the time-sense of his

dramatic universe: that of static continuum” (52). Time is suspended as a result, and the dreamlike present is elongated, creating a sense of being out of time—and outside of the law. In Christy’s words: “[...] and I’m after feeling a kind of fellow above in the furzy ditch, groaning wicked like a maddening dog” (1, 44), the use of “I’m after feeling” instead of *I felt* brings the experience of fear into the present. The fear can almost still be felt. This unconventional use of language can be interpreted as a subversive trait.

David Butler refers to the use of alliteration in the play as a subversive vehicle for “travesty and inappropriateness”. He refers to Sara Tansey’s toast, “There now. Drink a health to the wonders of the western world, the pirates, preachers, poteen-makers, with the jobbing jockies; parching peelers, and the juries fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law. [Brandishing the bottle.]” (249-250). Carnival excess is, incidentally, also illustrated in this scene, in the image of Sara brandishing the porter bottle.

Grotesque imagery is crucial to a discussion on carnivalesque language, and undeniably the text abounds in jaunty, colourful images that conjure up the devil, saints, animal images and the corporeal. Religious references appear frequently, but always in a pagan context, in conjunction with profanities and accounts of violent or irreverent acts. Brazeau discusses the “interconnected ideological functions” of Synge’s mixing of the religious and the profane, and calls particular attention to the following utterance by Shawn Keogh: “I’ll get the curse of the priests on you and of the scarlet-coated bishops in Rome” (1, 47). This choice of imagery promotes the view, in Brazeau’s opinion, that the villagers are “mired in a pre-modern and superstitious world of curses and vindictiveness” (156). Regardless of Synge’s intentions, the use of the profane is interesting in the light of Bakhtin’s affirmation that carnival familiarity was reflected in speech patterns and in abusive language, “[...] in the language which mocks and insults the deity and which was part of the ancient comic cults” (16). Bearing Bakhtin’s observation in mind, one can trace a juxtaposition of incongruous images throughout the play, such as the deadpan comment by Pegeen about maiming a ewe, mentioned in the same breath as “God” and “Holy Ireland” (1, 43). David Butler also regards the play as displaying “carnival’s blasphemous attitude in regard to all pieties, political and religious” (250).

According to Bakhtin, this grotesque imagery serves a purpose. "In

grotesque realism [...] the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people” (19). Grotesque language is therefore highly life-affirming as well as being death-embracing. Herbert Howarth writes that “Synge disperses what we usually imagine as beauty and in its place finds energy” (107), and Una Ellis-Fermor concurs that “Synge perceives the intermittent savagery of human nature” (37). Butler mentions the image of Philly assembling the corpse as an example of “comic-grotesque linkage of death to rebirth or renewal” (245). It can therefore be claimed that Synge presented life exactly as he saw it, in all its carnivalesque flavour.

One striking hallmark of the play is the directness and the lack of social niceties in the dialogue, particularly demonstrated in the language of the women. This gender reversal is essentially part of carnivalesque inversion; however, it deserves special attention given its prominent theme. Throughout the play, the female characters speak a power language and frequently lead the dialogue, interrupting and intimidating the men. Pegeen and Widow Quin’s Rabelaisian tug of love over Christy is a prime example of a comic norm-breaking event where the two suitors enter into a spirited verbal duel to win Christy. Each woman attempts to wrest Christy from the other by slinging insults aimed to sabotage her rival. The struggle ends when Pegeen literally shakes an answer out of Christy.

PEGEEN -- [to Christy.] -- Don't heed her. Tell her to go into her pigsty and not plague us here.  
WIDOW QUIN. I'm going; but he'll come with me.  
PEGEEN -- [shaking him.] -- Are you dumb, young fellow?  
CHRISTY -- [timidly, to Widow Quin.] -- God increase you; but I'm pot-boy in this place, and it's here I'd liefer stay.  
PEGEEN -- [triumphantly.] Now you have heard him, and go on from this.

This scene is of particular interest in the context of a carnivalesque reading, owing to the fact that Synge conceived it as “Rabelaisian—to be very strong”. Moreover, the fact that carnival licence reigns supreme in the village, and that the local potentates are mysteriously absent, can be construed as a further example of inversion: one where the normal social order has been turned on its head.

Ambivalent laughter is the fourth carnivalesque trait to be considered, and though *The Playboy* has been termed a comedy or a tragicomedy, its humour remains problematic. As Una Ellis Fermor says of Synge’s dramaturgy,

“[his]comedies are never wholly free from tragedy or tragic irony “(37). Clearly humour plays a role in the play, but it is an ambivalent laughter that subverts authority. Humour appears to wage a covert war against oppression. Its unruliness kicks at hierarchy in all its forms: parental, gender, conventions of decency, tyranny from Rome, London and Dublin. The notion of decency is ridiculed in the dialogue; the word *decent* appears in the text no less than sixteen times. Clearly, the antics of the characters are anything but decent. Ironic humour is intertwined in the play with slapstick. Brazeau makes the following amusing observation about the fair day where Christy attains the pinnacle of his success: “Christy is able to fall off his mount and still win, which is a testament to its other than breakneck pace. The race is also the occasion of impassioned cheering, bantering, prediction and general dialogue that actually moves much faster than the animals and jockeys” (163). This dual carnivalesque humour challenges our credulity and ridicules the doings of the characters. Christy’s parricide is also trivialised in an example of subversive humour delivered as the curtain falls on Act 1: “[...] wasn’t I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by?” (1, 63).

On the subject of the parricide, which will be discussed in more detail below, David Butler mentions the use of hyperbole. He identifies this comic exaggeration in Christy’s recounting of the deed, which grows in gory detail with each telling—escalating from a “blow of the loy that cracks the skull”, to “a blow that split him to the gullet”, and finally to a blow that “divided him to the trouser belt” (245). The parricide is the ultimate example of irony, comedy, grotesque humour and subversion.

Brazeau neatly sums up the play’s dialogue as a “catalogue of speech acts” (162). Arguably the most subversively carnivalesque *act* that language performs in the play is to bring about a conflation of fantasy and reality both on the part of the characters and that of the audience. Howarth notes that “Synge’s dialogue supplies images of aspirations [...] and images drawn from harsh fact. It is a direct counterpoising of reality and dream” (106). It is exactly this contradiction in the text that creates bewilderment on the part of the audience. There is a dilemma faced with Christy’s growing rhetorical skills and the unexpected and intermittent beauty of his love speeches to Pegeen. “Ironically, when Christy’s father appears in Act 2, his dismissive description of his son focuses on Christy’s *lack* of both verbal skills and

virility, “a dirty stuttering lout” (2, 80) who “would get drunk on the smell of a pint” (2, 81). Realistic elements clearly vie for supremacy with symbolic ones, complicating a genre classification.

Una Ellis-Fermor sees Christy as “the only character to be changed for the better by the central drama of the play by the rigorous debate between reality and illusion that forms so much of the action” (46). This statement contrasts with Bretherton’s view that Christy’s transformation constitutes “an escape into fantasy, an extravagance as Synge put it, and not one entirely of his own making. Christy has been cast in a role, seemingly great but actually limited and circumscribed, that he can play for only a time” (333). These diverging views illustrate the dilemma of interpretation that is the crux of the matter. The choice that the reader has is between accepting the drama as triumph of the imagination or seeing it as a temporary aberration with tragicomic overtones. As the play draws to a conclusion, the comedy gets darker and the audience is denied the traditional happy ending. Much has been made of Christy’s apotheosis—his rise to glory—and his triumphant departure. The traditional view of critics, such as Spacks, is that Christy leaves the village a new man, “[c]ertainly there is no question that Christy grows before our very eyes in *The Playboy*” (78). Christy’s declaration is indeed very emphatic: “I’ll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day” (3, 110). However, can the reader credit Christy’s words in a carnivalesque reading? Christy’s father, Old Mahon, makes a cryptic statement as he departs, claiming to be mad. David Butler also points out the ambivalence in Christy’s final blessing, though he gives credence to the notion of the playboy’s transformation. “Christy departs, having assumed a stable and assertive identity, his parting words an ambivalent blessing to the crowd for having turned him ‘a likely gaffer in the end of all’” (241).

The linguistic features described above serve to blur the division between words and action, and reality and fantasy, to the point where, right up to the final curtain, we are unable to predict the outcome. Moreover, the carnivalesque imagery of masking and mirrors further infers the instability that is inherent in carnivalesque phenomena such as inversion and subversion. This essay makes a distinction between inversion—which confounds expectation and typically provokes humour—and subversion, which has revolutionary overtones and seeks to upend the social or political order.

Christy's final boasts, "I'm master of all fights from now" and "[...] I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day." (3, 110) attest to the fact that one can verbally succeed even in the face of failure. He abandons Pegeen and his marriage plans, and leaves with his father; their most likely destination is home to the farm where drudgery awaits. Nonetheless, language appears to triumph after Carnival bows out. Christy's parting words are a *tour de force* that most likely impress the villagers, but often leave the audience less satisfied. Clearly, this is a play about play-acting on many levels and the language that facilitates it. According to Peacock, irony and farce tinge the role of the playwright too:

This comedy is not directed only against Mayo, but against Synge himself; against the artist and his dangerous love of fine words. [...]. His most ambitious work has for its theme the imagination, the fine idea and the fine word. It is one of those works in which the artist takes art and artists for his subject. It is, however, wonderfully disguised; and the disguise – the comedy and the irony – give it its quality (105).

If read as a fantasy, Christy can appear to metamorphose and magically grow before the eyes of the villagers. Shortly after appearing as a "scared, rabbit-like fugitive" (Bretherton 324), Christy suddenly produces lyrical outpourings of love for Pegeen that are achingly beautiful. However, as Spacks points out, "viewed as a realistic drama, the play immediately begins to seem implausible" (75). Despite the limits of this cursory examination of the language, there is reason to allege that this implausibility, strengthened by the existence of binaries and contradictions, can be deconstructed and superseded by the carnivalesque and its "boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations" (Bakhtin 4).

### 3. Carnavalesque action in the *Playboy of the Western World*

A carnivalesque analysis of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* would not be complete without an examination of the action and stage directions. T.R. Henn remarks that the play does not lend itself to classifications, but that it "runs its course between antimonies". For all its apparent simplicity of plot, he adds, it is a "delicately balanced system of ironies, ambivalences, both of word and situation" (58). Henn also mentions something crucial to a carnivalesque reading: "it embodies the classic elements of reversal and recognition". He is, of course, referring to the revelation of the parricide, which he refers to as the 'massive and mock-heroic lie' (56). David Butler also makes a similar point that:

The play, which tightly adheres to the classical unities of Time and Place, is constructed around a number of antitheses, many of which are bound up with what is represented onstage and what is reported offstage (241).

Both Henn and Butler are alluding to the fact that there is an antithetical relationship between facets of the play, including onstage and offstage action and between reality and fantasy. Indeed, one can posit the theory that the antithetical nature of the play's action contributes largely to a carnivalesque reading of the play. As Butler notes, the masterly executed deed conjured up by Christy's boastful words contrasts ludicrously with his paltry attempts at violence onstage (237). Christy wields the chicken drumstick in the air in Act 2 as he describes striking his father with the loy. The scene is farcical and grotesque to the critical observer and yet the village girls respond with rapture: "Well, you're a marvel! Oh, God bless you! You're the lad surely!" (2, 69). Here there is a clear tension or antithesis between the reaction of the characters and the reaction of the audience. This is one of many examples where logic and convention are inverted. According to Spacks, "one aspect of *The Playboy* that seems disturbing is the curious tone with which it treats the theme of patricide" (76). This fact has puzzled audiences since the play's first staging; nevertheless, the vacillating emotional responses of the characters, and of the reader, ties in with the antimonies mentioned above. Furthermore, the intricate system of contrasts includes those between the characters—Christy and Shawn, Widow and Pegeen, father and son—and, of course, symbolic contrasts, such as Christian and pagan, liberty and conformity, the ideal and the real.



The greatest antithesis of all is effected with the arrival of Christy's father with his grotesquely bloody bandage which, not only unmask his son, the celebrated parricide, but forces a stark contrast between the graphic realism of the deed and the idealism of the recounted tale: "between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (3, 108). Christy's only course of action to save his face in the community is to 'kill' his father a second time. However, far from appeasing the villagers, this move spells his downfall. As Bretherton asserts, the people decide when the carnival should end, and they do so in response to the "second murder" of Old Mahon, "in keeping with the carnivalesque tradition" as described by Bakhtin: "The King is crowned, only to be uncrowned, abused and scourged as was the King of the Jews" (Bakhtin qtd. in Bretherton 325). The villagers' mood swings, therefore, from approbation to disapproval. Like the angry crowd in the gospel who called for Jesus' execution, they shout jeeringly to Old Mahon, "There's the playboy. There's the lad thought he'd rule the roost in Mayo. Slate him now mister" (3, 103). The mercurial nature of the villagers is wholly consistent with their role as carnival organisers and with the topsy-turvy atmosphere that prevails at carnival time. Hence, the sudden and unanimous termination of Christy's kingdom is followed by the extreme suggestion to turn him over to the "peelers".

Illustrated above are the major binary opposites that exist in the action of the play—contradictions, which can be regarded as carnivalesque elements. These contradictions, though problematic for narrower interpretations such as comedy, are in alignment with the logic of the carnivalesque. The unruliness is due to the carnival's all-embracing force; for willingly or unwillingly, everyone succumbs to its power. To quote Bakhtin:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom (7-8).

The villagers enter unquestioningly into the spirit, and Christy, too, submits to the role of carnival king. David Butler refers to Christy's passivity, and the fact that his various roles are "thrust upon him by his would-be audience, along with the various prop and costume changes".

Thus he metamorphoses from vagrant to potboy in open-neck shirt to dandy in Shawn Keogh's hat, coat and breeches, to sportsman borne aloft in jockey's silks, and finally to a dethroned figure who just misses being cross-dressed in Sara Tansey's petticoat (237).

Not only are the characters unable to resist the carnival force, but they are pawns, forced to act out roles redolent of dramatic symbol; they are the clowns, the hags, the maiden, the girls bearing gifts, the overbearing fathers and the absentee patriarchs representing officialdom, and their actions symbolise the carnivalesque features discussed in this essay. Butler refers to the "reverse gesture" where Sara Tansey tries on Christy's boots, which evokes the inversion of the sexes. Pegeen's burning of Christy's leg with a lighted sod is a subversive act that flouts convention and that typifies the female brutality that appears natural to the women in the play. To reiterate the point made above, despite the "apparent simplicity of plot", the stock characters that populate the landscape of the play are puppets in the grip of the carnival and obliged to act out given roles—roles laden with dramatic symbol.

Ben Levitas, in his study of the dramatic symbol in the play, explores the wealth of symbolism within an Irish context, and contends that the bloodied and bandaged Mahon was anything but a figure of comedy for the audience. The symbolism of the loy is culturally specific, according to Levitas, and it makes the violence "socially and economically determined." The loy, he remarks, is "the tool of rural Irish labour" and "no weapon of choice, but the instrument of circumstance." Therefore, it can be inferred that the loy was not only a familiar object, but a highly subversive—and realistic—image in the context of Christy's uprising against his father. Also the burning with the lighted sod, a symbol of the Land War, has "connotations of resistance as well as of home and hearth" (470-471). The layering of familiar symbols, interlaced with the theme of subversion, was understandably highly emotive and confusing for early audiences. The further addition of comedic and fantastical elements to the drama is, however, consistent with Bakhtin's statement that carnival means "[...] complete liberation from seriousness, the atmosphere of equality, freedom and familiarity" (254), and "a signal is given to each and every one to play the fool and madman as he pleases" (246).

This essay posits the theory that Christy can be seen as the "fool" or the "madman" that Bakhtin describes, and that his transformation is *null and void* in terms of a carnivalesque reading. Bernadette Bourke cites Toni O'Brien Johnson's

claim that Synge explores grotesque realism through “a mixture of comedy, incongruity and ugliness and by utilising the fool motif”. Furthermore, in describing Synge’s use of the literary fool, Johnson makes three important observations:

The fool is closer to nature than the ‘insiders’, and is instinctive, vital and impulsive. The fool is irrational, which on the one hand leads others to admire his/her visionary ability to see into the heart of things, but on the other, to fear this madness and thus reject him/her. Finally, Johnson notes that the fool remains an outsider (Johnson qtd. in Bourke 588-589).

Both the playboy and his father, Old Mahon, describe the young Christy as a simpleton. “CHRISTY – [bashfully.] I’m slow at learning, a middling scholar only.” (1, 49) And later we read “CHRISTY – [expanding with delight at the first confidential talk he has ever had with a woman.] (1, 56) [and] Not the girls myself, and I won’t tell you a lie. There wasn’t anyone heeding me in that place saving only the dumb beasts of the field” (1, 57). Hence, in a carnivalesque tip of scales, Christy becomes the “churl” [who] rose, happy as a king” (Bakhtin 197). Could such a turn of events happen in any other setting than the carnival? According to his father, Christy is a “stuttering lout” (2, 80), “the fool of men” (3, 90). Nevertheless, he acquires a powerful and poetic language, almost in a fairy tale manner.

Bretherton poses the obvious question, “[w]hat sort of statement did Synge intend? Is *The Playboy* to be read as symbolist or realistic drama, or some combination of the two? Is it extravagance, fantasy, or a faithful dramatic rendering drawn from Synge’s country sketches [...]?” (323). This is the choice between two readings offered to every reader, or stage director, of the play. As evidenced in the text, incongruent elements call simplistic labels into question. Bretherton makes the point that our expectations are thwarted regarding the villagers’ reaction to Christy’s parricide. “Considering the nature of his deed we might expect the older people to be less sympathetic than the younger ones when he reports that he has killed his father. But in this carnival world the reverse is true” (328). Bretherton traces the grotesque motivation behind Christy’s parricide, stating, “[t]he issue that pushes Christy to the point of raising the loy against his father is the latter’s insistence that he wed the Widow Casey, who, Christy tells us, “did suckle me for six weeks when I came into the world” (327).

Moreover, interpretation is further hampered by the obvious Oedipal overtones, as well as by the parallels between Christ’s ministry and Christy’s

misrule. It is also tempting to see Christy's growth in terms of a Bildungsroman, where the hero comes of age and gains maturity. However, his public avowal that he intends to devote himself to dissipation seems to jar against this reading.

Monological interpretations of the play break down eventually and even the parricide, around which the play pivots, can be read both as an act of symbolic liberation and of spontaneous violence and realism. It is both an expression of the desire for self-fulfilment and one of unplanned revolt. Old Mahon is not merely a symbol of patriarchal oppression; he conversely represents Christy's pride in his lineage and patrimony.

If we chose to read the play as a symbolist drama, we can refer to the play's focus on the characters' internal fantasy of freedom. Pegeen in particular rejects her drab reality for a fantasy world. She is, in the words of Gail Finney, 'on the verge of rebellion' from the opening of the play. According to Finney, "she proceeds to build Christy up into a grand figure of heroic proportions". He becomes her "protector as potboy, [...] next she casts him as a ladies' man [...] [and] finally she envisions him as a poet" (108). Spacks famously calls Christy's murder of his father a "metaphor of 'achievement'" (84), and this, in Finney's view, represents the kind of liberation Pegeen herself craves. Again, the symbolism, just like the realism, in *The Playboy* can be incorporated into a carnivalesque reading, and indeed they strengthen such a reading with their complexities and paradoxes.

The ambivalent laughter in the play, while departing from monological interpretations of comedy, realism or fairy tale, brings an inclusive element to the drama. "Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (Bakhtin 66). Hence, laughter is an important key to unravelling the ironies and paradoxes of the play. Moreover, carnival laughter provides a release to counteract the tensions created by the antinomies described above. Butler points out that Christy's father comes back from the dead, not once, but twice. The second time, according to Butler, is "in a grotesquely comic manner (with both father and son crawling on all fours like infants)" (245). This scene can be seen as a highpoint of carnivalesque humour with one-liners such as "[a]re you coming to be killed a third time or what ails you now?" (3, 110) and "[...] I'm thinking Satan hasn't many have killed their da in Kerry, and in Mayo too" (3, 109). Bakhtin also states that "the people's ambivalent laughter, [...], expresses the point of view of the whole world;

he who is laughing also belongs to it" (12). Not surprisingly, the fair, with its carnivalesque overtones, coincides with Christy's sojourn in the village, and it becomes the ideal showcase for his pseudo-transformation. It is in response to Christy's successes, that Widow Quin proclaims, "[t]hat lad is the wonder of the western world" (3, 92).

Regarding the transformation, Bretherton maintains that Christy's new playboy personality is the "antithesis of his old" (324). In stark contrast to that view, this essay contends that Christy's makeover is unreliable in the unstable environment of the carnival, with its theme of masking and disguise. What seems more accurate is Bretherton's further claim that the "carnival spell is being cast off, and Christy has become its sacrificial victim" (326). The unexpected rapprochement between the father and son is, on one level, comically carnivalesque; instead of being paired with Pegeen, he is literally reclaimed by his father, with his virginity intact. It spells a return to filial duties, albeit with a new comic camaraderie between father and son. True to the spirit of the play, the father's newfound respect for his son is based on Christy's violent revolt. Bretherton, interestingly enough, claims that "Christy leads his father off in submission" (332). This essay counters this notion, however. The germ of the idea to leave together actually originates with the father: "[...] my son and myself will be going our own way, and we'll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo, and the fools is here" (3, 110). Indeed, the comic duo seems uncertain of who is leading whom and whether the current status quo will last. The inversion of the old order may once again be upended.

Christy's cowardice and dim-wittedness have been in evidence throughout the play; therefore, any boastful statement made by him must be taken lightly. Bretherton refers to Christy's "childlike innocence" and contrasts it with the Widow Quin's "cunning" and her "offer of parental support" (332). Indeed his father wanted him to marry an older widow, partly for gain and partly because of his weakness. "He was letting on I was wanting a protector from the harshness of the world" (2, 68). For Christy, assuming the role of playboy earns him his father's respect. As Michael, Pegeen's father, expresses it: "A daring fellow is the jewel of the world [...]" (3,102). Ironically, Christy's revolt involves attempting to kill his father. The father is impressed, not only with Christy's daring, but with the high respect Christy has won in the village through his verbal and sporting successes. To

Old Mahon's amazement, in a carnivalesque twist, Christy begins to ape his father's bullying tactics in the final scene:

CHRISTY Go on now and I'll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal and washing my spuds, for I'm master of all fights from now. (Pushing Mahon.) Go on, I'm saying.  
MAHON. Is it me?  
CHRISTY. Not a word out of you. Go on from this.  
MAHON [walking out and looking back at Christy over his shoulder.] -- Glory be to God! (With a broad smile.) I am crazy again! [Goes.] (3, 110)

Like everything else in *The Playboy*, the ending is far from stable. As Crawford puts it, "even at the outset of the play, the tone, the action, and the characterisation mix and simultaneously mock elements of comedy, tragedy, and romance" (488). This tension is further highlighted by Saddlemyer, quoting Synge's comment from his preface to *Poems and Translations*: "There is no timber that has not strong roots among the clay and worms. [...] It may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must be learn to be brutal." (Synge qtd. in Saddlemyer x). We might also consider Synge's own words from his preface to *The Playboy*, "On the stage one must have reality and one must have joy [...] the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality" (40).

The above considerations encapsulate the carnivalesque duality and dynamics of the work and, hopefully, demonstrate the difficulty of finding a more flexible and fitting theoretical framework for *The Playboy*. T. R. Henn describes this duality perfectly when he speaks of Synge's "technique of producing, deliberately, an ebb and flow in the audience's response to character and situation" (58). What indeed could be more carnivalesque?

#### 4. Conclusion

This short study has produced myriad examples of carnivalesque features in the language and action of Synge's *The Playboy*. It is hoped that convincing evidence has been presented to bear out the validity of a carnivalesque reading. The critics, Bretherton and Butler, have made valuable contributions in this area, though it must be pointed out that Bretherton's essay focuses on Christy as a character, discussing his role as a carnival king vis-à-vis his significance as a Christian, mock-Christian or Oedipal figure. Bretherton's essay does not discuss the play itself as a carnivalesque text, but focuses on Christy's carnival role, with emphasis on his Christology and on intergenerational conflicts. Butler's essay is highly relevant, but it is essentially an intertextual study that compares *The Playboy* with *Hamlet* in the light of the carnivalesque. Butler, who acknowledges the debt he owes to Bretherton, makes more liberal use of Bakhtin's theories. Butler's comments on the carnivalesque were immensely instructive. Neither text, however, dwells on the interpretative controversy surrounding Christy's transformation and the denouement of *The Playboy*.

There are two possible readings of the play's climax. In a symbolist reading, one can accept the notion that Christy triumphs over reality using his newfound rhetoric, having symbolically killed his father three times. Spacks compares this to an Irish myth, prevalent also across the Indo-European world, where a suitor is compelled by his intended bride to kill her, flay her and dismember her before he can win and wed her. The hero reluctantly complies with his beloved's demands and is rewarded with the rejuvenation of his bride from the scattered bones, whereupon they marry and live happily ever after (77). Read in this light, *The Playboy* can be seen as a triumph of the imagination, where (token) acts of violence are viewed as a natural prerequisite to growth. The fly in the ointment here, however, is that the play contains too many naturalistic elements that pull down the fourth wall of the theatre, confusing the spectator, and making a fantasy reading untenable. Renowned Irish actor, Cyril Cusack, who played Christy Mahon numerous times, makes the following claim:

[U]nfortunately at the play's ending reality disappears in a balloon-burst of disillusionment and the person of Christopher Mahon suddenly resolves itself into a

dew. It is here that, as an actor, I find the part less than satisfying; here where the playwright in search of himself is confronted with a void which is made the play's resolution. It is liberation, but a false one, of the artist in flight from reality; [...]" (54). Cusack goes on to explain that the difficulties he experienced lay in acting the role in the "too naturalistic style I had helped to foster" and he recounts how he later moved towards "a wider acting orbit closer to extravaganza" (54).

What's more, the fact that Christy leaves with his father is a less than satisfying fairy tale ending. If the play is read as a realistic or naturalistic text, combining grotesque elements, the hoaxer would rightly be unmasked and cast out following the end of the madness. How, then, are we to interpret Christy's puzzling boast in the final scene? Is he mad? How can we give any credence to plans for a carousing future with his father? What about the farm and Christy's succession? The essay has previously stressed the importance of land ownership and inheritance in rural Ireland. A decision to abandon the land would clash with cultural expectation and with the naturalistic elements in the play. What of Pegeen's lament at the end of the play, "Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World" (3,111)? Despite her awareness of the true state of affairs, Pegeen seems convinced that she has lost a life-affirming source of beauty and vitality.

Christy's transformation, or pseudo-transformation, is therefore called into question in the context of this carnivalesque reading. On the other hand, Christy is perhaps one step ahead of the reader again, providing a paradoxical ending that is entirely carnivalesque. Christy's playfully tenacious and subversive attitude to his *fate*, his denial of the end of the carnival, could be entirely compatible with the carnivalesque. He may just be thumbing his nose at all theoretical readings.

The subject of the language in *The Playboy* is one that invites closer inspection. I believe there is room for studies of the speech acts in the play and their illocutionary force, which covers the dichotomy between what is said and what is meant. The heavy use of stage directions in the play is striking and worthy of study. Furthermore, an exploration of parts of speech, such as adjectives, in the dialogue could produce interesting results. As mentioned above, the adjective *decent* was liberally used in the text. The adjective *lonesome* appears a staggering twenty-three times in *The Playboy*. Whether such heavy use of a particular word is a conscious or a subconscious act of the part of the author, we will never know. However, the mere



fact that such anomalies exist in a text that is so meticulously constructed cannot be dismissed as accidental or unimportant. On the most obvious level, of course, the frequency of the word *lonesome* highlights the paradox between the poverty of the villagers' vocabulary and their talent for innovative and colourful expression. With very little formal education, they manage splendidly to commandeer an idiom of their own. Subliminally, the word also adds a poignant note—and one that, arguably, adds an ambivalent and antithetical edge to the play, inviting the epithets tragicomedy and carnivalesque.

The *Playboy of the Western World* remains a tantalisingly elusive play, short and pungent, and thrillingly defiant in the face of reductive readings. Thomas R. Whitaker calls the play an “invitation to join Synge in an exuberant, astringent, and self-illuminating, theatrical playfulness” (1). And finally, Henn quotes from Synge's letter to the press in response to the furore following the première of *The Playboy*. Here Synge clearly acknowledges the play's openness to interpretation.

*The Playboy* is not a play with a “purpose” in the modern sense of the word, but although parts of it are or are meant to be extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it and a great deal more that is behind it is perfectly serious when looked at in a certain light. [...] There are it may be hinted several sides to *The Playboy*. (Synge qtd. in Henn 59).

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