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Masculine Charade: Unveiling Toxicity in *The Playboy of the Western World* by J. M. Synge

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ABSTRACT

Violence can never become a viable solution and thus killing someone should not be considered as commendable. These well known facts are universally agreed upon. Nonetheless, the opposite was done by John Millington Synge in *The Playboy of the Western World*. Here, the village Mayo is a place where rebellion against authority is a mark of heroism. Even though the rebel commits patricide, still he can be hailed. This pinpoints the dark image of fantasizing violence and toxic masculinity. Nevertheless, the bravery of females are not glorified which depicts the cushioning of traditional gender binaries. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to remove the curtain of comical elements to unveil the deep ingrained orthodox of romanticization of masculinity by using qualitative methodology. Hence, it employs qualitative textual analysis to deconstruct the play's portrayal of gender and violence. So, this paper examines how violence and patricide are paradoxically celebrated as heroic in John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. In other words, the charade of reality was unmasked through the charade of art.

INTRODUCTION

Femininity and masculinity are often linked to societal preconceived notions. However, “[m]ale and female are concerned with biological conditions; masculine and feminine with cultural conditions” (Tenorio 430). From the statement, it can be inferred that biological conditions make people male and female genetically but the behaviors are adapted from society. This array of behaviors that are culturally promoted is utilized to define genders. Moreover, these sorts of behaviors are strictly followed otherwise individuals would be ostracized. Consequently, “it has easily led to the idea that it was impossible to have the female without the feminine, or the male without the masculine” (Tenorio 430). Thus, the cultural expectation of femininity and masculinity causes women to become submissive and men to become aggressive. It paves the path for both men and women to suffer as they bury their true selves under societal expectations. Hence, on one hand, it reserves the definition of masculinity by only including violence and domination. On the other hand, it narrowed down the lane of femininity by only including dependence and submissive nature. Consequently, even the bolder women seek dependence on men. Having this in mind, their candid selves get lost in the burden of societal expectations. Therefore, in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge mocks societal norms by revealing how toxic masculinity is ingrained in male behavior. Here, it showcases the reality with a touch of entertainment to highlight the disproportionate measure that has been used to judge men and women. Hence, the unheard voices of non-masculine men are being echoed through the characters of the play. Through *The Playboy of the Western World*, J.M. Synge serves a critical examination of societal perceptions of heroism. Thus, the paper tries to pinpoint the romanticized notions of heroic actions by unlocking their inherent gender inequality and violent underpinnings. By the tool of hyperbole, Synge brings comical elements into the play to mock the social blindness regarding the romanticization of violence. Hence, it gives us the tip of the conundrum and therefore the paper dives deeper to unveil the mountainous issues underneath it. The portrayal of Christy Mahon and the villagers of County Mayo not only dismantled the glorified image of the hero but also exposed the harsh realities coupled with such idealization. This paper detangles the discrepancies between the idealized concept of heroism and the lived experiences of Christy Mahon and others. Hence, it unmasks the scars of violence behind the bravery of heroes who are being glorified by society. Ultimately, the paper discusses how these traditional gender roles dehumanize both men and women by forcing them into narrowly defined roles. By doing so, it uncovers the amplification of toxic masculinity by the hands of gender binary. It also highlights the consequences of blindly following heroic leaders who might not be real at all. Thereupon, the line between criminals and heroes is gradually getting blurred and thus the paper depicts the dangers of this misguided adulation. By critiquing these ingrained expectations, Synge paints a grim picture of a world where the obsession with heroic qualities merges heroes and villains. Hence, the paper forces the readers to rethink the validity and impact of these deformed definitions of gender and heroism which advocate such atrocious activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Playboy of the Western World, a well-knitted play, garnered the attraction of many critics and thus was dissected in different viewpoints by the scholars. In 1974, Edwards, Bernard Laurie described the myth of personality by saying, "Christy Mahon is implicitly able to assess the myth of his personality and ultimately, forced by actuality, to discard the myth and all its trappings in an assertion of selfhood" (12). Here, Edward shatters the myth of personality and projects how it can be distorted by wrong ideals. On the other side, in 1977 Gregory Castle sheds light on the colonial aspect of the story. He claims,

The heroic struggle for subjectivity figured in Christy's and the Connaught Man's patricide signals both the disabling ambivalence of colonial power (disabling because it splits the authority of the Father) and the crisis of identity that arises when the native Other attains the subjectivity long withheld by colonial rule. (280)

Here, Gregory focuses on the immense urge to defy the authoritative power which can also be interpreted as colonial power. It should be acknowledged that the play outraged a definite reaction from the audience and it reflected some sort of poisonous truth that was not digestible for the Irish audience. In the defense of Synge, Gregory utters, "If Synge's play misrepresents the folk life of the West or Ireland, it does so in order to create that life anew" (286). Thus, he suggests that Synge's play used exaggeration to provide a lucid view of the hypocritical mindset towards different genders. In the same manner, he claims that Synge's play tried to treat the minds that were infected by heroic obsession. Moreover, in 2002, Julie Henigan explored Christy's lies as "a means of heightening the villagers' experience of reality and transcending their day-to-day lives through the genius of wild imagination" (58). So, Julie extends the role of the play to present the essentiality of lies and thus uncovers the importance of writers. However, to find the kernel of the story the scholars turned to psychological prospect. They also scrutinized the psychological aspects of Christy and pinpointed that he was utterly excluded from parental love. This made him feel good for nothing. Similarly, Brazeau expands the ideas as he not only focuses on Irish nationalism and catholicism but also sheds light on the playful nature of language in *The Playboy of the Western World* in his paper published in 2009. On the topic of psychology, Meghnine Kahina and Mohamed Seghir Amina explained Christy's character in 2015. They commented, "Christy Mahon seems to be incapable of doing something good and even when he works, thing goes so badly. Therefore, one may deduce that this conduct comes as a result of Christy's feelings of incapability of doing anything" (35). In 2016, Dr. Asghar Ali Ansari elevated the psychological viewpoint to a different level by depicting the story as an interplay between illusion and reality. According to Ali,

All the characters find a solace in the world created by Christy where they find the outlet of their unfulfilled desires and all of them become, although for some times, happy. But when reality enters into the play in the form of Christy's father, the illusion is shattered and all the characters again return to their daily real

previous life except Christy Mahon who is now a grown up wise man and a totally changed person as now he has gained confidence in him. The illusion has changed his life. Now he is a matured man who can understand the life very well. (142)

However, this same concept was escalated by Median Mashkoor Hussein in 2021. He comments that imagination serves as a dominant force in creating national or personal identity. Thus, villagers envisioned Christy Mahon as a superhero who can oppose the authority which they failed to do. With reference to this, he even suggests that social and religious authorities forbid individuals to retain their own identity. Nonetheless, the Irish audience was not accepting the follies that were showcased in the play. Consequently, the audience attacked the theaters while the play was being played. In this regard, Qazi stated in 2022, “[t]he early audiences of mainly nationalists wanted to see a romanticised version of the women, and not the more honest one that Synge portrays in the play” (01). Considering the observation, it can be inferred that Synge portrayed women not as the traditionally subdued ones but rather introduced the bold women of Ireland. Nevertheless, the women were still depicted as somewhat reliant on men which explains their gravitation towards violent activities of men. While there are myriad works on masculinity in different texts, *The Playboy of the Western World* is no different. Correspondingly, in 2023, M Ajay entangled heroism with rebellion to stress out the hypocrisy and artificial standardization of society. As he announces,

Christy literally and figuratively killed his father. Christy does attempt to murder his father, which is also a defiance of social norms for which he is praised. The celebration of Christy's patricide by the villagers was a manifestation of their repressed desire to indulge their evil instincts and subvert the dominant moral order of Christianity. (127)

Here, he posits that the villagers' obsessive tendencies toward a violent heroic nature mirror their lack of morality which stems from their separation from Christianity. Therefore, Ajay rethinks the text from religious views. However, a gap is still clearly detectable. Here, the concept of obsession towards toxic heroism or masculinity which stems from the traditional gendered path is not tapped by any scholar. This concept of worshipping violence in the name of heroic attributes was not addressed previously and therefore, is being highlighted in the paper.

METHODOLOGY

The paper incorporated qualitative methodology to underpin the worship of toxic masculinity in the name of heroism. It dedicated itself to descriptive analysis to highlight both the views of the text and the result of it. Through the thematic analysis, the paper detangled all the issues regarding obsessive addiction towards heroism as it only accumulated itself with violence. Hence, the paper identified the patterns of the themes handicapped views of gender, heroism, and violence to connect them in one thread. With systematic close reading, it categorized the sections of the play to deconstruct the parts related to

the paper. Thus, the paper is an amalgamation of the analysis of the exaggerated actions and reactions that reflect the societal follies. Therefore, it decoded the underlying themes that offered a deep insight into the corruption of gendered behaviors and its consequences upon the characters as well as the readers. Lastly, through hermeneutic analysis, the paper also delved into societal impacts that forwarded the story as well as the paper. To make the paper credible, it dived into online resources such as journals, books, and research papers. Hence, all the secondary resources backed up the primary conception of the primary text *The Playboy of the Western World*.

DISCUSSION

Two wrongs can never make a right is a wise saying that advocates people not to choose the wrong path. However, can it also be applicable when the thin line between right and wrong is eliminated? In this case, how can one identify his/her wrongdoings? John Millington Synge explores this phenomenon in his play *The Playboy of the Western World*. By blending reality with art he compels his audience to see how society erased the line between good and evil. Here, men were idolized through their masculine abilities, whereas women with their strong bold attitudes were not given as much credit as the men. Correspondingly, it became a concrete foundation that compelled men to transform into courageous heroes or in other words violent men. Thus, the male rivals in the text are not inherently oppositional; rather, they are portrayed as such by societal norms. As the readers knew from the beginning, Christy Mahon fled to the village out of fear of getting caught. In fact, he was a timid man just like Shawn Keogh. However, the praises tailored a new Christy Mahon. Hussein even claims that “[a]s soon as they know about his [Christy’s] crime, the villagers begin to treat him with respect and admiration” (06). Therefore, Shawn, in comparison to Christy, becomes a macholess man who is against fighting. This way, a deep ingrained image of masculinity was formed where a man who can fight is an actual man. These beliefs made Pegeen Mike veer away from Shawn to Christy. To address the problem, Raewyn Connell’s views can be used where he claims that “these masculine heroic qualities are conventionally understood in opposition to or in contrast to feminine characteristics, those to do with vulnerability, tenderness or a need for protection” (249). Hence, Shawn’s legitimate fear was seen as he said, “I’ll not fight him, Michael James” (Synge 61) which made him less manly than Christy. Notwithstanding, why cannot a man be fearful? Under the pressure of social conditioning, Shawn is labeled as the less manly here and is forced to flaunt his courage through a duel with Christy. In this case, Connell’s comment, “the construction of the hero is usually, although not exclusively, around matters of combat and violence between men” (249) can describe the situation of the text. These faulty definitions change Christy as well. This is why this timid guy was also seen to choose violence each and every time to impress Pegeen. Hence, he was seen threatening Shawn with ferocity by saying, “I’ll maybe add a murder to my deeds today” (Synge 60). As a repercussion, Shawn was never seen as a practical guy who vehemently denied violence. Furthermore, he employed Widow Quin to engage in mind games which proves that he was a clever lad.

Nevertheless, no one praised this side of him because it does not fall into traditional masculine acts. On top of that, he was defined as a non-masculine and thus was neither liked by Pegeen nor by Michael. To show Michael's disappointment, he even says that he does not want his grandson to be like Shawn. Thus, in this context, he praises Christy by saying, "[A] daring fellow is the jewel of the world" (Synge 62). Consequently, Christy altered his feminine side when he was showered with a myriad of praises for his violent act labeled as heroic. Hence, this same fear of being emasculated made Christy build a pile of lies to borrow praise from the villagers. Regarding this, Jared Yates Sexton states, "[T]raditional masculinity, as we know it, is an unnatural state, and, as a consequence, men are constantly at war with themselves and the world around them" (9). Thereupon, this statement can describe Christy's deeds of metamorphosing himself to fit into the definition of a masculine hero.

The obliviousness towards women coupled with the deviation from gender roles makes the play one of a kind. To turn the table, Synge assigns masculine traits to Pegeen Mike and Widow Quin. Nevertheless, these strong-minded females were seen to romanticize the idea of a masculine hero. Here, Widow Quin admits about Shawn, "It's true all girls are fond of courage and do hate the like of you" (Synge 38). This sort of duality was leveraged to uphold the stark reality of a society where all the women wanted a masculine hero. Nonetheless, these females' courageous heroic qualities could never buy them the acknowledgment that they deserved. Thus, Simone de Beauvoir's declaration "[O]ne is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman"(10) is lucid in this context. As a result, Widow Quin, despite having killed her father, is not celebrated like Christy rather her deed was dismissed as a "sneaky kind of murder did win some glory with the boys itself" (Synge 22). It advocates that in County Mayo where killing the authoritative figure is a dauntless heroic act, here only the heroes are accepted, not heroines. It points out the conventional vision of a hero which can only be a violent masculine guy. Connell comments on this aspect, "the heroic is a gendered construction. The dominant version would have it that the hero is someone possessing characteristics conventionally understood as masculine" (249). Hence, these are wrong notions that were traditionally passed on. As a result, it caters to the notion of gender disparity which invites romanticization of men's violence. Correspondingly, a strong-minded girl like Pegeen also falls into the trap and gravitates towards a criminal. These instances can be explained by Judith Butler's gender performativity. He comments "gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other" (Butler 1). Thus, the characters are enacting the conditioned roles that society has planted in them. This is why, despite being a vocal woman, Pegeen fell in love with a criminal. Therefore, she never fell in love with Christy rather she was in love with the concept of a hero. Synge masterfully demonstrates the nub of the problem by underlining the societal discrepancies. He also projected the flawed definition of a hero that has persisted for decades. By showing how this misdefinition can turn a criminal into a hero, Synge exposes society's hypocrisy. Hence, this concept aligns with the 'Social Learning Theory'. Therefore, Ronald Akers explains it, "The general

culture and structure of society and the particular communities, groups, and other contexts of social interaction provide learning environments in which the norms define what is approved and disapproved" (322-323). Just like the theory society garnered Christy with praises and this reaction redefined his violent act as heroic. Thus, Michael says in this regard, "a man did split his father's middle with a single clout should have the bravery of ten" (Synge 62). Despite getting a graphic exaggerated description of Christy's crime, villagers were not scared. They did not even bother to see him as a threat but rather embraced him with praises. Thereupon, Christy with this acceptance forgot his real self and turned towards more violence to be hailed. It should be noted that his father never treated him with respect due to his cowardly attitude. Consequently, Christy even used the games to transfer this cruelty to the animals. In this regard, Meghnine Kahina and Mohamed Seghir commented:

This cruelty against the cow, stands as a symbolic act of the anger that enflames Christy towards his lost object which is, as we have assumed before, the love of his father. He could not face his father and vindicate his right to be loved as a son to Old Mahon; therefore, he transferred all this hostility towards animals to get rid of it. (36)

Thereupon, it explains Christy's shift as it lets him get the attention and acceptance that he never found by being his authentic self. It suggests that society has made masculinity a one-way lane that only accepts violence as its symbol. Hence, this profound influence transformed Christy into the 'Playboy of the Western World'. This is why, he even finds the courage to deny his father by saying, "I'm master of all fights from now. [Pushing Mahon]" (Synge 69). However, these praises also made his criminal act justifiable for him as well. Under this mindset, he was never seen to be guilty of his wrongdoing. It should also be noted that villagers were admiring Christy not because of any noble deed but rather for the act of defying paternal authority. Thereupon, it delineates their unfeasible fascination with Christy as a collective yearning for idealized masculine figures. Now, the question comes: why are they not morally aware? To answer that, Spencer's idea can be employed. He says that the great men are already in the chains of preconceived notions and the mob mentality compels them to follow it. Regarding this concept, Spencer even argues that before the great man "can re-make his society, his society must make him" (25). Here, Christy was shaped by the society and Shawn could not re-make the society. Hence, both of them were entrapped by societal expectations.

J.M. Synge transcended all boundaries, entrenching both reality and imagination to give the readers a pure truth with the spice of entertainment. He drafts the picture where people see heroes through rose-colored glasses but also removes those glasses to reveal a fuller picture. Therefore, it lets the readers see both sides of a story- of a hearer and an observer. This is why the line, "there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (Synge 67) provides the sheer truth. To reverberate the hypocrisy of the society Synge utilized transfigured reality which unveils, "reality is never completely objective, but neither is it entirely

subjective, because reality is always shifting and changing” (Collins 10). Hence, this notion allows the audience to perceive the story from different angles, offering them an unadulterated view of reality. Now, this phenomenon also splits the notion of heroism. Here, County Mayo including Pegeen Mike is not in love with Christy Mahon rather they worship the idea of a hero. This is why, before knowing Christy’s story Pegeen comments about Christy, “A soft lad like of you wouldn’t the windpipe of a screeching sow” (Synge 12). Soon after hearing the story of the murder, Pegeen relies on Christy by uttering, “[I]f I’d that lad in the house, I wouldn’t be fearing” (Synge 14). The distinct shift in Pegeen’s reaction does not come as an aftermath of knowing Christy. Hence, the obsession with heroism blinded Pegeen to make her fall for Christy. In this regard, Charles Horton Cooley proposes that “most people are not interested in the hero, but in what the hero can make them feel, and so [t]he hero is always a product of constructive imagination”(346). By the token of this, the scenario of Christy hitting his own father in front of everyone makes the villagers oppose him. It fuels the issue of the so-called hero and his actions. Therefore, encountering violence in real life made them flummoxed. So, it removed the rose-tinted glasses of heroism and they could see the actual violence behind it. Accordingly, it ploughs ahead the problem of blindly idolizing heroic violence, which can blur the lines between moral and immoral actions. For instance, Hitler was accepted as a hero by his countrymen, while they did not witness his violence firsthand. Thereupon, it implies the corrosive effect of blindly rearing the idea of heroic acts without considering their darker aspects of it.

CONCLUSION

Synge challenges the romanticization of heroic actions by addressing its inseparable gender inequality and violent features. In other words, he tries to break the wall that was erected by the expectation with the hammer of reality. Thus, the paper attempts to explicate the discrepancies between the ideal concept and the real experience. Owing to this image, not only brings the reality of the story but also highlights the real-life consequences that the world suffers while following the heroic leaders blindly. Here, in this world, the distinction between a criminal and a hero has been blurred out. Looking at this one-sided imbalanced view of society men become the puppets of society and mold them with the pace of the world otherwise they would be emasculated. Whereas women, despite being the stronger ones, are taught to stay behind a hero to be treated as a damsel in distress. Hence, all the hypocritical glorification of heroes is assimilated to paint the vile reality of a society where an obsession with heroic qualities causes the lines between heroes and villains to merge. Therefore, after reading the paper the readers will abandon such a world where men reshape themselves according to society while women, despite their strength, are relegated to the roles of helpless figures. Hence, the paper will create such reshapers who will shape the world in a manner that will incorporate everyone regardless of their sex.

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