
**Imagination and Reality: The Construction of National and
Personal Identity in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World***

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Abstract

This paper investigates how John Millington Synge uses the theme of imagination in his play *The Playboy of the Western World* to introduce a critical view of the construction of personal and national identities of those people, Irish people. It argues that the play juxtaposes two contradicted images of the construction of personal and national identities. On the one hand, the play satirizes the way that the villagers use their imagination to create their own hero to help them revive their primitive national identity. On the other hand, it emphasizes the importance of imagination in creating personal identity. The play questions the authenticity of the notion of national identity by depicting it as a human-made phenomenon, but at the same time it makes use of it by showing how imagination helps to change human life.

Keywords: identity, imagination, national, personal, playboy.

In his preface of *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge says that “people have grown sick of the false joy” of modern drama “that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality” (2008, p. 96). Therefore, Synge uses the “imagination of people” and the “rich and living” language that they use (2008, p. 96). This type of language, as he explains, enables the writer to be “rich and copious in his words” and at the same time it reflects “the reality, which is the roof of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form” (Synge, 2008, p. 96). However, improving the quality of writing and making it more realistic and natural is not the only reason to use people’s language. It also helps to introduce a critical view of the construction of personal and national identities of those people, Irish people. As this paper will try to demonstrate, *The*

Playboy of the Western World juxtaposes two contradicted images of the construction of personal and national identities. On the one hand, the play satirizes the way that the villagers in this fictional world use their imagination to create their own hero to help them to revive their primitive national identity. On the other hand, it emphasizes the importance of imagination in creating personal identity by showing how the mythical characteristics that the villagers bestow on the protagonist Christy help him to become a real hero. In other words, the play questions the authenticity of the notion of national identity by depicting it as a human-made phenomenon, but at the same time it makes use of it by showing how imagination helps to change human life. In doing so, the play tries to deconstruct the existent national identity and introduces it in a new form that is able to compete with, or to be equal to, other national identities, as the English identity. The modern national identity which the play advocates, “eventually create[s] a stronger Ireland... that... will be more like England and Scotland” (Cusack, 2002, p. 569).

The play takes place northwestern Ireland when the protagonist Christy Mahon, who thinks that he just killed his father old Mahon and is in the run from the law, meets Pegeen, Michael’s daughter, and Shawn, who wants to marry Pegeen but needs father Reilly’s permission to do that, in an alehouse outside the village of Mayo. Christy tells everyone how he breaks the law and that makes him the mythical hero that the villagers need in order to be able to revive their national identity.

Before introducing the process of reviving the villagers’ national identity, the play firstly explains the circumstances that lead to the procedure of change. From the very start the play connects the poverty and backwardness of the people of Mayo with their submission to social and religious authorities. Both authorities prevent the villagers from constructing an independent identity that helps to improve their lives:

Country public-house or shebeen, very rough and untidy. There is a sort of counter on the right with shelves, holding many bottles and jugs, just seen above it. Empty barrels stand near the counter...there is a settle with shelves above it, with more jugs, and a table beneath a window...Pegeen, a wild looking but fine girl, of about twenty, is

writing at table. She is dressed in the usual peasant dress. (Synge, 2008, p. 99).

the description of the shebeen reflects the poverty and backwardness that cause the misery and the suffering of the people of Mayo. Such a “rough and untidy” place shows how its inhabitants are removed from metropolitan civilization and become “wild looking” people. The emptiness of the place and its contents excludes any expectation of changing or improving the current situation.

This dark image, emphasized by the darkness of the night where the first scene occurs, is gradually unfolded to show how social and religious authorities dictate the characters’ everyday life and cause the villagers’ inability to overcome their poverty and backwardness. The play uses a set of allegories to show the role of both authorities and how they affect the characters’ life. The relationship between fathers and their sons or daughters represents the tension between authorities’ suppression and the characters’ imagination. It highlights the danger of social and religious authorities that deny and prevent any possibility of forming or reviving an independent personal identity. On the one hand, the power of religion is symbolized by father Reilly, whilst social authority is represented by James and Old Mahon. On the other hand, Shawn, Pegeen, and Christy represent three types of Irish people that react differently to both authorities.

The power of religious authority is the strongest and the most dangerous one because, as the relationship between Shawn and father Reilly shows, it manages to prevent the imagined independent personal identity in the first place, and that eliminates the possibility of improvement. This fact is revealed when Shawn refuses to stay with Pegeen when she asks him to do so. He refuses because he cannot violate religious authority:

SHAWN -- [looking at her blankly.] -- And he's going that length in the dark night?

PEGEEN -- [impatiently.] He is surely, and leaving me lonesome on the scruff of the hill. ... Isn't it long the nights are now, Shawn Keogh, to be leaving a poor girl with her own self counting the hours to the dawn of day?

SHAWN -- [with awkward humour.] -- If it is, when we're wedded in a short while you'll have no call to complain, for I've little

will to be walking off to wakes or weddings in the darkness of the night. (Synge, 2008, p. 100)

Even after he realizes that his action may put Pegeen's life in danger, Shawn insists on leaving. His behavior explains the crucial role of religion in forming his personal identity as well as it reveals the corruption and the hypocrisy of the religious authority that uses religion as a mean to achieve personal gains. Shawn's religious zeal contradicts his immoral attempt to bribe Christy to persuade him to leave the village:

“The half of a ticket to the Western States...I'll give it to you and my new hat ... and my breeches with the double seat ... and my new coat ... I'll give you the whole of them, and my blessing, and the blessing of Father Reilly itself, maybe, if you'll quit from this and leave us ...” (Synge, 2008, p. 123).

Along similar lines, depicting Shawn as a coward who prefers to spend the rest of his life as a bachelor rather than fighting Christy criticizes the crucial role of religion in creating and perpetuating the notion of submission that makes Shawn to give up his alleged right: “I'd liefer live a bachelor, simmering in passions to the end of time, than face a lepping savage the like of him ...” (Synge, 2008, p. 140). By referring to the importance of reproduction, which symbolizes the continuity of the nation, the play foresees the threat that religious authority poses to the existence of the national identity.

Although the play does not criticize religion overtly, portraying Shawn in this way criticizes the religious authority and highlights the danger of its effects. It shows the hypocrisy of religious authority by using illegal and immoral means. On the other hand, religious authority prevents Shawn from imagining himself as an independent person that acts or behaves outside the molds of religion. The power of religion becomes the force that prevents people from revitalizing their national identity that, as the villagers hope, can deliver them from their eternal misery.

Similar to religious authority, social authority also helps to prevent the possibility of improvement. Pegeen's conversation with her father reveals her plight under his patriarchal authority: “What right have you to be making game of a poor fellow for minding the priest, when it's your own the fault is, not paying a penny pot-boy to stand along with me and give me courage in the doing of my work?”

(Synge, 2008, p. 103). Her statement implies that she is the one who does the whole work, even though she has no authority to spend “a penny”. She is like a “pot-boy” who works without wages. However, Unlike Shawn, Pegeen manages to imagine herself outside social authority, which is represented by her father, when she implies that she will not submit to her social expectation. But, as most of the characters do, she does not have the ability to convert her imagination into reality: “PEGEEN -- [with rather scornful good humour.] -- You're making mighty certain, Shaneen, that I'll wed you now” (Synge, 2008, p. 100). Being a female, she is always dependent on males' support. She cannot transcend social and religious barriers that prevent her from maintaining her revolt: “I never killed my father. I'd be afeard to do that...” (Synge, 2008, p. 109).

The power of social authority is further emphasized when the play introduces another character whose plight parallelizes with Shawn's and Pegeen's. Christy also describes the tyranny and the barbarity of his father by depicting him as a mythical monster:

“... if you seen him and he after drinking for weeks, rising up in the red dawn...and going out into the yard as naked as an ash tree in the moon of May, and shying clods against the visage of the stars till he'd put the fear of death into the banbhs and the screeching sows” (Synge, 2008, p. 110).

After weeks of drinking, this monster-like father unleashes his rage and his power against anyone who dares to stand in his way or to challenge his authority. The father's abilities and power are magnified in order to explain the impact of social authority that dictates the characters' life.

The relationship between the three fathers and their children illustrates how both authorities create an atmosphere of blind obedience that helps to embed the poverty and backwardness. However, this atmosphere also highlights the need for change. Although the characters, as already established, neither have the power nor the courage to challenge the authorities, they, except Shawn, do have the desire to change their current situation. This desire is clearly revealed when Pegeen recalls the memory of Irish mythical heroes: “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" (Synge, 2008, p. 100). Instead of revolting against the authorities, the villagers see their imagined independent identity in the deeds of their legendary figures. Pegeen's statement highlights the importance of a national figure who represents, as Hertel puts it, the emblem or the flag that unifies the nation (2014, p. 10). Suffering the poverty for a long time and being suppressed by both authorities, the villagers need a new hero to help to revive the "imagined Irish nation that existed once in an ideal past and might exist again in an ideal future" (Cusack, 2002, p. 572).

This situation is suddenly changed when Christy unintentionally hits his father and runs away. When the villagers know that Christy has broken the law recently, the villagers affirm their desire to challenge the authorities by taunting and encouraging Christy to admit his crime: "He's done nothing, so. (To Christy.) If you didn't commit murder or a bad, nasty thing, or false coining, or robbery, or butchery, or the like of them, there isn't anything that would be worth your troubling for to run from now. You did nothing at all" (Synge, 2008, p. 105). By listing all types of crimes that challenge the authorities, the villagers reveal their yearning for the imagined hero who can challenge the authorities, break the law, and do what he wants.

As soon as they know about his crime, the villagers begin to treat him with respect and admiration because they see in Christy's action their suppressed desire of challenging the authorities and changing the status quo: "You should have had great people in your family... you a fine, handsome young fellow with a noble brow... a fine lad like you should have your good share of the earth" (Synge, 2008, pp. 108,109,111). His action, as they see it, is not a merely revolt that, to certain extent, may be able to disturb or reduce social and religious authorities, but it represents the ultimate revolt that aims to remove the power of both authorities once and for all.

However, in so doing, the play aligns with the idea of "imagined community" that Anderson (Anderson, 1991) and Hertel discuss. According to Hertel, "a nation is abstract by necessity... one can neither see nor feel it... Thus, national self-awareness need symbols to find expression, such as flags, heroes and ... significant events" (Hertel, 2014, p. 10). On the one hand, Christy becomes the emblem and the national figure that unifies the villagers, and, on the

other hand, by praising and glorifying their hero, they perform a daily referendum, as Ernest Renan puts it, to maintain the validity of his imagined identity (Renan, 1990, pp. 8-22). The gift and the admiration that he receives from the young girls who have walked four miles to meet him (116-120), Pegeen's reading of the fearful crimes of Ireland for the last two weeks (Synge, 2008, p. 122), and so forth represent the daily referendum that the villagers practice to keep the durability and continuity of the imagined image of their mythical hero.

Ironically, the way that they imagine the alleged hero contradicts with what he knows about himself: "CHRISTY -- [with a flash of delighted surprise.] Is it me?" (Synge, 2008, p. 108). Furthermore, it opposes what they notice about him when he fails to describe his deed: "Were you never slapped in school... I'm slow at learning, a middling scholar only... If you're a dunce itself, you'd have a right to know that..." (Synge, 2008, p. 104). Juxtaposing both images, the play satirizes the way that the villagers construct their national identity as well as it also implies that the idea of the nation is not a sacred or original thing that people have to maintain, on the contrary it is a human made phenomenon and therefore it can be criticized or discussed by the people they believe in it.

At this point, besides helping them to retrieve their imagined national identity, the villagers' imagination sets the process of improvement, or "self-definition" as Castle puts it (Castle, 1997, p. 271), in motion by helping Christy to reconsider himself and reevaluate his potentials. Looking at the mirror, he thinks that he knows "rightly [he] was handsome, though it was the devil's own mirror [he] had beyond..." (Synge, 2008, p. 115). The legendary characteristics that the villagers bestow on Christy affect his own imagination about himself. In other words, the process of creating the imagined hero parallelizes with Christy's attempt of constructing a new personal identity. Whilst the first one is maintained and represented by the villagers' insistence on believing in the notion of the hero that they create, the latter is reflected by Christy's behavior and language: "Amn't I after seeing the love-light of the star of knowledge shining from her brow, and hearing words would put you thinking on the holy Brigid speaking to the infant saints..." (Synge, 2008, p. 128). His poetic language that predicates his new future with

Pegeen is dependent on the villagers' belief about him, but it also helps him to transform his dreams into reality.

The grand story that he tells reflects the reform of his personal identity. The more confident he becomes the more poetic language he introduces: "That's a grand story" (Synge, 2008, p. 118). His grand speech is accompanied with his moral and heroic act when he refuses to accept Shawn's bribery: "CHRISTY -- [as proud as a peacock.] -- I'm not going. If this is a poor place itself, I'll make myself contented to be lodging here" (Synge, 2008, p. 125). This is further emphasized when he wins all the sports and challenges Shawn to reclaim his right (Synge, 2008, pp. 138-9). As the play progresses, Christy's imagined characteristics not only help him to become a new person, but they also influence other characters and encourage them to revolt or at least think about revolting against the authorities: "Pegeen: PEGEEN -- [fiercely.] He's missed his nick of time, for it's that lad, Christy Mahon, that I'm wedding now" (Synge, 2008, p. 139). Even Shawn who represents the type of people that deny any change is influenced by Christy's deed. He dares to imagine himself outside the religion's molds: "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" (Synge, 2008, p. 124).

However, the imagined picture that the villagers create, and the consequences of this picture are suddenly interrupted by the return of the father. Old Mahon's return is used to serve three important things that the play discusses. Firstly, it emphasizes the crucial role of social and religious authorities that the play introduced before: "MAHON. I want to destroy him..." (Synge, 2008, p. 125). Secondly, it highlights the satirical way that the play uses to engage the notion of national identity. The father's return revives the real image of the hero that the villagers try to manipulate in order to make it fit with their expectations: "If he seen a red petticoat coming swinging over the hill, he'd be off to hide in the sticks, and you'd see him shooting out his sheep's eyes between the little twigs and the leaves, and his two ears rising like a hare looking out through a gap" (Synge, 2008, pp. 125-127). However, his return, as the discussion will explain, only manages to destroy the imagined picture that the villagers create but not the real one that Christy makes. Finally, and the most importantly,

by putting the hero face to face with social authority, it helps to assess how valid and effective the process of improvement is.

After they know the truth, the villagers turn against Christy by accusing him to destroy the image of their imagined hero. The irony is further emphasized when they continue to reject him even after he intentionally tries to kill his father. His second attempt is the last and the most important part of the process of the reform because, unlike other characters who "reinstall the very hegemonic regime whose tyranny motivated the entire process to begin with" (Boynton, 2012, p. 246), the hero managed to maintain his revolt: "CHRISTY. Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all..." (Synge, 2008, p. 146). Additionally, the outcomes of his attempt accentuate the need for reform by showing how the absurdity of the villagers makes them lose both types of identity. They can neither revive their primitive national identity nor able to reform an independent modern one. Pegeen's lamentation¹ at the end of the play exemplifies what the villagers have lost: "(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" (Synge, 2008, p. 146).

After following one day of the characters' life, this paper has demonstrated how the play satirically discusses the role of imagination in constructing the notion of national identity, and at the same time it sheds light on how the power of imagination can be used to transform dreams into reality. The imagined image of the hero that the villagers create helps them to revive the collective consciousness that united them; consequently, the same image provokes the hero to reconsider his potentials and that helps him to construct an independent personal identity.

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¹ However, her lamentation could also imply that the play accentuates the women's plight to show how it is impossible for female characters to challenge or maintain their revolt against social and religious authorities. The final lament may be used to justify the females' absence from the process of reformation.

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المخيلة والواقع: تشكيل الهوية الوطنية والشخصية

في مسرحية فتى الغرب اللعوب للكاتب سينج

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وزارة التربية/ مديرية تربية واسط

الخلاصة:

هذه المقالة تحقق في كيفية استخدام الكاتب جون ميلينغتون سينج لموضوع المخيلة في مسرحيته الشهيرة فتى الغرب اللعوب لتقديم رؤية نقدية لتكوين الهوية الشخصية والقومية للشعب الأيرلندي. تستدل المقالة على ان المسرحية قدمت وبشكل متوازي صورتان متناقضتان لكيفية تشكيل الهوية الشخصية والوطنية. من الجانب الأول، انتقدت المسرحية وبشكل ساخر الطريقة التي استخدم فيها القرويون مخيلتهم لخلق البطل الذي سيساعدهم على احياء هويتهم القومية القديمة. من الجانب الاخر، اكدت المسرحية على أهمية المخيلة في خلق الهوية الشخصية. بتعبير اخر، المسرحية شككت في اصالة فكرة الهوية الوطنية بتقديمها على انها ظاهرة من صنع البشر، ولكن في نفس الوقت استخدمت المسرحية هذه الفكرة عندما بينت كيف ان المخيلة يمكن ان تغير حياة الانسان للأفضل.

كلمات دالة: هوية، مخيلة، قومي، شخصي، اللعوب.