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Paul M. Levitt

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THE TWO ACT STRUCTURE OF THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

By Paul M. Levitt

When Walter Starkie told a seminar on Irish drama that J. M. Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World is structurally a two-act play, Starkie explained that, prior to the 1920’s, the two-act form was unacceptable to directors and theatres because it was neither short enough to be used as a curtain raiser or as part of a double-bill, nor long enough to develop and sustain the dramatic interest that was to be found in plays of three, four, and five acts. Hence Synge made a three-act play from material that should have been organized into two acts.

We know from Synge’s letters to Molly that during the writing of Playboy he found the second act particularly troublesome: “I am very bothered with my play again now, the Second Act has got out of joint in some way, and now its all in a mess” (Glendalough House, 16 October 1906). “I half hope I have got over the weakness in my Second Act that has been worrying me so much, but it is too soon to say with certainty” (Glendalough House, 1 November 1906). The trouble with the second act is that it breaks in two; half of the act belongs to the first part of the play and the other half belongs to the second part.

Structurally, the division of Playboy into two acts would reinforce the play’s thematic unity. The two major themes — “the growth of the man” and “the growth of the poet” — which Pegeen Mike joins in phrases like, “poet’s talking, and such bravery of heart,” “savagery or fine words” (p. 153), and “a gallous story and dirty deed” (p. 169), are introduced in the

1 Walter Starkie was the director of the Abbey Theatre from 1927 to 1942. In the spring of 1963, at U.C.L.A., Dr. Starkie taught a graduate seminar on Irish drama. The author was present at that seminar.
first half of the play and resolved in the second. The turning point in the development of these two themes coincides with the first entrance of Old Mahon. As the play is presently constituted the second act, which begins a new day and ends with the start of the games being held on the beach, is particularly unsatisfactory, as it does not represent any body of action clearly independent of Acts One and Three. It is an appendix made necessary because of the need to have three acts, instead of two. The points at which Synge chooses to divide his acts indicate only a change in time (Act One) and place (Act Two) and may be retained effectively as scene divisions, making a play of two acts with two scenes each.

The first half of the play is devoted primarily to the growth in Christy’s self-esteem. His growth is revealed in his language, and in the highly adverbial stage directions. He enters, a meek stuttering lout, uttering nothing but simple sentences, when he dares to speak at all. He gains unanticipated respect from Michael, Philly, Jimmy, Shawn, and especially Pegeen Mike, with the story of slaying his da. Flattered by this respect, he gains confidence in himself, as seen in his longer, more descriptive speeches.

However, it should be noted that Christy’s character growth is not a progressive development from timidity to courage, but is a recurring series of ups and downs, from confidence and courage to shyness and cowardice. Hence, at the Widow Quin’s first entrance, Christy clings to Pegeen Mike out of fear and reverts to one line speeches. But when Christy finds that Pegeen Mike and the Widow Quin are fighting over him, and the local girls are clamoring to see him, he once again loses his fear and believes that he is a handsome, charming lad, admired by the ladies. Throughout the play, Christy’s language is a good indication of the state of his confidence: his poetry soars or suffers in relation to the degree of his self-esteem.

By the end of the first half of the play, Christy has irreversibly gained self-confidence, and not even Pegeen Mike’s rage can
reduce his language below the poetic level. Christy's growth is real; and, although he is subsequently distressed at his father's appearing at the door of the shebeen, not even that causes him finally to lose his confidence or his poetic language. His speech, "... and I not lonesome from this mortal day" (p. 113), which comes in the middle of Act Two, would seem to indicate that, notwithstanding some temporary setbacks, Christy is going to be his own man.

Old Mahon's entrance is the test of Christy's conviction, and thus the turning point of the play. Prior to Old Mahon's entrance all the exposition about the "murder" has come from Christy. He says that he left his father "split to the knob of his gullet" (p. 103). Old Mahon's entrance in the second half of the play begins the recital of Christy's character from the point of view of his father. Old Mahon is obviously not dead, and the Christy whom he describes as lazy, stuttering, and timidly simple is not the same Christy who, at the end of Act One, declares "wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by." At the end of Act Two and the beginning of Act Three, we learn the truth about the "murder"; and in addition we learn about Christy's youth in his father's service, which provides not only a further deflation of Christy's character, but also an implicit repudiation of Christy's fine talk, that is, his poetic language. What Old Mahon tells us in Acts Two and Three is clearly at odds with Christy's "gallous story" and self-esteem in the first act and part of the second. The discrepancy between Old Mahon's and Christy's stories creates at the middle of Playboy a tension that engages Synge for the remainder of the play. In its present form, Synge ends the second act with Christy leaving for the games; but there is no structural or psychological reason to interrupt the action at this point. The play logically breaks into two parts.

Consider: if we regard the first half of the play as that action which concludes with the first entrance of Old Mahon (or, for that matter, concludes with Act One), what we find in the first
half is a young man who has gained confidence in himself because of the praise and respect that he has received. (A situation which calls to mind the Irish proverb: praise a boy and he will prosper.) However, he has not yet really done anything to merit the praise. It is in the second half of the play — after Old Mahon’s entrance — that Christy must decide either to assert himself in deed, as he has done in language, or to admit his lie and shamefully return home with his father. He decides to act and thereby give substance to his “fine words” and “gallous story.” Hence the latter half of the play is the demonstration of Christy’s growth as a man.

His first achievement is to win at the games and races. And it is of some importance that although his achievement is a physical one — an athletic display of manhood — he is crowned as a poet. In this way — honoring the successful man as poet — Synge unites in the play the two major themes. The love speech follows the crowning and completes Christy’s growth as a poet. But the real climax to the bravery theme is the dramatization of Christy’s second “killing” of his father. Rather than suffer the loss of respect that his story has gained him, Christy decides to slay his father again. When the second attempt fails, Old Mahon reappears, proud that his son has become both a poet and a man. He orders Christy to come home with him. Christy exerts his new-found manhood by telling Old Mahon that he will leave, but “like a gallant captain with his heathen slave” (p. 173). Christy’s “bravery of the heart” ends the play and concludes the development of “the growth of the man” theme.

Briefly, then, in Playboy, Synge distributes the action over three acts, instead of two, because turn-of-the-century theatrical conventions made it impractical if not impossible to present a two-act play for production. The truncated second act of Playboy is an artificially conceived act that has been fashioned out of material that structurally lends itself to two acts. If the play were divided at the point of Old Mahon’s first entrance (or
even at the end of Act One), such a division would focus on the two themes in the play, thus reinforcing the play’s thematic unity.

*University of Colorado*

*Boulder*