

# Modernity as Hostile and Predatory: Synge and the Irish Anti Hero in *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Well of Saints*

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**Abstract:** There is a constant and observable conflict in J. M. Synge's drama between traditional pagan Irish values and those imported first by Christian missionaries and English invaders. Often, critics portray a single dimension of this conflict, with the Irish Anti-Hero character confronting those forces that represent modernity. The character's heroism usually remains obscured by modern standards because he/she appears in the form of a tramp, an outcast, or even a violent criminal, and their inability to adapt causes them to stand as misfits in their own time. This article updates Irish identity politics narrative by presenting the "Irish Anti Hero" character as heroic in a traditional Irish sense because they choose the personal/local over the institutional/colonial. Their engaging in dreaming, song, poetry, storytelling and mythmaking are read as expressions of resistance to the foreign elements that threaten their culture and wellbeing. Drawing from *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Well of Saints*, this article presents Synge as interested in creating narratives that condemn the history of Irish invasion and celebrate Irish cultural inheritance. As preserver of this tradition that predates colonialism and still lingers in the fringes of modern Irish society, Synge's anti-Irish heroes, who are alien to their own environments, resist mores and/or circumstances defined by modern values and are exceedingly imaginative. This intergenerational context signals the importance of understanding the historical circumstances that continued to impact the lives of many Irish in Synge's days. By highlighting the long-term background and its damaging effects on Irish political identity, the Anglo-Irish dramatist invites the reader and the politician to develop a deeper understanding of the Irish experience, which can lead to a debate and, ultimately, to change.

**Keywords:** Irish Anti-Hero, Irish Identity, Nationalism, Modernism, Native Myth

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## 1. Introduction

J. M. Synge was a visionary of the turn-of-the-century Irish literary and nationalist revival and produced deliberate literary works based on native myth as a vehicle for advancing the revolutionary agenda of the fight for Irish home rule. He so presented figures that were considered odd by his contemporaries that he was at one time considered a passive or borderline radical [1]. As did his nationalist predecessors, Synge assumed that reviving characters from Irish mythology while uplifting "the temple of Irish domesticity, the sacred origin, the mystery of mysteries was a practice useful in unifying native Irish people and bolstering nationalist sentiments" [4]. But the question many kept asking was "Was twentieth-century Ireland to return truly to antiquity?" [11].

These "new" ideas that cloaked in the form of tradition permitted the playwright to transpose his hopes about his world, as it actually was, creating characters who upheld traditional Irish values in less epic ways. His concern as a playwright and as a modernist writer was to tackle the question of Irish traditional values.

In order to explore this question whose underlying cultural tension revolves around defining whether traditional Irish values are Christian or pagan, one should view the moment in storytelling history at which pagan Ireland acquiesced. Amin Nozen and Geoffrey Rayburn in "A Critical Study of the Contribution of Abbey Theatre to the Promotion of Irish Literature: With Reference to the Selected Works of William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge and George Bernard Shaw" agree that literature on the beauty of ancient Ireland

dates as far back as the eighteenth century and revolves around the values and exploits of Oisín, regarded as the bravest and most handsome young warrior in Irish legend [10]. W. B. Yeats' and Lady Gregory's versions of the Oisín legend lift the pagan Oisín against the Christian St. Patrick. Both versions draw from an ancient epoch while capitalizing on the comic futility of Oisín's predicament. In Yeats' *The Wanderings of Oisín* and Gregory's *Oisín and St. Patrick*, the hero of Christendom, Christ, represented by the harsh, puritanical St. Patrick, attempts to stamp out the last remaining Fenian figure, Oisín. The tale turns out to be nothing more than a back-and-forth volley of incompatible values. But it is not the perfection of Christian mercy that is illuminated in the tale; rather, St. Patrick is seen as the villain and Oisín the victim of a foreign cultural value system.

In *The Wanderings of Oisín*, the storytelling in which Oisín indulges not only exemplifies but exacerbates the very cultural irritation that the original story was intended to extinguish. That is, "the tale was originally designed to quell any residual native anxiety over the question, what has happened to Finn and the Fianna?" [10]. The answer, as Yeats put it, "... on the flaming stones, without refuge, the limbs of the Fenians are tost", provides one of the dimensions of this article [12]. At first, one would think the Christian sensibility, the God of Grace, the God of St. Patrick, has proven more powerful because he easily defeats Finn, and is more generous than Finn because, unlike Finn, he guarantees salvation. But the tale says more than that because it satisfies the pagan sensibility. With Finn, although overpowered by a new king, nothing seems amiss in terms of ancient mythological systems of power. In comparing the native Irish conceptions of power and generosity in the Oisín legend, Nozen reveals that "unlike Christ, Irish folk heroes are great warriors and bearers of riches to those who showed their allegiance... neither St. Patrick nor Christ is any great warrior or ring bearer" [10]. This tale thus uncovers the most significant paradox beneath the surface of modern Irish culture: the Irish are a deeply Christian people and the Irish are a deeply Pagan people.

Synge understood that Ireland has been faithfully Christian for far too long to recover its original pagan identity, and was aware of these cultural pressures Christianity/modernism put on the nation [12]. Yet, he rejected the (seemingly) disingenuous gesture of Yeats' and Gregory's totally idealizing the Irish peasant (in the figure of Oisín) in order to generate a political effect. Synge's characters embody less allegorical value, flaunt real human flaws and speak in careful, overly authentic language with, as Maria Kardi describes, "stilling and slowing which turns the imagination in upon itself" [7]. Among the complexities of Synge's plays is his development of common anti-heroic characters, those who like Oisín resist Anglicised modernity regardless of social cost. But unlike Oisín, Synge's characters claim no direct family ties to Irish mythological figures [8].

To Synge therefore, Ireland has been from the furthest reaches of history too pagan to eject such elements from its traditions. He might have drawn from Yeats' and Gregory's revival and adaptations of the Oisín legend as seen in his

presentation of an Irish anti-hero trope that had been in a fitful sleep through centuries of colonization. The Oisín legend, to Synge produces the motif of the outsider, the dreamer, the resistor, the character who bears an allegiance to tradition that will not succumb to modernity regardless of the cost.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

New historicism and psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan's theory on language) are used to investigate the critical battle between Christian and Anglicised modernity and Irish pagan traditional forms that inevitably occur in the plays under study. As shall be seen below, Synge got to learn more about Irish traditional forms and beliefs when he visited the Aran Island and through challenging ideas via discussions and works of art that circulated during his days, and was to interpret them according to his personal beliefs and the socio-political realities. I therefore find new historicism useful for this study, especially as it rethinks the issues of inter and para textualities in the study of various forms of textual material and historiography. Also related to this work is new historicists' view that "literary texts consist of a diversity of dissonant voices and these voices express not only the orthodox but also the subordinate and subversive forces of the era in which the text was produced" [13]. In this light, Synge's plays are read as instruments for propaganda of cultural values, especially as I read them as subversive of existing hegemony.

Also, Lacan's structuralist synchronic dimension of the study of the language of a text is used in this article to examine the language "disorder" of Synge's anti-Irish heroes. The characters' loss and gain of poeticism is considered here strictly in individual and subjective arbitrariness, what Lacan calls "unchaining the signifier" [5]. New historicism and psychoanalysis therefore facilitate my analysis of Synge's imaginative "dreamers" and their separation from mainstream society.

## 3. *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Well of Saints* as Symbols of Detached Modernity

J. M. Synge's *The Playboy* and *The Well of Saints* are unique in the way they mimic lives of modern Irish folks and pagan roots. In these plays, Synge demonstrates that the cross-cultural interactions Ireland has been exposed to through colonial and missionary aggression have been the source of nothing but cultural obfuscations. In these plays, the playwright demonstrates that the cultural identity loss many characters suffer is the product of modernity and lack of recognition of the base culture from the outside [6]. It is such a repeated intrusion and neglect that has so exacerbated the raw bitterness that flows within the collective Irish native spirit, as represented in the two plays under study. Synge labels the blame of diminished tradition to non-native construct. In this section, I explain the existence of obscurity on Synge's anti-heroes in the light of this cultural phenomenon.

*The Playboy* and *The Well of Saints* deal directly with the

push and pull between imported and traditional values. Synge's Christy Mahon in *The Playboy of the Western World* is plunged against an entire village of burgeoning modernity. The folks of Playboy's late nineteenth century Mayo have embraced all of the elements of materialism and shallow piety that resulted from centuries of post-pagan Christian and English influence. From the ambitious Widow Quin to the spineless Shawn and his absentee overseer Father Reilly, the village structure is put to a cultural test when faced with the outsider Christy's command over their imaginations.

The Christy who is introduced in Act I belongs to the world of the tramps and not heroes. He is first described by Shawn as "a slight young man ... very tired and dirty" [7]. Shawn further says that he is "speaking in a small voice" and is like one who "followed after a woman in a lonesome night" [7]. With this description, Synge immediately places the Irish anti-hero in conflict with pompous and overzealous modern Mayo community represented by Shawn, the direct opposite of Christy. When introducing his characters, Synge describes Philly and Jimmy as "small farmers" and Shawn as "a farmer", and when he makes his first entrance, the stage direction presents him as "a fat and fair young man" [7]. By presenting Shawn as such, Synge positions him/modernity at the head of the Mayo community. There is therefore a great difference between Christy and Shawn in relation to physical description and economic context. In Act I, as part of the marriage bargain between himself and Pegeen, Shawn promises Michael "a drift of heifer and a blue bull from Sheem" in addition to the items in the list Pegeen is making [7]. Shawn's willingness to spend more does not relate to how economically sound he is but to the corrupt nature of modernism.

From the moment Christy infiltrates this community, we see an instant desire of the entire community to be detached from the corrupt and modern to the organic. Note that Christy's emergence from the ditch represents the organic and the non-institutional. His entrance therefore constitutes a dramatic mystery as he succeeds to create a detachment from the society. The entire Mayo community finds it impossible not to celebrate the Christy who ultimately chooses to wander in the opposite direction of a material modern existence. The more detached from bourgeois society Christy remains, the more traditional he flourishes in the bardic sense.

Pegeen Mike's comparison of Shawn and Christy is of central importance: "Wouldn't it be a bitter thing for a girl to go marrying the like of Shaneen, and he a middling kind of a scarecrow, with no savagery or fine words in him at all? [7]. Pegeen's thoughtful affections for "savagery" and "fine words" indicate a subconscious connection that the contemporary bourgeoisie have been mythmaking. But the pressure of modern law infiltrates the scene and Michael, Shawn and Pegeen subdue Christy to take him to the peelers. At the play's end, it becomes clear that Pegeen's aversion was never to Christy's willingness to commit patricide; rather, the fear of retribution for involvement in the act itself drove the locals' actions. Once Christy's guilt of deed is removed at the end, Pegeen is again drawn back to his savagery, lamenting "Oh my grief...I've lost the only playboy of the Western World" [7].

Synge in *The Well of the Saints* presents another tramp, Martin Doul whose hatred for modernity takes a spiritual dimension. Events in the play reveal that the more detached Martin remains from modernity, the more spiritually secure he is. Synge draws upon a story told to him during one of his visits to the Aran Islands about a blind man who regained his sight after being blessed by water from an ancient well. In the play, the saint of God turns around and attributes the miracle to his Christian God. At this point, there is cultural collision as "the well, a glaring symbol of pagan femininity and renewal is overrun by the saint, a symbol of both the masculine and of Christian proselytization who claims the well's water as holy [3]. As a result, and to show his hatred for the invaders, Synge treats the precious asset of sight ironically as a burden on the central beggar anti-heroes, Martin and Mary Doul. Without sight, the characters are free to envision an ideal world, devoid of ugliness and toil. They are connected with nature as opposed to the modern burgeoning middle-class society that surrounds them. Since the illusory world is preferable to the Irish anti-heroes, the deliverance pushed upon them by both the saint and Christianized society is no more a gift than a curse. When we examine Martin's and Mary Doul's states in their blindness we find that it has all the fantastic brightness of the illusory world. Martin describes his fantastic world to the Saint, an agent of the imported Christian god in the following utterances:

Isn't it finer sights ourselves had a while since and we sitting dark smelling the sweet beautiful smells do be rising in the warm nights and hearing the swift flying things racing in the air, till we'd be looking up in our own minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and broadening rivers, and hills. [8].

Later, he says "It's a good right ourselves have to be sitting blind, hearing a soft wind turning round the little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting the dirty feet is trampling the world" [8]. In both cases, the use of bright language, idyllic Irish setting, and pagan images such as gold, sun, sky and feminine beauty evokes a positive, idealized image of pre-Christian Ireland. The irony is even more significant in that Martin's speech expressly deconstructs the grandeur of Catholic/post-pagan and modern society by showing the Saint's deed as one that destroys ideal beauty the same way it facilitates toil and hunger.

The Saint's gift only gives Martin and Mary a view of torment and dirty feet trampling the world. Having regained his sight, Martin works for Timmy the smith who begins, "killing [Martin] with hard work, and keeping [him] with an empty windy stomach in [him], in the day and in the night" [8]. Similarly, in the Lady Gregory version of the Oisín legend, Saint Patrick also never gives Oisín enough food to fill him up. Oisín says: "they say I am getting food but God knows I am not, or drink; and I Oisín, son of Finn, under a yoke, drawing stones" (Gregory 4). The above reference to Oisín, as being under a yoke, reiterates the symbolic Christian drowning of Irish primitive power. This, by implication, means that the water archetype (cleansing, purity, and femininity) that restores Martin's and Mary Doul's sight becomes perverted, as it destroys the ideal of the archetype itself by converting it

into the Christian archetype which in this case stands for invasion and authority.

The Saint, speaking to Martin Doul says:

If it's raggy and dirty you are itself, I'm saying, the Almighty God isn't at all like the rich men of Ireland; and, with the power of the water I'm after bringing in a little curagh into Cashla Bay, He'll have pity on you, and put sight into your eyes. [8].

In effect, the Saint of the well implies that the Christian God is here to claim Ireland for "He'll forgive you as soon as you see things as you are told to see them" [8]. The resistance to this proposition is heroic regardless of the characters' more immediate incompatibilities within their society. In fact, the incompatibilities become the essence of the heroism itself. The saint is deliberately depicted here as an ultra-condescending agent of assimilation who mocks the traditions of pagan Ireland. Synge almost certainly has his saint character make such a reference to "rich men of Ireland" to remind readers of the richness and generosity of Finn and other pagan kings.

The anti-heroes, in their resistance, are mocked for being dreamers and rendered beggars. Like Christy Mahon, Martin Doul makes his entrance into the play as a body utterly detached from society. It is no accident that both characters emerge into action from the periphery of the rural ditch (or gap). Likewise, there is equal significance to both characters to revert their position back to the fringes when given the opportunity to operate in modern society. Martin retains spiritual purity through his choice to embrace the illusory world inhabited with the help of his blindness. What transpires when he regains his sight is that he is forced to see the world in all its bleakness and is effectively robbed of his identity. Realizing the empty promises of the Saint, who touts the world as the glorious creation of the Almighty, and his sight as something fulfilling, Doul chooses to re-lose his sight in order that he may reconstruct his original world of illusion thus evading the evangelical transformation from the traditional to the modern. In this light, Kate Powers suggests that the Christian miracle would equal destruction for Doul: Mary Doul's "The Lord protect us from the saints of God!" sums up the major irony of the Christian society with its Patrician heritage trying so hard to save the same Martin it has almost destroyed.

#### 4. Heroic Defiance of Modernist Institutions in *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Well of Saints*

Christopher Collins holds that "Synge's plays defend the view that the miraculous resides in the personal rather than the institutional" [2]. The skepticism Synge raises towards modernism and clericalism in the criticisms of the clergy and the foreign effect on traditional Irish spirit that permeates both *The Playboy of the western World*, and *The Well of the Saints* points to this effect, and inevitably generated the controversy that surrounded these plays when they were first staged. His most brilliantly subtle crack against the power of modernism comes in *The Playboy of the Western World*. In scene I, we see Shawn Keogh, who has so far been presented as a

representation of the modern and prudish, and cowardly squirming out of his coat and fleeing the scene in fear of reprisal from the local priest. His future father-in-law stands holding the empty coat only to say, "Well, there's the coat of a Christian [modern] man. Oh, there's sainted glory this day in the lonesome west" [7].

The tragedy in *The Playboy* is made clear in the kind of life (modern) Mayoites live. The play is set in Mayo, which Ni Dhuibhne describes as "a colony full of foreign institutions in the throes of a land war, as the last phase of the campaign against feudalism, in Ireland is enacted" [9]. The modern Mayo is a poverty-ridden place, inhabited by peasants, who try to make ends meet through their agrarian activities. The world of the play demonstrates a violent environment where people celebrate a readiness to accept murder under certain conditions as an act of heroism. The land is saturated with boredom, fear and insecurity.

When Christy Mahon surfaces, the society is in need of a hero, and he is accepted and worshipped irrespective of his status. Pegeen Mike needs someone to stay with in the shebeen till the dull doldrums of the night are over. Pegeen's father and modern husband are "leaving [her] lonesome on the scruff of the hill.... [she's] asking only what way [she'll] pass these twelve hours of dark, and not take [her] death with the fear" [7]. It is significant that the action of the play starts in the night. This is symbolic of the gloom and loneliness, and the dark realities that characterize the modern lives.

The characters in the play are worn out by the state of their dull and poverty stricken life, hence their stereotypical description. In order to cope with their disordered world, they take to reckless and monotonous life; Michael and his friends are used to going to wakes for the "best stuff" of drinks. Christy describes the way he lives his life before he "kills his father": "I there drinking, waking, eating, sleeping, a quiet, simple poor fellow with no man giving me heed" [7]. It is this tragic modern Irish condition that Synge records in *The Playboy*. Christy, therefore, appears as the long desire savior they have been waiting for.

Christy's introduction and his revelation that he killed and buried his father immediately affects the support Shawn has already won for himself. Shawn's attempt to intervene in any conversation is met with contempt and disgust. Pegeen is "snapping at him" while she speaks to Christy in a "honeyed tongue". By the end of Act I, Shawn's public view has deteriorated to the point that Pegeen declares "I wouldn't wed him even if a bishop came walking forth to join us" [7]. This declaration symbolically portrays the Mayo community's evading of the evangelical/modern "transformation". In Act II, Shawn tries to inquire from Widow Quin what may be the reason for his sudden drop in popularity. The answer he gets is that "all girls are fond of courage and hate the likes of you", symbol of modernism [7].

Christy is triumphantly transformed thanks to the power of his tale, a symbol of ancient Irish tradition, and is now considered their protector and the hope of the community. Though Christy is introduced to the reader as a tramp, he quickly gains fame among the people of Mayo and is treated

like their king. He becomes the most respectable and the most celebrated among the people of Mayo. After listening to his tale, Philly is quick to confirm this new status as “a great terror when his tempter’s roused” and as someone “the peelers is fearing and if you’d that lad in the house, there isn’t one of them would come smelling around the yard” [7]. Pegeen compares him to King Solomon in the Bible while Michael thinks he is the strongest and most courageous he ever saw, and the community feels safe under his leadership. As the ruler, he is now expected to ensure the security of the people and provide them with useful tips on how to face oppressive foreign influences and brutal colonial agents. Thanks to Christy’s eloquence and highly convincing tongue, the people see him as the “champion of liberty”.

To further show his admiration for the original Irish pagan identity, Synge infuses in these caricature-like characters the power of the tongue. While Christy is in Michael’s house, everyone wants to know why he looks tired and worn-out. He does not rush in answering the questions they ask him but takes his time to select his words, using them aptly. For example, Michael asks if he is running away because he killed his father. Christy answers slowly, saying: “With the help of God I did, surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother will intercede for his soul” [7]. To show his “braveness”, he declares: “I never used weapons. I’ve got no license, and I am a law-fearing man” [7]. Then, with the aim of gaining more support, Christy adds: “and I walking forward, facing hog, dogs and devils on the highway of the road”. Christy’s beautifully narrated tale makes Jimmy to declare that “now by the grace of God, herself will be save this night, with a man killed his father holding danger from the door” [7].

There is a strong bond existing between Irish primitivism, represented by Christy and the citizens of Mayo. To Suzan, Sara, and Blake, he is “a marvel” and is God sent. Pegeen on her part promises to “be burning candles to the miracle that God has brought to the south” [7]. Pegeen starts seeing their union as a possibility “for there won’t be our like in Mayo, for gallant lovers from this hour” [7]. There is, therefore, an indication that Pegeen will be happy with Christy, and Michael decides to make his daughter permanently happy by putting together their hands, declaring: “a daring fellow is the jewel of the world, and a man did split his father’s middle with a single clout should have bravery often, so may God and Mary and St. Patrick bless you from this mortal day” [7]. By accepting Christy, the people embrace ancient Ireland and the primitivism it stands for. The community “votes for” the idealistic past, while rejecting the modern and corrupt invasion. By choosing Christy over Shawn, the Mayo community settles for the supernatural folktale, the idealistic wealth and the imaginative potentials of the Irish against a modern, corrupt and capitalistic-oriented one.

Synge masterfully uses the image of the well to expand this tone with irony in *The Well of the Saints* when Mary Doul screams in desperation, “Lord protect us from the saints of God!” [8]. In this scene, not only is the comedy raised to a ferocious level, but Synge, at the same time is able to illustrate institutional corruption, where what was once a

symbol of Irish ancient mysticism and glory in Ireland, the well, is now used by the church as a source of miracle from God. The Saint intends to use the very magical and medicinal potion from the traditional Irish symbol of healing as a weapon through which Martin and Mary will gain their sight so as to enable them to observe the world in modern terms. When they express dissatisfaction concerning their new state (when they gain their sight) and their loss of the imaginary, the Saint rebukes them harshly in the following words; “May the Lord who has given you sight send a little sense into your heads, the way it won’t be on your two selves you’ll be looking—on two pitiful sinners of the earth—but on the splendor of the Spirit of God” [8].

The rebuke is rather banal, and caricatures the priest who defers all subjects of talk to the royal glories of God Almighty. Geoffrey Rayburn describes best what Synge sets forth with this scenario and how it captures the overarching theme of the play as follows: “In this way Synge points to the dangers inherent in reforms contrived by those who do not understand the society whose ills they are attempting to ameliorate” [11].

Synge’s portrayal of an Irish people who are exceedingly imaginative springs not from some outlander political ideal. Rather, his own experience with the folk of the Aran Islands transcended any modernity of his spirit and gave him a true connection to his environment. To Synge, there was a purity to be conveyed by their experience. He once said of the Arans: “there is hardly an hour I am with them that I do not feel the shock of some inconceivable idea, and then again the shock of some vague emotion that is familiar to them and to me.” [12]. This true heroism amounts to the power of the imagination, the primitiveness of the dreams of the uncorrupted Irish soul. His beggar character, Martin Doul, is postured to preserve the Irish soul by being stripped of contemporary identity through his blindness.

As already illustrated, Synge’s mastery of the subject of Irish primitive heroism is overtly shown in the language he invests in his anti-heroes. In *The Well of Saints*, the language matches the states of the characters. Synge uses shifts in Doul’s language between the three acts, specifically between when he is either sighted or blind, a process that sheds more light to plot shifts in the play. In Act I, we are introduced to a Doul who, sightless and spiritually personal, traditional and free, speaks and acts in a more natural and emotional manner. Synge’s stage directions are revealing: At different points throughout Act I, Doul’s character is directed to speak plaintively, with his natural voice, with mock irony, interestingly putting out his hands in the sun, crying out joyfully, and teasingly, but with good-humor.

Usually, in this section, Doul’s dialogue begins with a lyrical quality. His very first couple of lines is illustrative: “You were at length plaiting your yellow hair you have the morning lost on us and the people are after passing to the fair of the clash,” and “I’d be destroyed in a short while listening to the clack you do be making, for you’ve a queer cracked voice...” [8]. These lines are filled with rhyme such as length/plaiting, after/passing/clash, and clack/crack. The lines also possess a rhythmic quality as in “queer cracked voice” or

“you have the morning lost on us and the people are after passing to the fair of the clash”. These authentically crafted and rhythmic utterances constitute the signature quality of Synge’s tramp-characters, and are also reminiscent of the poetry of the characters who defend Irish traditional culture.

One notices that Doul’s language in Act II deflates considerably after he has taken the gift of the Saint, regained his sight, and been reduced to hunger and toil. Here, Doul shifts direction from a contemplative (spiritual) man to a physical/modern (non-spiritual) fellow. In Act II, Synge invents a Martin who is moving uneasily, horrified, bitter, passing behind, drawing back, speaking quickly, standing afar, turning round, and rousing himself with an effort. At this point, his dialogue is uncertain, unpoetic, and, sometimes, even tremulous and groveling. A case in point is when he is asking Molly Byrne not to embarrass him and says “[turns round, sees Mary Doul, whispers to Molly Byrne with imploring agony] Let you not put shame on me, Molly, before herself and the smith. Let you not put shame on me and I after saying fine words to you, and dreaming dreams in the night” [8].

This particular speech is important not only for what is found therein, but also what immediately follows. First, the dreamer cannot come to terms with his quick baptism into modernity and speaks in almost telegraphic terms (as opposed to the flowery language of the first act). One notices, especially, Doul’s failed attempt at entering into the lyrical or poetic mode and instead stumbling over the words dreaming and dreams. Later, he notes that “Is it a storm of thunder is coming, or the last end of the world? [He staggers towards Mary Doul, tripping slightly over tin can] The heavens is closing, I’m thinking with darkness and great trouble passing in the sky” [8].

The second half of this speech becomes utterly poetic with language such as “the last end of the world”, “the heavens is closing” and “darkness and great trouble passing in the sky”. The shift is easily explained: this is the moment of the play in which Doul suddenly goes blind again. Synge has literally used a split, single paragraph to show the relationship between the imaginative poet/dreamer and his separation from mainstream society.

## 5. Conclusion

As seen so far, J. M. Synge defends the autonomy of what is often referred to as a “the anti-hero trope” in a contemporary society where parricide and ancient healing and spiritual methods (subjects of Irish oral tradition) experience total social dysfunction but maintain a fringe existence in a myth that is both self-sustained and self-sustaining. Synge’s Christy Mahon revives the anti-hero trope in more contemporary terms by facing an entire village of burgeoning modernity. When faced between sacrifice, martyrdom and cold-blooded murder, he chooses the bleakest edge, sacrifice. Martin Doul, on his part, represents the resistance of the collective Irish imagination against the limited narrow outlook of modernism and the invading church. When he knocks the holy water from the Saint’s hands, the power-grabbing institution and the evil they represent is denounced.

Synge, therefore, breeds anti-heroes whose resistance is not born from modern apathy, but on a conscious connection to ancient Irish tradition. *The Playboy of Western World* and *The Well of Saints* indicate a setting in which characters are so ingrained with collective cultural satisfaction so that their behavior becomes unmitigated violence against anything/anyone who stands against this serenity. What the anti-hero characters share can, therefore, be characterized as an appareling of collective cultural identity that, sometimes, leads to increasingly drastic anti-social behavior.

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