University of Athens

Faculty of English Studies

Irish Drama

Instructor: Prof. A. Velissariou

**Women in the Irish Theater**

Athina Asimaki

ID 1563201300016

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We could recognise the “foundations of Irish culture – state control of women’s reproduction, and the nationalist and religious mythologies, Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland – that have framed and, therefore, limited Irish women” (Moloney, 2003: 198).

This emphasis on both the Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland has resulted in women occupying a unique position in Irish society; women have been recognised, not as subjects with their own identity, but have instead “been reduced to symbols of the nation” (Ryan, 2010:92).

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**1. Introduction**

The Abbey Theatre, which was founded in 1904 by William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, played an essential role in the construction of the Irish national identity. At a time when Ireland struggled for its cultural and political independence from the British rule, literature in general and theatre in particular tried to portray and define Ireland. Therefore, the depiction of women was included in this definition of Ireland, which was represented as a woman. By the way women are depicted in Irish Theatre, we get information concerning the way Irish society viewed and treated women (Wilson, 2006:291).

First and foremost, the fact that Ireland was represented as a woman is directly associated with the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan which constitutes a great symbol of Irish nationalism. In this play written by W.B.Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, it becomes clear that Irish women are dependent on men, who have to fight so as to free Ireland. In this sense, women are not free and autonomous. Instead, they have to support men in their struggling for liberation, but also sacrifice themselves for them (Wilson, 2006:293). Moreover, Irish women had to conform to certain standards and stereotypes that both the Irish society and the Catholic Church had established for them. According to those standards, Irish women had to be confined in the domestic environment under the constant supervision of men. Additionally, considering the fact that the Irish was a heavily puritan and conservative nation, women had to be sexually pure. Their sexual instincts were repressed, the cult of virginity stigmatized their life and of course sex outside marriage was a taboo and even any reference to it was forbidden in most Irish families. Thus, women who deviated from those norms were marginalized by society (Ryann, 2010:92-94).

In this essay, *The Playboy of the Western World* by John Millington Synge, *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *Juno and the Paycock* by Sean O’Casey will be studied in order to show how women are represented in the Irish culture and mentality.

**2*. The Playboy of the Western World***

**2.1. John Millington Synge’s biography**

John Millington Synge was one of the most important Irish playwrights and one of the founders of the Abbey Theatre. He was born on 16 April 1871 in Rathfarnham, a rural area outside Dublin and died in 1909 in Dublin .He studied at the Trinity College and at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin and then continued his studies from 1893 to 1897 in Germany, Italy, and France . He met W.B. Yeats while he was studying in Paris. Yeats played a catalytic role in Synge’s life, as he encouraged him to go to the Aran Islands, in the west of Ireland, where he studied the language of those people and the way of their life, something which inspired him to write some of his plays (Wilson, 2006:312-313; “John Millington Synge”, Encyclopaedia Britanica). One of his most famous plays is *The Playboy of the Western World*.

**2.2. Summary of the play**

Christy Mahon enters a pub in a village on a wild coast of Mayo and tells the story of how he believed that he has killed his father. His narration of the parricide, which he is constantly repeating throughout the play, arouses the interest of the local people who soon admire and even adore him. Peggen, the daughter of the pub owner who is engaged to Shawn, is enchanted by Christy’s poetic narrative of how he has killed his father and the two soon fall in love. She then fights with the Widow Quin over Christy. But things turn upside down when the father of Christy, who was supposed to be killed, suddenly appears. Therefore, the villagers who once admired him as a hero now turn against him. Peggen also rejects Christy and decides to wed Shawn. Finally, Christy departs from the village with his father and the play closes with Peggen’s lamentation: “Oh my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only Playboy of the Western World” (Synge, 1995:146).

**2.3. Analysis of Peggen**

*The Playboy of the Western World* constituted a controversial play, which caused the audience’s riots begun in the opening performance of the play in the Abbey Theatre in January 1907 and continued in following performances. They were caused by the Irish nationalists who considered the contents of the play as offensive against Ireland’s moral standards (Wilson, 2006:314-315).

One of the reasons why the audience rioted in such a great extent against the staging of the *Playboy of the Western World* in the Abbey Theatre was the way in which Synge depicted women. In *The* *Playboy of the Western World,* as also in other plays of him, Synge portrays women who do not conform to the figure of the typical Irish woman established by the Irish nationalists. The audience therefore could not accept the fact that his protagonists bore no resemblance to the mythical symbol of Cathleen ni Houlihan, which was identified with Ireland and stigmatized women of that period. His women are dynamic characters who seek independence while at the same time express their sexuality. This image is opposed to Ireland’s puritan and restrictive standards, where women had to be sexually pure and confined in the domestic environment (Wilson, 2006: 317,329; Tenorio, 1999: 425-426) His conceptions of women become evident by his portrayal of the character of Peggen in *The* *Playboy of the Western World.*

In the *Playboy of the Western World*, Peggen, although trapped in the restricted rural environment of a village, is presented as a dynamic and strong-willed character who, as we can assume by the way she conceives the world around her as also by her actions, seeks for autonomy and individuality. Even though Peggen has accepted certain conventionalities of the rural environment she lives in, like that of marriage (we learn from start that she is going to wed to Shawn), she is presented as a woman who is not afraid of any kind of authority, able to handle and control the men around her .This is evident in certain moments throughout the play. For example, she has the control of her relationship with Shawn, while Shawn is afraid that she may change opinion concerning their marriage as shown even by their first dialogue in the beginning of the play “He is surely…the Court of Rome”. She also speaks to him “with scorn”, as is marked by the stage notes, and she calls him Shaneen with a scornful and teasing tone. Furthermore, she is in fact a woman who admires courageous men who can “tell stories of holy Ireland”, “the like of Daneen Sullivan … of Marcus Quin”. Thus, she sees in Christy those figures, as she encounters him as a man who showed enormous bravery by killing his father, an archetypical figure of authority. He appears as a hero who came in her rural confined life, marked by submissiveness and respectability to the social norms, so as to make her evade her pre-arrranged route of life. She is greatly enchanted by Christy’s narratives of how he has killed his father and she lets her imagination and fantasy flourish. In Peggen, we can detect a woman with passions who expresses her sexuality and struggles for her independence. She tells what she thinks of without hiding her thoughts and she does not hesitate to use sharp language. She is a woman with real courage and strength of character with ambitions. In fact, a lot of times in the play she is presented much more courageous than men, as obvious in Shawn’s hesitation at the time when he is told to tie Christy up and he asks “Is it me to go near him […] Let you take it Pegeen,” and she does so without any hesitation (Wilson, 2006: 315-316; Hanley, 2015).

Finally, even though Peggen is depicted as an unconventional woman who does not conform to the standards of that period’s model of Irish femininity, she essentially fails to evade the fate of a typical Irish woman. This is proved in the end of the story, where she realizes that Christy has not committed parricide, which means he is not a hero anymore and she decides to wed Shawn. Hence, she ends up entrapped by the conventional rural environment and the conformity of a marriage (Wilson, 2006: 315-316; Hanley, 2015). As Kibert (1996:178-9) states “*The Playboy* starts and ends with Pegeen’s plight as a trapped rural woman in a landscape virtually bereft of enterprising men”.

**3. *The Shadow of a Gunman***

**3.1. Sean O’ Casey’s biography**

Sean O’Casey was a very significant Irish playwright of the 20th century. He was born on March 30, 1880, in Dublin, Ireland and died on September 18, 1964, in Torquay, England. He grew up in a lower middle-class Irish Protestant family. His father died when he was six years old and the whole family encountered economic problems. It is noteworthy the fact that he was mainly self-educated, as he received only three years of formal education. Even though he was brought up a Protestant, he was not a member of the Protestant-Ascendancy class, as he worked on the railways for certain years. He was a socialist and he is most well-known for his occupation with Irish slums during the war (“Sean O’Casey”, Encyclopaedia Britanica).

**3.2. Summary of the play**

*The Shadow of a Gunman* was performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1923. The action takes place in the slums of Dublin in 1920 at the heights of the Anglo-Irish War. In the tenement resides Donal Davoren with Seumas Shields. Although Donal devotes most of his time to write poetry, the residents think that he is a member of the I.R.A., a gunman, who is hiding from the Black and Tans. Seumas, who is a pedlar, brings in Mr. Maguire, who unlike Donal, is a real member of the I.R.A.. He leaves a briefcase which contains explosives in their room for safekeeping. At the meantime, Minnie Powell, a young girl, is enchanted by Donal and the two fall in love. When Mr. Maguire is shot and, the Black and Tans raid the apartment, Donal and Seumas are saved, since Minnie has hidden the bag. Nevertheless, they inspect her room and ultimately they arrest and kill her.

**3.3. Analysis of the women characters**

Sean O’Casey lost his father at a very young age and was brought up by women. This has influenced to a great extent the way he presents women. He admires, respects them and recognizes their strength of character. He portrays women who are actually stronger than men while at the same time does not hesitate to sexualize them; to present them as sexual beings.

In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Minnie is at first presented as a typical young naïve girl who takes care of her dresses and falls in love with a man whom she considers a hero, as a “Helen of Troy” who falls in love with “Paris”. This is obvious in the following extract, “Right glad I am … to save it.”, where women are presented as an image, a beautiful picture who do not exist outside male gaze. However, Minnie is proved to be a really courageous woman who sacrifices herself for Donal, a man whom she considered a hero. On the other hand, Donal and Seumas are proven to be cowards who have left her die because of their own faults. Their cowardice is apparent throughout the play, as shown by the following extracts: “For god’s sake…it’ll be all right”, “Is that all you’re thinking of …let her do what she did”, “Ah me, alas! Pain, pain, pain ever, forever! … poltroon and poet!”. Therefore Sean O’ Casey presents Minnie, as a character who, though is a woman, will remain in history as a heroine, in contrast with men who will be erased as they construct themselves as heroes though they are not. It is apparent therefore that O’ Casey presents a woman who contradicts the model of the typical Irish woman and who possesses characteristics and takes actions that are typically identified with men, as those of courage and sacrifice (Wilson, 2006:323-324).

**4. *Juno and the Paycock***

**4.1. Summary of the play**

Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* was first performed at the [Abbey Theatre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbey_Theatre) in [Dublin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dublin) in 1924. The action takes place in Dublin’s [working class](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_class) [tenements](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tenement) in the early 1920s, during the Irish civil war of 1922–23. It refers to the story of the Boyle family: Jack Boyle is often found without a job and spends his time drinking with his friend Joxer, his wife Juno is a very responsible woman who actually bears the burdens of the whole family. Jack and Juno have two children: Johnny, who has lost his arm in the war and Mary, a young idealist who goes on strikes. The family becomes enthusiastic when they learn from Mary's fiancé Charlie Bentham that they will inherit money from a relative of Boyle's who has died, while at the same time they lament the loss of Mrs. Tancred's son, one of their neighbours. However, afterwards it becomes clear that no money will be given to them, since there is a problem with the will. At the same time, Mary announces that she is pregnant and that Bentham has left for England. At the end of the play, Johnny is murdered by the Black and Tans who learn that he was responsible for Mrs. Tancred's son’s murder and Juno decides to leave her husband and her daughter raise up the child.

**4.2. Analysis of the women characters**

In *Juno and the Paycock*, O’ Casey portrays once again women who are much more capable and admirable than men.

Juno is a really strong character, who, as Murray (2000:70) states, “tower[s] in significance and moral authority above any of the men”. She holds her family together as best she can, but, even though she is long-suffering, she does not take her family’s foolishness lying down. She is spirited and “heroic in a world of antiheroes and fools […] a rock of common sense” (Murray, 2000:66). Juno contrasts with the typical view of the Irish mother, who is characterized by total loyalty to her family and obedience to her husband, but can be seen as a heroine, a symbol of an Irish woman. She is the woman who bears the burdens of her family and maintains its unity. On the other hand, the men of the family are presented as weaker members who always rely on her. Her husband is a lazy man, who rarely has a job, spends all of his time in drinking and has no responsibility over his family. Her son, Johnny uses his injury as a pretext and asks from his mother everything he needs. Finally, her dynamic character is once again proven in the end of the play where she decides to leave her husband so as to help her daughter, who is pregnant. This sounds very strange for a woman, since women were not supposed to take decisions, as this was made by men (Wilson, 2006: 324-325).

Mary is also opposed to the image of the average Irish woman. She is presented as a young idealist woman, who goes on strikes and seeks for her independence. Her life is marked by her principles and she seems to be confident for the decisions she takes in her life. Moreover, Mary is radical for her times, as she becomes pregnant out of marriage. This is unheard of a woman of that period of time, since sex out of wedlock was considered a sin. This belief is demonstrated by the others’ reaction of Mary’s announcement of her pregnancy. Jerry criticizes her, as he considers her a fallen woman and refuses to get married with such a woman. “My God,   
Mary, have you fallen as low as that?” (Wilson, 2006: 324-325).

**5. Conclusion**

In those plays studied, it becomes obvious that both playwrights viewed women from a different perspective given the standards of Irish femininity of that period of time. Namely, they presented dynamic and radical women who struggled for independence and autonomy in a time when the majority of women was living in the shadows of society. In this way, they illuminated the unseen aspects of female personality, causing the shock of the audience.

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