

The Playboy of the Western World

Author: John Millington Synge (1871-1909)

Type of work: Play

Type of plot: Comic realism

Time of plot: Early twentieth century

First published: 1907

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Overview: The setting for this play, a public house in an isolated part of County Mayo, in the west of Ireland, highlights the tension in that island nation between the urbanized, "civilized" East and the wild, "truly Irish" West.

Near Achill Island

This is in the remote north of County Mayo, the absolute west of the west of Ireland, somewhat north of Synge's beloved Aran Islands, and therefore an apt setting to illustrate Synge's repulsion at the ignorance of Ireland's poor. Synge came by this disdain honestly, through his fiercely Protestant family, who owned land in both County Galway and County Wicklow (thereby bracketing the island both east and west).

Within this isolation, there is community. The shebeen stands alone, yet it is constantly filled with people. Though they may be distant as the road goes, they are closer through shortcuts, ones that the public house law does not take into account. These people have carved an existence out of their remote setting, relying on contact with the larger world both through the post and the gossip at social gatherings.

Nevertheless, this is a place beset by evil, both real and imagined. There are strange people out at night, from the madmen of Keel to the ten tinkers in the glen to the thousand militia in the countryside. Even

the unseen priest, Father Reilly, haunts the action. They surround this last public house on the island, and threaten it with madness, theft, war, or religion. Into this place comes Christy, a boy from further east, and therefore one possessing more native wit than the westerners he comes upon. He brings the evil of the outer world with him, but wins over the folk. When the truth is found out, they turn on him, but he goes forth, back to the east, a new man, having seen himself as a hero in their eyes and found out a bit of his true nature.