Nation and Freedom in Ireland's National Theatre: J.M. Synge's Role in Establishing the Abbey as a Theatre of Free Experimentation

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Abstract: Many of the early plays written and performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin were controversial, creating dissent between religious, social, and political groups in Ireland. Among the most volatile of these controversial pieces were those written by John Millington Synge. His *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1902) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) enhanced a diverse dialogue regarding the role of the Abbey in Ireland as a national theatre. He helped answer the question of whether or not the Abbey would be a place to strengthen and praise idealized nationalistic and conservative norms, or a space of free experimentation for Ireland’s dramatic artists. Synge’s plays spurred on the necessary conversations and conflicts surrounding the Abbey Theatre, forcing her management and audiences alike to decide what material they considered most appropriate to represent the nation. As is discussed at length in this project, Synge’s works survived critical backlash in order to establish the Abbey as a haven for Ireland’s experimental artists.

Keywords: John Millington Synge, J.M. Synge, Irish Drama, The Abbey Theatre, Irish National Theatre, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory
NATION AND FREEDOM IN IRELAND’S NATIONAL THEATRE: J.M. SYNGE’S ROLE IN ESTABLISHING THE ABBEY AS A THEATRE OF FREE EXPERIMENTATION

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CHAPTER ONE
The Formation of the Irish Literary Society and the Abbey Theatre

William Butler Yeats once wrote, “A moment comes in every country when its character expresses itself through some group of writers, painters, or musicians[…]” (First Principles 393) For Ireland, this time came during the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At the forefront of this movement was Yeats himself, along with a collection of thinkers, writers, producers, and actors with whom he founded what would eventually be known as The National Theatre Society. This society, dedicated to the production of not only national Irish drama, but national Irish dramatic art, found a home in the Abbey Theatre, in Dublin, Ireland. They set out to represent the Irish people upon the Irish stage, while also honoring the aesthetic freedoms of writers and performers. The Irish audience members themselves, however, were not always sympathetic towards the free expressions of Ireland produced on stage. Martin Esslin writes that theatre is “the place where a nation thinks in front of itself” (Esslin qtd. in Murray 3), but when the smaller units that make up the nation do not all share the same opinions of nation and national expression, contradiction and conflict occur. Many questions arose, including: Should the productions show ideals of identity or reality? Should they be accurate or exaggerated for dramatic effect? Should they focus on the rural or the urban setting? And whose responsibility was it to answer these questions: the audience or the playwright? Opinions regarding these questions were varied and much debated.
John Millington Synge, whose plays now hold prominent positions in the cannon of Irish dramatic literature, acted as a catalyst for some of the most impassioned debates over the National Theatre at the turn of the century. While Synge’s two most criticized plays, *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *Playboy of the Western World*, represent what seems to modern theatergoers as a picture of thoroughly Irish life and art, in their own time, they formed the epicenter of the debate over Ireland’s national theatre. Many of the conflicts surrounding these two plays were the result of differing opinions as to how Ireland should be shown on stage, as well as what role the stage should play in the nation. The Abbey would either become known as a theatre that affirmed its audiences in their notions of an idealized Ireland, producing propagandist rather than artistic material, or a safe-haven for the experimentation and expression of Irish artists. Looking back at their first performances at the Abbey Theatre, we will note that Synge used a combination of un-idealized Irishness and lyrical aesthetic in order to engage in an experiment of provocative audience liberation. In his ultimate success, the Abbey was able to stake its claim as a blank canvas on which the artists of Ireland could freely express themselves without fear of censorship.

**The Beginning of the Abbey Theatre: Why Drama?**

The National Theatre Society was born out of a larger movement of cultural nationalism known as the Irish Literary Revival. A revival in the dramatic arts of Ireland was not isolated, but “operated in conjunction with an Irish literary revival in all genres: poetry, fiction, criticism, new histories, and translations from and into Irish Gaelic.” Drama (especially in Ireland where oration is both valued and a part of daily life) offered a special opportunity for the expression of national culture, because, as John Harrington explains, “drama is fundamentally a group event,
involving authors, production personnel and an audience,” which therefore caused it to take “a critical public role in this revival” (Harrington xv). The dramatic setting allows for the unification of various roles and talents into one, final stage production that both includes and transcends its various parts. The formation of a national identity is also a group event accounting, at least in theory, for the diversity of classes, viewpoints, traditions, and cultures while simultaneously transcending them with the greater sense of a unified nation. Thus, the theatre was an ideal setting for Ireland to hammer out its cultural identity, attempting to bring together the many parts of the nation into one, comprehensive setting. The Abbey Theatre was intended to serve this role in Ireland as a space for the representation and contemplation of Irish themes before an Irish audience. All units – audience members of various classes and backgrounds together with artists of many forms and talents – came together to share in the process of transcendent cultural definition.

**Foundations**

Despite its great significance to Irish cultural history, the way in which the Abbey Theatre began was quite spontaneous. As Lady Gregory, one of the three main founders of the soon to be named Irish Literary Theatre (along with Yeats and briefly Edward Martyn), recalls from a meeting between the three at Duras house in September 1897, “I said it was a pity we had no Irish theatre where such plays could be given […] we went on talking about it, and things seemed to grow possible as we talked, and before the end of the afternoon we had made our plan” (Murray 2). Unasked and unappointed, three individuals simply and spontaneously took it upon themselves to create a theatre that would represent the entire nation. Their plan resulted in the following statement of purpose:
We propose to have performed in Dublin [...] certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying on a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us. (Gregory 402)

With this statement began a new, dramatic movement within the greater revival of Ireland’s literature. Known first as the Irish Literary Theatre (1899-1901), then the Irish National Theatre Society (1903), and finally opening the doors to the new Abbey Theatre in Dublin (December, 1904), this movement would become a defining force in Irish aesthetics, housing some of the nation’s greatest dramatic writers and producing many of the plays which have endure as staples of Irish literary culture to this day.

It is important to note, however, that the National Theatre Society was not the first company in Ireland to produce “Irish” plays. Implicit in the proclamation above is an assumption
that Yeats, Gregory, and Martyn were creating something novel. Although unique in their views regarding the primacy of the artist and his freedom to express himself through experimentation in the national theatre of Ireland, there was nothing new at the time about plays portraying “Irishness”. Morash comments on this assumption by writing that the statement, especially where it claims to be founding a “Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature,” “effectively erases a dramatic tradition going back at least to the seventh century” (Morash 117). Although Irish audiences were flocking to venues such as the Queen’s Theatre, the self-proclaimed “Home of Irish Drama,” to see wildly popular nationalist plays like *Wolf Tone*, the founders of the Abbey chose to ignore the Irish productions of commercial theatres (109). As Morash writes, “the Irish Literary Theatre came into being by imagining an empty space where in fact there was a crowded room” (117). By rather presumptuously stomping upon the existing popular Irish drama, the founders of the Abbey were taking it upon themselves to start from scratch, shrugging off the old traditions and founding a “theatre of their own” based on their personal value systems of national representation and aesthetic freedoms (115).

**National Censorship or Free Expression?**

Ireland’s new National Theatre Society developed two defining features: its adherence to national themes and its commitment to free, artistic expression. Murray writes that “a common purpose was formulated to locate and give voice to the soul of a people. Articulation of a focalized theme and search for an appropriate style […] were to become the two defining preoccupations of this literary theatre” (Murray 2-3). The focalized theme was the representation of Irish national identity on stage, and the appropriate style was based on artistic freedom. Representation of Irish identity and the ability to maintain artistic freedom, however, proved a
hard balance to strike, and the Abbey would eventually need to decide which they considered more valuable in Ireland’s cultural development as a nation. When these forces came into conflict, they would need to determine which they would stand by and defend: representation of nation or freedom for national artists. According to Yeats, the first responsibility of Abbey playwrights was to their own art – the Abbey must, therefore, be a space of free experimentation. Yeats and Gregory’s focus on dramas potential for artistic expression in place of popular, political, or educational entertainment made their ambitions for the Abbey stand out from what was happening at other theaters in Ireland where Irish plays were already being staged.

The Abbey Theatre’s purpose was not to indulge the nationalist idealistic musings of nationalist Ireland. In answering the question, “What is a National Theatre?” Yeats wrote that those who “think that a national play must be as near as possible a page out of The Spirit of the Nation put into dramatic form” are very much mistaken (An Irish National Theatre 413). Instead of well-worn, conventional literature designed to build up the good feelings of Irish nationalists by affirming their idealizations, Yeats pushed for writings that were more personal and authentic to the individual playwright’s experience of Ireland, encouraging them to draw on what they felt would best suit their own experimentation. As he advised playwrights hoping to have their works produced at the Abbey:

A play to be suitable for performance at the Abbey should contain some criticism of life, founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer, or some vision of life, of Irish life by preference, important from its beauty or from some excellence of style […] We do not desire propagandist plays, nor plays written to serve some obvious moral purpose; for art seldom concerns itself
with those interests or opinions that can be defended by argument,  
but with realities of emotion and character that become self-
evident when made vivid to the imagination (“Advice to  
Playwrights” 349)

Yeats always insisted upon the artist’s right to draw from his own “experience or personal  
observation.” Murray writes that, although “[Yeats] shared, and made the dramatic movement he  
headed share, the national aspirations, Yeats tried to draw a sharp line between politics and art”  
(Murray 4). Yeats readily admits that “politics are [Ireland’s] national passion,” and therefore are  
worthy of representation on stage, but that representation must come out of an artist’s free  
expression rather than the forms and motivations of propagandists or historians (“Ireland and the  
Arts” 396). Yeats further claimed that “beauty and truth are always justified in themselves, and  
that their creation is a greater service to our country than writing that compromises either in the  
seeming service of a cause” (387). The plays staged at the Abbey would not be made relevant  
(“justified”) because of their political aspirations or their preoccupations with Irish nationhood,  
but rather they would be made important because they represent “beauty and truth” on stage, a  
distinction returned to repeatedly throughout the Abbey’s early history.

Although Yeats believed in the freedom of the individual artist, he also set down certain  
guidelines regarding what he saw as Irish aesthetics that would best fit such expression.  
According to his notions of Irish aesthetics, Yeats called on Ireland to reform its dramatic  
practices, giving three requirements in his essay, “Ireland and the Arts.” First the theatre must be  
a place, he writes, “of intellectual excitement – a place where the mind goes to be liberated.” His  
second and third points focus on the importance of speech and lyricism in the theatre. He claims  
that in order to “restore words to their sovereignty we must make speech even more important
than gesture upon the stage,” and that acting must be simplified by discarding “everything that
draws the attention away from the sound of the voice, or from the few moments of intense
expression […] There must be nothing unnecessary, nothing that will distract the attention from
speech and movement” (“Ireland and the Arts” 387-389). Along with asserting the rights of
Abbey playwrights to express themselves as they saw fit, he recommends writing in a style that
privileges mental liberation and lyricism when representing Ireland. Abbey plays must represent
life as experienced by the author, showing authentic emotion and character through lyrical,
spoken text, and, while it was preferred that the emotions and characters portrayed be Irish, first
and foremost was the author’s freedom to experiment and express his own sense of beauty and
truth, whether complimentary to or in spite of political leanings and convictions. Especially
considering their nation’s stifled past, Yeats and the Abbey founders determined that providing
freedom for experimentation, in the hope of liberating the minds of artists and audience members
alike, was the greater responsibility of Ireland’s national theatre.

**Representation and Exclusion**

Despite good intentions for unimpeded expression, experimentation, and freedom
through liberating lyricism, disputes over forms of national representation could not be avoided
by Ireland’s national theatre. As the national theatre, the Abbey still bore the responsibility to
represent the nation in some way or other on stage, and the audiences did not always approve of
the representations chosen freely by Abbey playwrights. Harrington describes the development
of a “school of dramatic literature,” according to the proclamation, as necessarily “evaluating
segments of a national society and determining which will occupy center stage as the authorized
emblem of nation, or as ‘the real Ireland’” (Harrington x). The playwrights having their plays
performed at the Abbey would need to decide what exactly constituted Irish identity, who would make up the “focalized theme” – was it the peasantry, the factory workers, the labor movement, Sinn Féin, the Irish Republican Army, or perhaps even the Ascendancy (from which Yeats and Gregory themselves came)? Whose identity represented “real Ireland”? Harrington writes that what unifies Ireland’s Abbey playwrights is “not the birthplace of the authors but their collective contemplation of Ireland’s identity” (xvii). But in this contemplation and decision, there is an inevitable sense of exclusion. The diversity in even such a small country as Ireland makes it difficult, if not impossible, to create a singular, all-encompassing identity – a task made all the more difficult within the even more limited space of a dramatic text where the pressure to appeal to mixed audiences while allowing space and freedom for the expression of the artist is great. The combination of the artist’s right to freedom and his responsibility of national representation lead to discrepancies between the Irish identities chosen by writers versus the “Irishness” with which the audience identified. The inconsistencies between the Abbey as a space of political nationalism distilled in dramatic performance and as a canvas for the free expression of the dramatic artists of Ireland gave rise to many conflicts, the two tenants of the Abbey – artistic expression and national representation – inevitably resulting in contradiction and conflict.

In the midst of these conflicts and contradictions, many critics questioned, given Yeats’ privileging of the freedom of the artist over the expression of certain national themes, whether or not the Abbey could truly be considered a National Theatre. Although the Abbey claimed to “bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland,” the chosen thoughts and emotions were not always accepted by, nor accessible to, everyone – regardless of their artistic merits. Exclusion occurred both in the writer’s choice of Irish identity to be represented on stage and in who was welcomed to attend the Abbey’s plays. This fact became evident in both the
seating available at the Abbey Theatre, and in Yeats’ expectations of appropriate audience behavior. Unlike other theatres at the time, such as the Queen’s Theatre or the Gaiety, the Abbey did not initially offer seats at the rate of sixpence. This was in part due to a smaller seating area, where it was not possible to build the high galleries that typically cost sixpence, but in its pre-Abbey days, the same space, known then as the Mechanics Institute, did offer seats for as little as twopence apiece. This form of exclusion was not lost upon critics at the time, as one journalist proclaimed in a headline: “The Horniman-Yeats Theatricals: No Low Persons Wanted.” Annie Horniman, who donated the money that made the purchase of the Abbey Theatre possible, expressed her wishes in regards to seat pricing by saying, “the prices of the seats can be raised of course, but not lowered…to prevent cheap entertainments from being given” (Morash 128). The founders of the Abbey were reaching out to an audience with “a stronger feeling for beautiful and appropriate language than one finds in the ordinary theatre,” so that their national dramas would be the focus of what the founders considered deeper, more thoughtful appreciation than that received by other, popular dramas. In seeking this kind of audience, and allowing no sixpence seats, the Abbey stage, supposedly representative of national thoughts and emotions, excludes the less financially wealthy thinkers and feelers of Ireland (“The Reform of the Theatre” 387). The sixpence seats were established in the pit of the theatre shortly before the first run of Playboy of the Western World, a fact that possibly contributed to the intensity of the riots surrounding the production, and will be further explored in chapter two.

In addition to exclusion through seating practices, the Irish Literary Society (and Yeats in particular) sought to change the way that Irish audiences conducted themselves at the Abbey. In accordance with his commitment to artistic freedom in the expression of truth and beauty, he writes, “we must remember when truth and beauty open their mouths to speak, that all other
mouts should be…silent” (“The Reform of the Theatre” 387). This kind of behavior was assumed in the founders’ first proclamation when it stated that they hoped to find in Ireland an “uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory.” On the contrary, however, Irish audiences were trained – by that same passion for oratory – to be anything but silent listeners at the feet of beauty and truth. Morash writes that Irish audiences were “vocal in their likes and dislikes…capable of shouting down plays that offended them” (Morash 117), and Harrington also notes that Ireland’s audiences were as adept at “speaking as well as listening, for modern Irish drama is notable for obstreperous objections to the images of the Irish people presented to the Irish people by Irish playwrights” (Harrington x). With or without the sixpence audience, the Irish people attending early plays at the Abbey could hardly have been realistically expected to sit in silence through performances, whether they approved or disapproved, and audience response was not uncommon from both the stalls and the pit. Although Yeats insisted that truth and beauty “justify and have no need of justification,” the theatregoers demanded justification – especially for anything they felt was a poor representation of their nation (“The Reform of the Irish Theatre” 382). Once again, the founders of the Abbey were choosing to ignore the established traditions of Irish theatre in order to form what they personally felt was a more appropriate atmosphere for national drama – disregarding large portions of the population they hoped to represent.

The Audience

Despite Yeats’ objections, a national drama hoping to represent national life through art cannot avoid inclusion of the audience’s evaluations of those representations as a part of the greater debate over the role of the national theatre. Harrington writes that the “central conflict” in
the national theatre was between the “pragmatic and the aesthetic,” stating that “at issue was both the accuracy of the representation of Ireland on the stage and the formulation of Ireland’s proper ambition” (Harrington xvi). As valuable and properly ambitious as the free aesthetic may be, a national theatre cannot ignore calls to justify the “accuracy of representation” on stage, as it is the audience – as members of the nation – who are in part being represented. Harrington explains, “the idea of a national drama […] is to present the theater’s audience on its stage,” and if the audience and its own nation are presented, then they must be able to recognize themselves. To claim that the audience’s voice is not welcome in the theatre space, as Yeats tried to, hindered the unified effort of formulating “Ireland’s proper ambition” both on and off stage. Writers, audience members, actors, and producers must all be “active participants in a debate about a drama with national pretentions and so about the nation itself,” as this debate has an effect on all of them both in and out of the theatre, especially in such a crucial time of national identity establishment in Ireland as the early nineteen-hundreds (xvii). And yet, what is special about representing the nation in drama is that this type of portrayal serves a dual purpose: it both reflects and elevates. Harrington writes that “national drama has a complex relation to its audience: to reflect the audience as it is, and simultaneously to improve it” (x). The elevating aspect of drama affirms Yeats’ focus on the Abbey’s role as a space for Ireland’s artists to express themselves first and to express their nation second – they must not simply represent and unify, but portray their own message of audience and national transcendence – the ultimate purpose of the play. National drama must, therefore, incorporate both the audience and the art, presenting material that is both recognizable and challenging, representational and transcendent. Although audience involvement is essential to the Abbey’s mission as a national theatre, the free expression of Abbey artists, because it inspires this involvement, was the theater’s first priority.
The playwright who wishes their work to endure must establish some aspect of Irish identity via an elevated, free artistic style that, like Yeats requested, will bring about some form of mental liberation. They must embrace both national authenticity and aesthetic freedom while successfully engaging the audience in a discussion of Irish identity.

Creating a space of discourse and experimentation, the Abbey Theatre cast off the traditions of Irish commercial theatres in order to contribute something novel to Irish literary culture: a dramatic repertoire both national and beautiful, created through free expression and experimentation by some of Ireland’s finest playwrights. Although their presumptions often resulted in harsh criticism, the most controversial plays from the Abbey have become, perhaps by virtue of their controversies, pillars of Ireland’s literary canon today. The conflicts and contradictions within the Abbey as a national theatre gave rise to three distinct characteristics of Irish drama at the turn of the century: representations of Irish life according to the experience and artistic freedom of the writer, the portrayal of universal human truth or beauty (preferably expressed through language), and a give-and-take relationship between the production and the audience it presumes to represent. Through these, writers, performers, and producers at the theatre hoped to offer their audiences a sense of liberation – a transcendence from the stifling, conventional powers under which they had struggled for years. Free of any such censorship, the Abbey committed itself to function as a haven for Ireland’s controversial playwrights. For this reason I turn to a close examination of two of Synge’s most controversial and enduring plays, *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Playboy of the Western World* in order to show how they played powerful roles in the debate over, and establishment of, the Abbey Theatre as a theatre for national liberation and free thinking.
CHAPTER TWO

J.M. Synge: Liberation Through Provocation

John Millington Synge is now known as one of Ireland’s great writers, and his most recognized plays are featured in all comprehensive collections of Irish dramatic literature. He is one of the standard-bearers of the Irish dramatic canon. From his birth, however, Synge’s “Irishness,” and therefore his right to represent Ireland on the national stage, was called into question. Born to an Anglo-Irish, protestant family on April 16, 1871 in Dublin, his closest kin consisted of Wicklow and Mayo landlords. Like Yeats and Gregory, the validity of Synge’s Irishness also came under attack during his professional career from Catholic nationalist groups, such as the Gaelic League, who, as Aidan Arrowsmith writes, “measured authentic Irishness in terms of Gaelic heritage and Catholicism” (Arrowsmith vii-viii). The struggle between Anglo-Irish and Gaelic Catholics over the definition of Irish national identity was one of the major disputes between writers, dramatists, performers, producers, and audiences during the Literary Revival, a dispute referred to by some as a ‘battle of two civilizations’ (Moran qtd. in Arrowsmith ix). Arrowsmith explains, “Synge’s writing is central to this [debate], just as the debate is central to his writing” (Arrowsmith ix). While Synge was attacked for his lack of Gaelic Irishness, he in turn used his plays to attack the conservative conventions of Catholic Ireland, opening up the debate once again as to what the priorities and purposes of the Abbey as a national theatre should be.
While he was neither Catholic nor Gaelic, Synge still shared a desire to represent and preserve Ireland, as well as liberate her, as passionate as any cultural nationalist of his era. Arrowsmith writes that in both *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge’s “sense of a precious Irishness under threat and in urgent need of preservation is clear” (Arrowsmith xvi). Perhaps what makes his works so politically and emotionally rousing, however, is Synge’s ability to implicate the audience in the events unfolding on stage. He is simultaneously critical of the “encroaching modernity” of Ireland while provoking the “bourgeois [Catholic] audience out of their complicity in this process” (xvi). Synge spent an extensive amount of time in the Aran Islands – what became for him, in their separation from English and Catholic, bourgeois influence, a symbol of unpolluted Irishness. Holding this up as a measure to mainland Ireland, however, he found her to be lacking in her modern, bourgeois, Catholic morals and behaviors, and chose to present these in a farcical but challenging manner in both *Glen* and *Playboy*. Arrowsmith elaborates, “If Synge mythologises Aran, his attitude to the mainland is one of robust demythologization” (xv). Synge not only showcased the failings and frailties of the Irish on stage, but drew his audience into them as coconspirators in the pollution of Irishness, showing that they and their conventions were as much at fault. Synge’s experiment in drama was liberation through provocation, and his was a comedy aimed to arouse and convict the audience into the creation of a better Ireland.

**Embracing Ireland’s Wild Reality**

Throughout Synge’s artistic process, he claims that his criticizing works are strictly based in reality, despite (but in combination with) his comedic, parodic approach. Thus he echoes in his own artistic convictions Yeats’ “Advice to Playwrights” that states that Abbey plays should
“contain some criticism of life, founded in the experience or personal observation of the writer”
(“Advice to Playwrights” 349). Although Synge’s representations, in particular his use of
unsavory language, of Ireland came under strong attack from the Gaelic Catholics in his
audiences, he insisted on their authenticity and value, writing, “I have used one or two words
only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland” (“Preface” 453). On multiple
occasions, some of which are explored later in this chapter, Synge defended his choices of story
and language, citing sources from which his authentic, as he claimed, representations sprang.
Despite the audience’s chagrin at what they perceived as a represented Ireland that was too dark
and dirty to be real Ireland, Synge insisted that he was only representing his actual experience
with Ireland and her people.

Nor did Synge find these forms of speech and story to be detestable in the way that his
audience regarded them. He writes, “I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk-
imagination of these fine [Irish] people” (“Preface” 453) adding that there is a “rich joy found
only in what is superb and wild in reality” (454). Although polluted by modernity, Synge still
finds in Ireland a strong sense of lyricism and poetic storytelling that runs throughout his plays,
exalting even the poorest characters in the grimmest situations, giving them a sense of freedom
and magnitude. In this way he both represents and transcends within his comedies. The lyric
beauty of his dramatic prose affirms Yeats’ assumption of an Abbey play’s “beauty” and
“excellence of style” (“Advice to Playwrights” 349) through which Synge captures the beauty of
even polluted Irish reality found in the “fiery and magnificent” lyrical imaginations of the people
(“Preface” 454). Thus he combines art and reality in an effort to both provoke his audiences out
of complicity in polluting Ireland with bourgeois, Catholic modernism and to exalt the freedom
and magnificence of pure Irish speech (representing and transcending) – a combination that
proved volatile in their early Abbey performances. His dramatic concoctions resulted in performances that were anything but “outside all the political questions that divide [Ireland],” as the Abbey founders described future plays in their original proclamation (Gregory 402). Precisely because of the stir caused by Synge’s experimental plays, they acted powerfully as a necessary catalyst for a more lively debate on the national theatre and what role it should play in the dramatic world of Ireland. Synge would force his audiences to defend their views of the Abbey as either a home for censored, nationalist propaganda or as an unfettered, free space for the artist to express himself.

**In the Shadow of the Glen: Synge’s First Strike**

Critic Nicholas Grene writes that Synge’s first stage play, *The Shadow of the Glen*, was never surpassed in its “subtlety and depth” by even his later, more popular works (Grene 87). *Glen* was written in the summer of 1902, first staged on October 8, 1903, and brought back upon the stage on the second night of the Abbey’s opening run on December 28, 1904. On its most basic level, *Glen* is a “farcical comedy,” classified by Grene as “the comedy of the eavesdropper” (86). It tells the story of Daniel Burke, the eavesdropper, who pretends to be dead in order to listen in on Nora’s, his much younger wife, conversations during his supposed wake. By doing so he hopes to catch her in an incriminating act that will prove her unfaithfulness to him. The comedic template is simple and straightforward, but, Synge’s plays are never what they seem on the surface. Throughout *Glen* he has woven a strand of serious criticism focused on the “clash between sterile conformity and romantic freedom,” a social commentary for which the comedic elements present in the play are only a starting point. As in his plays to come, he sets up
this dynamic within the “conservatism of rural Irish society,” showcasing the failings of the Catholic bourgeoisie (Arrowsmith xvi).

In Glen, Synge focuses his critique on the plight of Irish women married via arranged marriages in rural communities. At the turn of the nineteenth century, sons of land owners could neither inherit nor marry until their fathers had died, leaving the young women of the community with few options other than to marry the much older men who had finally inherited from their fathers. Synge “presents Nora Burke’s experience as typical,” representing these marriages as lacking “love and satisfaction” and being “devoid of passion of any kind” (Arrowsmith xvi). Combining the reality of these marriages with the comedy of the eavesdropper, Synge transforms Dan “from the comic stereotype of the jealous husband into a very real and terrible old man” (Grene 82). Synge uses comedy and humor to create a striking, critical juxtaposition between the conditions onstage and the conditions in real life Ireland as they related to the debate over conformity and freedom, all the while implicating the audience members by virtue of their laughter or outrage. By putting Glen on the national stage at the Abbey, Synge not only extends the debate and concern over Ireland’s shortcomings to his audience but also to the nation at large, essentially declaring the choice between complicit conformity and lyrical freedom a national necessity.

The result of Synge’s combination of basic comedy and social critique in Glen is a complex drama with a provoking commentary on Irish life. Due to their provocative nature, it is unsurprising that Synge’s representations of Irish life in Glen were not accepted by all. The first performances of the play, in the Irish National Theatre Society’s pre-Abbey days in 1903, were preceded by the withdrawal of certain prominent actors and members. Actress Maire Nic Shiubhlcaigh, who first played Nora, describes how:
there was a division of opinion against it within the society.

Dudley Digges, our juvenile lead, was of the opinion that it was an unsuitable piece for us to play, and he was joined in this by some other members who said that they would be compelled to withdraw from the society if it was put on. As it had already been decided to produce the play, there was nothing to be done but let them go.

(Shiubhlaigh 24)

She goes on to say that the reaction of these society members was, to her surprise, echoed “on a larger scale by some sections of the public and the Press,” causing “an immense verbal furore” (25). Glen also received harsh criticisms during its run as part of the opening week of the Abbey Theatre. Those complaints came mainly from nationalists in the audience who saw it as a misrepresentation of Irish life, especially as a slander upon Irish womanhood. Murray writes, “Maud Gonne walked out of the opening performance and wrote against the play […] Arthur Griffith mounted a damaging attack” (Murray 74). Despite Synge’s themes of freedom and his attention to the hardships of Irish women, he somehow managed to deeply shock and offend some of Ireland’s most important national and cultural figures, kicking off a lively debate over the reality and representation of Ireland on the national stage that would culminate with the production of Playboy.

While the first runs of Glen were overshadowed by public criticism, the play itself operates under a metaphorical “shadow” of cruelty and societal convention, deepening Synge’s apparent intention to destabilize the audience’s sense of an idealized Irish rural society. Grene explains, “The glen is above all dominated by the ‘shadow’ which gives the play its title” (Grene 82). By use of symbolic reference to the shadow and its power and workings upon the
inhabitants of the glen, Synge clearly intended his audience to perceive that something was off-kilter within the small society he set up on stage. Dan’s “death,” the impetus of the play’s unfolding events, occurs, “the time the shadow was going up through the glen” (Glen 4). The shadow further acts as both a location and a force of nature. The Burke’s land is, as the title suggests, in the shadow of the glen, and the shadow evokes the isolation and loneliness characteristic of the location. When questioned by the Tramp regarding the lack of mourners at Dan’s wake, Nora defends herself saying that she is a “lone woman with no house near me” (5). Nora’s loneliness figures greatly throughout the play, affecting her thinking and behavior. When Shawn notes her strange manner of speech, claiming that she sounds like the men who have spent long days in the back hills, Nora responds that she, too, has been at the foot of the back hills a “long while […] sitting here in the winter and the summer, and the fine spring, with the young growing behind me and the old passing.” Nora’s extreme melancholy is the result of her long, lonesome hours spent in the shadow. She watches other women as they either bear children, like Mary Brien, or grow mad and old in their loneliness, like Peggy Cavanagh, all the while contemplating her own place in society – will she also become the childless, old madwoman, “sitting in a dirty old house, with no teeth in her mouth, and no sense” (11). Rather than bringing her children and security, Nora’s conformity to societal norms by marrying a much older man in order to secure herself shelter and food to eat in her own old age, only place her at a greater risk of being consumed by the shadow of lonely madness like Patch Darcy and Peggy Cavanagh.

Synge turns conventional esteem for marital fidelity on its head by engineering the circumstances surrounding Nora – the shadow of loneliness and a decrepit, old husband looming over her happiness – in such a way as to make her a sympathetic character despite her supposed
unfaithfulness to Dan. Showcasing her loneliness and isolation, Synge makes the point that the societal conventions of the morally conservative in Ireland create the very situations in which infidelity can occur. Although it is intentionally unclear whether or not Nora has actually been unfaithful to her husband, Dan is convinced of the fact, calling her a “bad wife for an old man” (Glen 8). When Michael also notices the “power of men” she seems to know for living in a lonely place, Nora defends her relationships with the men who pass by saying, “It’s a lonesome place you do have to be talking with someone” (10). And at the conclusion of the play, as Dan is throwing her out to walk the roads, she defends herself again with her loneliness by saying, “What way would a woman live in a lonesome place the like of this place, and she not making a talk with the men passing?” (15). Whereas she may or may not have been unfaithful to her husband, Nora’s desire to know other men is clear, but understandable. Rather than condemning her along with Dan, Synge is defending her by her own words and the hard situation of her life – a life towards which the audience is meant to be sympathetic. Rather than a man throwing out a “bad wife,” Synge gives us a cruel husband executing an overly harsh judgment upon the unfortunate, lonely Nora, imprisoned in a matrimonial shadow and desperate for human contact.

The shadow not only highlights Dan’s cruelty against his lonely wife, but Synge suggests that it may also be the generating force behind his suspicions of infidelity. Grene singles out Nora’s statement that Dan was “always […] thinking thoughts in the dark mists” (Glen 4) as evidence that the shadow is “if not the origin of Dan’s bitter obsessions, at least the condition congenial to their development” (Grene 84). Just as these conditions drive Nora to seek out other company, Dan’s own isolation drives him to his “bitter obsessions” regarding his wife. Synge uses the shadow to draw attention to Nora’s predicament, making the audience sympathetic towards her distress, while also turning them against Dan, who is steeped in the shadow of
cruelty. Dan is, in fact, a kind of shadow himself. In the context of the comedy of the
eavesdropper, the audience’s knowledge that Dan is aware and listening to everything as it
transpires upon stage creates as much a sense of impending doom as humor. Thus Synge creates
the dramatic tension between comedy and cruelty of which the audience is constantly aware.

Out of Dan’s cruelty in the play’s final moments, however, springs the hope of lyrical
freedom offered by the Tramp who represents both a physical and metaphorical escape from the
shadow. Murray writes that Synge considers the Tramp to be an “artist figure” (Murray 76),
quoting from Synge’s essay, “The Vagrants of Wicklow”: “In all the circumstances of this tramp
life there is a certain wildness that gives it romance and peculiar value for those who look at life
in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the art also” (“The Vagrants of Wicklow” qtd. in Murray
76). Murray notes that the Tramp and Nora share many similarities, including a “poetic
awareness” of the glen’s loneliness and a mutual admiration for Patch Darcy (Murray 76). This
sense of commonality between the two is touched on early in the play when the Tramp wonders
at Nora’s lack of fear for him, to which she responds, “It’s other things than the like of you,
would make a person afeared.” The Tramp in turn heartily agrees with Nora, showing their
shared sense of caution by saying, “It is surely, God help us all!” (Glen 5). Just as the audience is
meant to feel sympathy towards Nora, the Tramp, too, empathizes with Nora, even to the point of
standing up for her in the face of her enraged husband. As Dan doles out his cruel sentence upon
her, that she must travel “lonesome roads […] hiding herself away till the end will come,” the
Tramp accosts him by declaring, “It’s a hard thing you’re saying for an old man, master of the
house; and what would the like of her do if you put her out on the road?” (Glen 13) He goes even
further (in sharp contrast to the timid Michael Dara) to offer Nora both his encouragement and
his company. The Tramp offers her his knowledge of life on the roads, as well as the promise of
a more beautiful life, saying, “You’ll not be getting your death with myself, lady of the house
[… ] you’ll not be sitting up on a wet ditch, the way you’re after sitting in this place […].” He
goes on to describe how, rather than hearing Dan “wheezing the like of a sick sheep, close to
your ear,” Nora will be “hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you’ll be hearing
the grouse and the owls with them […] it’s fine songs you’ll be hearing when the sun goes up”
(14). Synge employs beautiful and evocative lyricism, combined with natural images, to describe
Nora’s future. Arrowsmith writes, “Synge identifies the itinerant life of tramps […] with poetry
and with freedom” (Arrwosmith xvi). While the Tramp is assuring her that “It’s a wild night,
God help us; but it’ll pass surely” (Glen 14), he is also offering her a life full of bird songs and
warm winds, a life liberated from the shadow of an old husband and a loveless, lonely marriage,
shut up in the back hills. As Yeats stressed the primacy of spoken language on stage, calling for
it to be set apart from any distractions, Synge privileges lyricism and language in his own plays
both through the beauty of the actual speech and the freedom offered through lyrical characters.

When Nora steps out of the door at the end of the play, she is stepping out from under the
weight of societal convention that had resigned her to a lonely life, threatened by the shadow of
barren madness. Nora’s journey from sterile conformity to romantic freedom can be seen,
through the lens of Synge’s critique of Irishness, as his intended path for Ireland as a nation.
Long under the sterile oppression of Catholic convention, he urges the audience to give
themselves over to the road – to engage with their land’s naturalism and lyricism, to embrace a
sense of Irishness freed from lonely isolation. Arrowsmith explains:

The tramp’s connection with nature is an indication of vitality and
fertility that is so lacking at home and, Synge suggests, in Catholic
society. And Nora’s position seems to be presented to the audience
as Ireland’s: the possibility of romantic liberty exists, but can only be accessed by rejecting conventional society. (Arrowsmith xvi)

By being forced to reject the conventional marriage to her husband, Nora is able to take the Tramp’s offer of a romantic, lyrical life on the road – a choice that Synge wishes his audience to also make. Nora represents the possible transcendence to liberty upon the national stage that the founders and Synge hoped to inspire for all Ireland. He sets up a sympathetic dynamic between Nora and the audience that should create an affirmative reaction to her rejection of convention in the name of “romantic liberty,” but the reactions of Synge’s first audiences were a far cry from sympathetic. Synge wants us to see Dan as the cruel villain of the comedy whose joke turns both to tragedy and opportunity for Nora. The Tramp is then made admirable as he “clears a way for a new life with Nora” (Murray 76) – a new life that is to be celebrated in its romanticism and its freedom. On almost every account, however, certain members of the Abbey audience reacted exactly opposite of what Synge had hoped for. Rather than shocking them out of their complicity in the sterile world of Catholic, bourgeois convention, they rose up passionately to defend it. In their outrage, they seemed to support the very pollution that Synge hoped to inspire them to condemn, thereby rejecting all his offers of transcendent liberation.

Irish womanhood, in particular, became a focal point of audience reactions to Glen. This was nothing new to the Abbey, where Yeats’ The Countess Cathleen drew similar complaints, and the situation was the same with Glen as it “elicited jeers,” and, as earlier mentioned, even caused Maud Gonne to exit the theatre due to what she “perceived as the play’s slurs on Irish women” (Reynolds 466). As the authenticity of Synge’s representations came under attack, the debate was brought back to both Synge’s own Irishness and his right to represent it on the stage. Many considered Synge and his material to be completely lacking in real “Irishness.” In quick
response to *Glen*, Arthur Griffith published a piece called “In a Real Wicklow Glen” that was meant to be an authentic response to Synge’s spurious representations. This piece portrayed Nora (renamed “Norah”) as “happy and content to do her duty as a good Catholic wife” (Arrowsmith xvii). Griffith explained his response by writing, “Men and women in Ireland marry lacking love, and live mostly in a dull level of amity. Sometimes they do not – sometimes the woman lives in bitterness – sometimes she dies of a broken heart – but she does not go away with the tramp” (Griffith qtd. in Arrowsmith xvii). Griffith’s statement assumes that Synge’s representation of Nora as a generalized Irishwoman suffering from a bad marriage who is eventually forced to run off with a tramp is completely inauthentic. Ironically, however, he nods to one of the main issues in conventional Irish society that Synge set out to create awareness of – the practices of matrimony and inheritance that created the loveless marriage in the first place. Rather than acknowledging that Synge was accurate on some accounts (that some women in Ireland do, indeed, “marry lacking love, and live mostly in a dull level of amity,” suffering “bitterness” and “a broken heart”), Griffith focuses on what he believes to be the preposterous and impossible assertion that an Irish woman would ever leave her husband – a husband who is, in fact, forcing her out – with a tramp, in this case the only man present who offers her a helping hand.

Synge, adhering to his belief that theatre should contain some reality, defended himself by relaying the story that inspired him to write *Glen*, told him by Pat Dirane and recorded in *The Aran Islands*. In the original, the husband pretends to be dead long enough for his wife to take her lover into another room. Then, finding them asleep in each other’s arms, the husband kills them both (Murray 75). Actor and producer William Fay recalls that he and Synge “afterwards discovered three other versions of [the story] in different parts of the country,” which may call the actual authenticity of the original source into question (Fay 28). However, the repetition of
this story throughout Ireland shows that it was, in any case, an authentic piece of the folklore and cultural heritage of the people. Furthermore, the original story is far more violent and incriminating than Synge’s reproduction in Glen. While the wife in the original does not run off with a tramp, she is clearly unfaithful to her husband – a fact that is intentionally left ambiguous in Glen. Additionally, the actual husband’s violence and brutality is even more shocking than Dan’s fictionalized reaction. According to Diran, “the dead man got up, and he took one stick […] we saw them lying together with her head on his arm. The dead man hit him a blow with a stick so that the blood out of him leapt up and hit the gallery” (The Aran Islands qtd. in Murray 75). This bloody scene is both final and resolute, but in Glen, Synge allows Nora to be both more sympathetic and grants her more opportunity for romantic freedom than was offered to the wife in the original story. As such, he makes Irish life seem, perhaps, less polluted than it is, granting Irish women more agency and innocence. Despite Griffith’s claims about the “duty” of “good Catholic” wives, the real Ireland, or at least the Ireland of her folk-imagination (as seen in Diran’s story), is far more disturbing than what was shown on stage at the Abbey.

The response of the Catholic nationalists in the audience at the Abbey seemed to stem in part from mixed opinions as to what was authentic Irishness – a debate that seems very appropriate in Ireland’s intended “national theatre” – but also from a surprising denial of reality. Some, like Griffith, refused to see Ireland, especially Irish womanhood, cast in a poor, if realistic light, and therefore overreacted against even the redeeming qualities and sympathies that Synge had hoped to arouse in his audience for the plight of Irish women. Rather than a story of Irish women finding their freedom from arranged marriages with much older men (who caused them to be isolated from the world and held within a shadow) the Catholic nationalists perceived only slanders and threats to the same sterile, societal conventions from which Synge hoped to break
them free. The story of Nora was intended as a story of freedom for Ireland from the powers of stifling convention. Far from being a slander on Irish womanhood, it was a condemnation of husbands and land practices that oppress Irish romantic freedom – points that the Catholic nationalists who brought complaints against the play completely failed to see, or, as in the case of Griffith, saw but chose to ignore. Shiubhlaigh accounts for the public response by explaining that Synge was simply ahead of his time, a “genius” who had written a play that was “sufficiently in advance of its time to arouse in Dublin audiences a completely unfounded indignation” (Shiubhlaigh 23). Fay is less gracious, saying that, “Instead of being convulsed with laughter at the stark comedy of *In the Shadow of the Glen* they were convulsed with what Oscar Wilde calls ‘the rage of Caliban at seeing his own face in the glass,’” a sentiment echoed by some commentaries on the reaction of Irish audiences to *Playboy*, which will be explored in the next section (Fay 28). In either case, the audience’s inability to see *Glen* as a story of liberation through the beauty of lyrical poetry was, in fact, a favoring of censorship in order to preserve a set of ideals that the audience felt had been threatened. Rather than acknowledging the possible existence of representations they did not particularly like, some audience members called for the silencing of the author and his work. The Abbey founders, however, would not give in to such demands, and allowed Synge to continue to experiment and express his vision of Ireland in their theatre, an allowance that would sink the Abbey deeper into the debate over her validity as a national theatre.

Distraught and frustrated, Synge vowed to do better in his next play. When *The Well of Saints* was met with similar disapproval from Catholic nationalists in 1905, Synge was once again exasperated by what he called the audience’s “crass ignorance, fatuity and malevolence” (Synge qtd. in Arrowsmith xviii). Fay explained, “[Synge] had given of his best in good faith and
offence had been taken where no offence had been intended. ‘Very well, then,’ [Synge] said to me bitterly one night, ‘the next play I write I will make sure will annoy them.’ And he did” (Fay qtd. in Arrowsmith xviii). Synge’s frustrations would culminate themselves in his most infamous work, *The Playboy of the Western World*, but they would also further the necessary debate of the national theatre. If the Abbey audiences thought they had seen Synge’s critique of society in full swing, they were about to discover that they had only whiffed the smoke of a much larger fire.

Fay commented, “*In the Shadow of the Glen* provoked a hurricane of abuse which, bad as it was, was no more than a foretaste of what was in store […] and was to attain the most extravagant heights of foolishness and violence with the production of *The Playboy of the Western World*” (Fay 28).

The riots that were about to be inspired at the Abbey by the production of *Playboy* would be forever remembered for their passion and scale, immortalizing Synge’s role in both the definition of the Abbey Theatre and the Irish literary canon as a playwright of conflict and controversy.

**The Playboy of the Western World: A Shift in the Theatre**

*The Playboy of the Western World* was first staged at the Abbey on January 26, 1907, and has since become Synge’s most well-known play – an anchor in the history of Irish dramatic literature by virtue of its lyrical and comedic structure. In its first run, however, *Playboy*’s brilliance was “overshadowed by the audience’s outrage” (Arrowsmith vii). Given Synge’s resolution to annoy the audience, this is hardly surprising. Murray even describes *Playboy* as “Synge’s revenge against those who queried his credentials as an Irish playwright and author of *The Shadow of the Glen*” (Murray 81). This time around, some say that Synge even showed “delight in the audience’s strong reaction” against the play (Arrowsmith xix). In the many
similarities that they share, Synge very much wrote *Playboy* to follow on the heels of *Glen*, except this time his intent was deliberate and extreme provocation. Again we find a play that begins with a woman left alone in the dark night (Pegeen), her lack-luster suitor (Shawn), and the mysterious tramp with an incredible gift of lyrical language (Christy), but this time Synge takes his play to even greater extremes. Rather than focus on the sympathetic side of a lonely woman trapped in a loveless marriage, he shows us a rural community that revels in murder, glorifies the grotesque, and that will turn on their heroes at the drop of a hat (or a loy as it may be).

*Playboy* is not, in its rural atmosphere and focus on provincial life, the first peasant drama of its kind. Arrowsmith explains, “In 1901, the ground rules for the ‘peasant dramas’ so beloved of the Abbey audience had been set by Douglas Hyde’s play *Casadh an tSugáin.*” Hyde tells the story of stranger who arrives in a strong, Catholic rural community that pulls together in order to waylay the threat the stranger poses to the marriage between two of their respectable young people. The play is a celebration of the “unity and moral strength of a typical Irish rural community,” and sets up a utopic image of Catholic society in an Ireland protecting herself from outside threats (Arrowsmith xviii). Synge’s play, on the other hand parodies each aspect of the “typical Irish rural community” that the Abbey audiences loved. He snaps the audiences to attention as he “parades the grotesque qualities of the Mayo peasants” across the stage (Murray 83), and calls into question the reality of a utopic, Catholic Ireland.

Far from seeking to protect themselves from the outsider, Synge’s characters embrace the murderous fugitive, Christy. Morash describes that, “everyone on stage seemed to be uncommonly pleased with the killing, welcoming the self proclaimed murderer” (Morash 131). Rather than protecting themselves from the dangerous outsider, the characters in *Playboy* welcome him with open arms. And rather than protect the young woman of the story from the
stranger in order to preserve her intended marriage, her father leaves her in the stranger’s care.

After Michael James hires Christy as pot-boy, offering him “good wages,” the father’s friend Jimmy says of Pegeen, “herself will be safe this night, with a man killed his father holding danger from the door” (*Playboy* 78–79). The people of Mayo not only revel in Christy’s patricide, but they give him a job and leave him alone with one of Mayo’s most eligible young women. Christy is no fool when he remarks, “Well, it’s a clean bed and soft with it, and it’s great luck and company I’ve won me in the end of time […] till I’m thinking this night wasn’t I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by” (86). The delight shown towards Christy as a murderer is heightened with the arrival of a group of young girls the morning after he arrives. While Christy is out of the room, one of the girls, Sarah, asks another, Susan – who is inspecting Christy’s boots – “Did you never read in the papers the way murdered men do bleed and drip?” to which Susan replies excitedly, “Is that blood there, Sarah Tansey?” pointing to Christy’s boot (88). To their disappointment the “blood” is only bog water, much like Christy’s story about killing his father, but Synge is making it clear to the audience that these young, Irish girls are anything but pure and innocent residents of a utopian society as they take a twisted pleasure in imagining a dead man bleeding and dripping. Not only do they practically swoon over the murder story saying, “That’s a grand story […]you’re a marvel! Oh, God bless you!” (91), but they shower Christy with gifts, bringing him eggs, butter, cake, and a pullet, the breast of which the supposedly virtuous young girls provocatively tempt Christy to pinch.

The parade of the grotesque continues when Old Mahon enters in Act Two, bloodied and bandaged. The Widow Quin greets him in the shebeen, and the stage directions read: “he takes off a big hat, and shows his head in a mass of bandages and plaster, with some pride […] [Widow Quin taking] his head in both hands and examining it with extreme delight” (*Playboy* 79).
Again the idealization of the wizened old widow is thrown off-kilter by her delight in the gruesome and grotesque. Widow Quin, furthermore, is a murderer herself who, “hit [her husband] with a worn pick, and the rusted poison did corrode his blood the way he never overed it, and died after. That was a sneaky kind of murder did win small glory with the boys itself” (84). The Widow Quin and Christy are, indeed grouped together throughout the play as honored murderers; Sarah calls both of them “heroes, surely” (91). Old Mahon is an object of grotesque admiration, and Christy and Widow Quin are glorified for their murders as the locals delight in their misdeeds.

Synge’s parody continues in full, violent swing, gathering momentum through the beginning of Act Three. About mid-way through the final act, Christy is carried into the shebeen on the shoulders of the villagers, more a hero than ever for having won all the village games. Just as the girls presented him with gifts at the beginning of the play, the town showers gifts upon him for winning the sports declaring, “Here’s his prizes!” Although these are won by virtue of his actual athletic skill, Christy insists that they would think his real feats “only little” had they seen him “striking my one single blow” – a story that the audiences, and Christy himself, are now aware is, if not completely false, highly exaggerated (Playboy 110). Yet Synge allows Christy’s euphoria to continue a little longer, just long enough to woo Pegeen, his ultimate prize. This he does with his lyrical prowess, telling her “it’s then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night, the times sweet smells do be rising […] with yourself stretched back onto your necklace, in the flowers of the earth” (110-111). Christy’s poetic power works on Pegeen as she muses, “any girl would walk her heart out before she’d meet a young man was your like for eloquence, or talk” (110). As we saw in Glen, Christy is the lyrical stranger offering Pegeen a life full of romantic, poetic beauty. Like Nora and the Tramp, they bond over
their shared loneliness. Both were raised only by their fathers, and they each resonate with Christy’s statement when he says, “I wish to God I was letting on; but I was lonesome all times” (94). Christy offers her a new life. Instead of being shut up in the shebeen long, lonely nights, he tells her how they will be out together “coining funny nicknames for the stars of night,” (111). They intend to live a new life of poetry and nature together, speaking eloquent words under the stars. Christy offers, through his lyrical expression (much like the Tramp in Glen), a poetic transcendence from her lonely life selling poteen in her father’s shebeen. While Hyde protected the young woman of the village from the outsider, Synge gives her whole heartedly to Christy, along with her father’s blessing, in an offer of transcendence via lyricism. Unlike Glen, where the transcendence offered Nora seems more made up of honest than fancy words, the parody is maintained throughout this sequence in Playboy by virtue of the audience’s knowledge that Christy, despite his lyrical prowess and offer of transcendence is much less than the hero he seems to be.

Pegeen’s temporary, if futile, hope for transcendence makes what happens next even more striking as the story takes a sharp, and dark, turn within its parodic structures. The people of Mayo who had shown little care for protecting their village from the outsider as Hyde had portrayed in his play, suddenly care deeply when Christy’s violence comes upon their own soil, implicating them in his murderous deeds. Their response shows that it is little more than self-interest in entertainment and self-preservation that motivates them to accept Christy into their community. Rather than seeing the town come gradually to their Hyde-like senses, they are made even less utopic by the sudden violence of their turn against Christy. The turning of the tide begins when the town discovers that Christy has, in fact, not killed his father. In outrage the crowd cries, “You’re a liar!” (Playboy 115). Pegeen, who has just promised herself to him in
marriage, laments, “And to think of the coaxing glory we had given him, and he after doing
nothing but hitting a soft blow and chasing northward in a sweat of fear,” before she tells him to
“Quit off from this” (116). It seems that Christy’s greater sin was not patricide, but telling a tall
tale – a tale that the town had been so enraptured with but, upon discovering it to be untrue, is
severely disappointed.

This disappointment becomes the environment in which Synge sets up the warped morals
of the Catholic town. Christy first seeks to retrieve his reputation by pointing out his good deeds
to the crowd, saying, “I’m after hearing my voice this day saying words would raise the topknot
on a poet in a merchant’s town. I’ve won your racing, and your lepping” (Playboy 117), but
when this is to no avail, he attempts to murder his father once again. Rather than restoring his
credibility as a patricidal murderer, this second act of violence only condemns him more in the
eyes of the crowd. While it was fine for him to have killed his father elsewhere, attempting the
same act on their home turf does not sit well. Only now, under threat of being legally implicated
in his crime, do the people begin to “protect” themselves against Christy. After a change of heart
Michael James says to Christy, “If we took pity on you, the Lord God would, maybe, bring us
ruin from the law today, so you’d best come easy, for hanging is an easy and a speedy end,”
echoing perhaps the expectations of many audience members at the drama’s outset. Pegeen is
more telling of the town’s motivations when she adds, “Take him on from this, or the lot of us
will be likely put on trial for his deed today” (119). The same town that had praised and honored
Christy, giving him gifts for his bravery and good deeds, is ready to lynch him in a matter of
minutes. As soon as he no longer serves their purposes of grotesque entertainment and becomes a
threat to their own legal safety, they have no use for him. Synge, therefore, makes the people in
his Mayo village even more disgraceful, separating them a greater distance from the ideals of Catholic nationalists and previous peasant dramas.

Synge, however, does not leave the audience (if they hear him out to the end) with the grotesque self-interest of the villagers, but offers up his same note of freedom. The follies of the townspeople – the conventional, Catholic society – are tools by which Synge reveals the necessity for Ireland to break away from the sensation-indulging, greed-causing conventions of sterility and self-interest. Of the characters in the play, three are recipients of freedom: Christy, Old Mahon, and Pegeen. Christy and Old Mahon’s freedom is expressed as they make their final exit. Old Mahon declares, “my son and myself will be going our own way, and we’ll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo, and the fools is here.” Their freedom is in the story they have been given. In a culture that values and honors a well told story, as the story of Christy was initially honored, they will have no trouble finding shelter and a good meal with the story of Mayo’s treachery. Father and son are free to roam, like Synge’s artist-poet Tramp in *Glen* – a sharp contrast to their hard laboring lives before their encounter in Mayo. Again we see the primacy of lyricism as a means of freedom for the characters and the stage. Pegeen’s freedom is won less victoriously. Synge writes in his final stage directions that she breaks “*into wild lamentations*,” mourning her loss of “the only Playboy of the Western World.” Pegeen’s lamentation, however, follows her rejection of Shawn, telling him to “Quit my sight” (*Playboy* 121). Although she does not get her Playboy, she also refuses to comply with the village’s convention of becoming a “good Catholic wife.” Earlier in the play, with Christy to compare him to, Pegeen says of Shawn, “Wouldn’t it be a bitter thing for a girl to go marrying the like of Shaneen, and he a middling kind of scarecrow, with no savagery or fine words in him
at all?” (113). She has seen the world in a different light, and by merit of her lyrical infatuation with Christy has won a bitter freedom from the stifling forces of catholic convention.

Synge’s message of freedom in *Playboy* is only reached in the final moments of the play, but in its first performances at the Abbey, the din of rioters made it impossible to hear at all. Joseph Holloway wrote in his journal from *Playboy*’s first performance at the Abbey that, following some distasteful comments from Christy on stage, the house was set “off into hooting and hissing amid counter applause, and the din was kept up till the curtain closed in.” (Holloway 457). Lady Gregory sent two telegrams to Yeats, who was lecturing in Aberdeen that evening, which were very telling of how the events unfolded. The first telegram, sent after Act I, stated simply, “Play great success.” The second, sent after the conclusion of the production, read, “Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift” (Gregory qtd. in Morash 131-132). Joseph Holloway, Dublin theatre enthusiast, recalls running into Lady Gregory after the play, at which point she asked him, “What was the cause of the disturbance?” to which he responded, “Blackgaurdism!” Gregory followed up by asking, “On which side?” Holloway’s brief retort was, “The stage!” (Holloway 457). On the surface, it appears that the audience was outraged at the invocation of women’s undergarments, but the dynamic of audience discomfort ran much deeper in Synge’s provocative *Playboy*. Synge crafted his play in such a way that it would build in momentum, becoming more outrageous and provoking in each act, culminating at an intersection of parody and realism that proved too much for the initial audiences to handle.

Three shocking events transpire in quick succession during Act Three that pushed the Abbey audience over the edge: the appearance of Old Mahon, the mention of the word “shift,” and the physical presence of a woman’s petticoats. Each of these events would have been offensive to the sentimentalities of certain audience members on their own, but when the three of
them occurred together they worked off of each other in a powerful way. When Old Mahon appears, and later when Christy attacks him for a second time, critic Ben Levitas explains that the “allegorical possibilities are narrowed, and a generalized violence is forced into specific form, with identifiable victims and known localities” (Levitas 469). The humor involved in the town’s glorification of Christy as murderer is snapped into sharp focus when his victim actually appears, and even more so when Christy tries to carry out the dirty deed a second time. There is a certain amount of comedy tied up in the vague, imaginative aspects of the town’s fascination over Christy that is lost when his victim becomes real and present. The audience, along with the members of the Mayo community, discover that, as Pegeen put it, “there’s a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed” (Playboy 119). Then, when the audience’s nerves are already on edge, Synge throws in not only the word “shift,” but the appearance of a lady’s undergarment. After the second blow of the loy, Widow Quin and Sara urge Christy to make an escape, to which he responds, “It’s Pegeen I’m seeking only, and what’d I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself” (118). In a fateful decision by Fay, who was playing Christy, he switched “chosen females” to “Mayo girls,” “making the insult even worse by making it more specific” (Morash 132). As the appearance of Old Mahon made Christy’s act all the worse by presenting it physically to the audience, Fay’s quick switch made the mention of women’s undergarments all the more incendiary in its specificity. Women in undergarments is bad enough, Irish women is inexcusable. Synge goes on to be even more specific by writing in his stage directions that Sara “runs in, pulling off one of her petticoats,” which she then attempts to fit over Christy (Playboy 118). Here we find another physical representation, this time of the woman’s undergarment, furthermore, a woman’s undergarment being put on a man – a scene that must have been jarring to conservative audience members sensitive to established gender roles.
Murder and indecency became all too real, and the Abbey audience erupted into vocal dissent. What started as a light-hearted parody became what was perceived by many in the audience as a pointed insult against Ireland and her people, shedding shame upon her impropriety and immorality. The representations on stage suddenly became so jarringly real that one audience member was compelled to stand up and declare, “This is not Irish life!” (Holloway 457).

Critics have theorized that the reason the sudden specificity of murder and undergarments caused a shift in audience reception was due to the disappearance of the fourth wall between the audience and the stage. In order for the comedy in Playboy to have been maintained, the division between reality and representation – between the real lives of the audience members and the fictitious lives played out onstage – must remain intact. Murray explains, “The joke of having an anti-heroic parricide welcomed and lauded by a village community depends firmly on the fourth-wall convention in the theatre” (Murray 85). This distance, however, was not maintained, and the illusion of comedy was lost. This, of course, did not occur without Synge’s own influence. Paige Reynolds writes in her essay, “The First Playboy”, that, “The first production of Playboy, it appears, actually encouraged the audience to confuse the real world and the fictive world” (Reynolds 467). Synge’s piling of graphic, specific detail that he knew would tread upon the toes of his conservative Catholic audience is a testament to his intentionality, supporting his comments regarding Playboy as revenge for the critical reactions he received after Glen. Synge’s use of language also added to the conflation of reality and representation. As previously mentioned, he always maintained that in writing his plays he “used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland” (“Preface” 453), and The Irish Times also acknowledged Synge’s “‘remorseless truth’ in characterization and its uncannily accurate duplication of peasant speech,” while pointing out that some in Dublin would not approve –
despite the accuracy of representation. Reynolds goes on to write, “The realism of the production encouraged its audience to ignore the fourth wall, and believe they could somehow alter the course of events on stage” (Reynolds 467).

The dynamic of a conflated audience and stage became humorously apparent when, on Wednesday night’s production, Philly spoke his line, “I’m thinking we’ll have right sport before night will fall” (Playboy 109). Although he was referring to the events about to take place on stage, the Abbey audience, now mid-way through the week of protests and accustomed to outbreaks of everything from fits of coughing and bugles blowing to the musicians striking up lively tunes to accompany the arrests of belligerents and choruses of “God Save Ireland” competing with “God Save the King”, erupted in an “outburst of hearty laughter” (Reynolds 467). The audience’s complaints against the play, actions to protest it, and disagreements amongst themselves – specifically between the pit and the stalls – became as much a part of the nightly production as the play itself. A satirical account of the riots entitled, The Abbey Row, eloquently stated, “The stage became spectators […] And the audience were players. Whether the play was good or bad,/ It really didn’t matter” (The Abbey Row qtd. in Morash 138). By combining realistic speech and specific, physical detail in Playboy, Synge created the perfect storm for the theatre riots that transpired. Levitas comments, “Provoking the riot, Synge’s incitement brings his audience into the play, completing the explosive action by engaging his public in a common manifestation of staged ideas” (Levitas 471). The audience was forced into a spectator’s drama that would determine what role censorship would have in deciding what was considered a valid or an invalid representation of Ireland on the Abbey stage. The idealized notions that the Mayo townspeople held about Christy must culminate in an encounter with the reality of his deeds just as the audience’s idealized assumptions about Irish peasant dramas
clashed with Synge’s comedy of loose morals and grotesque glorification – a discord that created a series of events that, in the context of the Abbey, “further enlarged as a dynamic between play and spectators [enjoining] all participants in an expanding drama of censorship” (472). *Playboy*, as a culmination of what Synge started in *Glen*, helped fuel a necessary and lively debate about the Abbey as a national theatre.

**Synge’s Contribution to Ireland’s National Theatre: An Experimental Success**

Coming upon the stage in the early years of the Abbey, Synge’s plays *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World* inspired formative debates that would help determine how much freedom Abbey artists would have to express their own visions of Ireland. He included in his plays the three elements essential in Abbey productions: he represented Irish life according to his own experience and through his own, unbound artistic vision, portrayed beauty and truth through liberating lyricism, and inspired a give-and-take relationship between his plays and the audiences they presumed to represent. By transcending his lyrical visions of Ireland, he offered up a choice for his characters and audiences alike. Murray writes that, “In [Synge’s] plays there is always a choice to be made” (Murray 17). The choice presented to the audience is the same faced by Synge’s protagonists: a life of sterile conformity under secure, Catholic societal norms (i.e. censorship), or the liberation of Ireland’s people through the artistic freedom of the artists. This debate roughly split the audience into two groups of people: the Catholic Nationalists seated in the pit and members of the Protestant Ascendancy seated in the stalls. While the Catholics stood up to defend their conventional ideals by attempting to silence anything that threatened the societal structures, the Protestants advocated for individual freedoms – essentially choosing whether conformity or individuality would better serve the national goals.
of autonomy. But even before one or the other could make their choice, many felt the need to establish whose responsibility it was to answer such questions in the first place. Although both had legitimate claims to their own Irishness, they often clashed over which path they perceived as the right one for their nation, ultimately questioning whose sense of Irishness was superior. Arrowsmith explains, “The argument became one about who counted as properly Irish and therefore, had the right to represent Ireland and Irishness.” He goes on to point out that these debates were often steeped in politics, writing, “Playboy seemed to some a perfect opportunity for political point scoring” (Arrowsmith viii). Synge’s choice between convention and freedom tapped into the tension that already existed between these two groups over conservative Catholic societal norms and the progressive, art-for-art’s-sake values of the Protestants and upper-classes.

It is important to note at this point that, shortly before Playboy was staged at the Abbey, the sixpence seats that were originally excluded from the theatre were reinstated, creating an even wider gap in the Abbey’s divided audience. This change was announced in an issue of the Abbey’s journal, The Arrow, establishing “Sixpenny Seats in a part of the Pit” (The Arrow qtd. in Morash 131). The establishment of the sixpenny seats created the opportunity for an even wider audience to attend Abbey performances, a condition that created an even more volatile atmosphere as it exacerbated the tensions between the upper/middle classes and the working class of Ireland as they struggled to make the choice between convention and artistic liberation. Morash writes that the Abbey, “with its stern warnings against late-comers rattling the stall doors,” was attempting to create an audience “more in line with upper-middle-class notions of decorum” (Morash 137). These new standards inherently denied and excluded Irish people who did not comply with them, disregarding the Dublin theatre scene’s long standing traditions of interactive audience behavior. Despite Yeats’ attempts to create stricter codes of audience
behavior as described by Morash and elaborated upon in the first part of this thesis, the establishment of sixpenny seats in the pit opened the Abbey to audiences further removed from the “upper-middle-class,” meaning that an even wider range of Irish opinions were present on the nights of the *Playboy* performances, as well as a greater diversity in what was perceived as acceptable audience behavior. The availability of sixpenny seats opened the Abbey doors to Dublin’s more riotous audiences. Those who purchased the sixpenny seats were accustomed to a tradition of vocal response to the on-stage action – and incidentally dissolving the fourth wall – quite contrary to Yeats and Gregory’s aspirations for an audience “trained to listen” (Gregory 402). The degree of difference between the pit and the stalls was thus widened at one of the most crucial moments in the Abbey Theatre’s history of controversy. Synge’s dramas not only masterfully involved the audience through their provocative combination of comedy and specific, realistic detail, but also brought together these two clashing forces as they both tried to define what a proper representation of Irishness should be. Arrowsmith explains, “an essential element of [Synge’s play’s] complexity lies in their dramatisation of Revival Ireland’s ‘battle of two civilisations’” (Arrowsmith xix). The question was which “civilization” would have the right to determine what material was appropriate for the National Theatre Society at the Abbey.

The debate that followed the Abbey’s first run of *Playboy* was considered by Yeats and Gregory as not only an overdue necessity, but also a chance to make a name for the Abbey as a haven for the artistic freedoms of Ireland’s artists. Lady Gregory noted during *Playboy*’s closed rehearsals, “I feel we are beginning the fight of our lives, and we must make no mistakes” (Gregory qtd. in Morash 130). As a result of the riots, Yeats organized a debate over the national theatre, and he began his opening speech by commenting, “The struggle of last week has been long a necessity” (“The Controversy” 463). Gregory and Yeats both felt that *Playboy* and the
riots it inspired were essential to defining the Abbey’s mission as both a national theatre and a landmark of art and freedom in Ireland’s literary circles. Indeed, in the midst of the struggles, opinions varied as to the effect the disruptions would have on the Abbey’s future. Holloway wrote in his journal from that week that supporters of Synge were “hopeful that the success of scandal would be the making of the theatre,” but added that he thought, “As an Irish Theatre, the Abbey’s knell is rung” (Holloway 461). Either the Abbey would be abandoned by Ireland’s Nationalists as a place of corrupt morals and anti-Irish sentiments, or it would be bolstered by the newly inspired support of those who believed that the greatest thing a national theatre could do for Ireland was to give her exceptional artists a free space to express themselves. Although history has proven Synge’s supporters correct in their hopes for success, the varying opinions in the debates that started slowly with *Glen* and raged during *Playboy* were well represented by both sides.

Yeats was quite blunt in his low opinion of those who protested the play, but critics and historians have noted that the Catholic dissenters were, in many ways, just in their expectations of their national theatre. Yeats called the *Playboy* Riots an “annihilation of civil rights […] never anything but an increase of Irish disorder” (“The Controversy” 463), but Reynolds insists that the audiences were not the “unenlightened philistines who failed to recognize Synge’s genius,” that they were often made out to be. It was the Abbey associates, on the other hand, who refused to acknowledge a well-established trait of Dublin audiences who had been engaging “directly with the stage for centuries” (Reynolds 466). The behavior of the audience members in the pit, and the response of those in the stalls, was nothing uncommon or surprising in the Dublin theatre world. As Holloway stated, “[The audience] frankly did not like the play and frankly expressed itself on the matter, having patiently listened to it until the fatal phrase came and proved the last straw”
In his opinion, and in accordance with Dublin tradition, the audience had every right to vocally object to a play they disliked. Dublin law affirmed Holloway when Justice Wall ruled during the trials of arrested rioters following the *Playboy Riots* (based on a precedent set during the Bottle Riot which occurred 84 years prior) that, “[Audience members] might cry down a play which they disliked” (Wall qtd. in Morash 137). It would seem that in a national theatre, a theatre dedicated to representing Irishness on stage, that, if the Irish audiences did not approve of the image they perceived, they had every right to protest against it. Simply put, “The Abbey, which professed to be a national theatre, had offered its public an offensive and unflattering picture of Irish peasant life, rather than the affirmative depiction of national folk culture” (Reynolds 465). Morash further explains:

> …the *Playboy* riots had offended against an imaginative geography, which idealized the western seaboard (the part of the country most remote from English influence) as the home both of what Synge had called ‘Cuchulainoid’ heroics, and of an equally sentimentalized notion of Irish femininity. These were, of course, political issues, manifestations of divergent understandings of nationality separating the lower-middle-class, predominantly Catholic nationalists, audience who sang ‘God Save Ireland’ in the sixpenny pit, from the upper-middle class, predominantly unionist, audience who sang ‘God Save the King’ in the three-shilling stalls.

(Morash 136-137)

The Catholic audiences approved of plays such as Hyde’s peasant drama that showed an idealized, utopic rural community, but disapproved of Synge’s parody. Some in the audience
expected the national theatre of Ireland to build up their sense of positive nationhood, preserving and glorifying their most appealing attributes, but were instead met with pointed criticisms of the very communities they idealized, the result of which was a legal assertion of their traditional rights to cry down the play.

While the pit audiences were protesting the play because they did not approve of it, other members of the audience were defending the actors’ and author’s right to experiment, as well as their own right to hear the play free of disruption. While the Catholic, bourgeoisie were crying for the censorship of Synge’s plays, members of Dublin’s upper classes seated in the stalls, such as Lord Walter Fitzgerald, were declaring the right of the actors to be heard (Morash 133). The Catholics were focusing on an idealized sense of Ireland that they perceived as being slandered on the stage, while the Protestants upheld the rights of the writer and actors to be heard. The question is then, should the Irish stage portray representations as the author or the audience perceives them to be? And if one group does not agree with the representation, do they then have the right to usurp the rights of the audience members who wish to hear the play? How can a common transcendent sense of shared nationhood be settled upon in the midst of heated dissention and controversy? While the members of the Anglo-upper-classes in the stalls did not approve of the theatre etiquette of those sitting in the pit, it was equally objectionable to those who disapproved of the play that they should be threatened by police arrest for voicing their opinions. Holloway commented, “A Free Theatre is a droll cry where police line the walls and block the passages…ready to pounce on anyone who dares say “boo” to the filth and libels of the Irish peasant girl on the stage. “Free” indeed!” (Holloway 461). The Abbey was in the throes of two forces claiming conflicting rights – the rights of the audience to protest versus the rights of the artist to be heard uninterrupted.
Although both sides were vociferous in the defense of their own rights to either condemn or support Synge’s plays, the artists’ right to be heard won out in the end. Yeats recalled that “When the curtain of The Playboy fell on Saturday night in the midst of what The Sunday Independent […] described as ‘thunders of applause,’ I am confident that I saw the rise in this country of a new thought, a new opinion, that we had long needed” (“The Controversy” 463). A critic writing for the Irish Times during Playboy’s first run elaborated further that the experience of the Catholics in the audience was “as if we looked in a mirror for the first time, and found ourselves hideous” (Irish Times qtd. in Murray 86), a comment reminiscent to Fay’s analysis of Glen audience’s Caliban-like experience of recognition. Ultimately, Synge’s goal of shocking the audience into self-recognition proved a success as audiences became not only tamer and more receptive towards the end of Playboy’s first run, but also self-parodic. This manifested itself during the Thursday night performance when an audience member, in response to Old Mahon explaining that Christy could not hold his liquor, called out, “That’s not Western life” – a comment received with “the general amusement of the whole house” (Morash 136). Synge broke his audiences out of their conventions of idealization and censorship, allowing them the freedom to laugh at their own expense. For his characters and his audiences, Synge is a playwright whose skill “lies in emancipation” (Murray 76). His provocation that started in Glen and culminated powerfully in Playboy laid the groundwork for a greater sense of artistic freedom at the Abbey, thereby also allowing the audiences to be both more honest and liberated in their assessments of what they saw on stage and of themselves.

Synge’s transcendence from individual representation to inclusion of the nation is rooted in his inspiration of debate and discussion – his plays, in their provocation and challenge, invite everyone to voice their opinions, and it is at this point that he hopes to liberate his audience.
Rather than tying the audience to assumptions about Ireland’s virtues, whether accurate or not, Synge opened the door for the audience members to keep a critical and comedic eye on the forces at work in Irish society. The process of self and national recognition at the Abbey had been a tumultuous road, and Murray writes that “Synge thus created an art form which enabled the nation to grow into violent self-discovery” (Murray 87). Synge’s process of provocation was a necessary obstacle for the national audience at the Abbey, culminating in a conflict between the pit and the stalls that would determine what role the Irish theatre would play in Ireland’s history as either a source of affirmative, idealist propaganda (stifling convention) or literary, sometimes-critical art (romantic freedom). Ultimately, Synge’s experiment of liberation through provocation proved successful, helping to establish the Abbey as a haven for Ireland’s dramatic artists where they could express themselves honestly and freely, unfettering themselves as artists while offering up the liberation of the audience’s minds.

The reassertion of the artist’s right to freedom affirmed the Abbey’s Yeatsian values. As Yeats, himself, said in the discussion over Irish national theatre during the week following the riots:

> We have claimed for our writers the freedom to find in their own land every expression of good and evil necessary to their art, for Irish life contains, like all vigorous life, the seeds of all good and evil, and a writer must be free here as elsewhere to watch where the weed or flower ripens (“The Controversy” 462)

The audiences were free to be parodied and satirized, and the artist was free to express his own Irish experience whether it be affirmative or critical. Neither would be beholden to the standard of an idealized utopic vision of Ireland, and the artist’s right to express his vision as he saw fit
was declared more “Irish” than the audience’s right to protest. The tradition of the audience’s right to dissent, though not abolished, was beginning to be replaced by the author’s right to be heard. The Abbey’s goal, as an Irish theatre, was first and foremost the free expression of artistic experience. Plays would be judged, echoing their founding proclamation, according to their “degree of excellence” (Gregory 402) and on the basis of the “personal observations of the writer,” not according to propaganda or moral messages, but on “realities of emotion” (“Advice to Playwrights” 349). Through this free expression, the audience was encouraged to recognize its “own part in the drama happening offstage” as both life and drama moved “away from sterile conformity and towards romantic freedom” (Arrowsmith xix). George Bernard Shaw once wrote, “The Playboy’s real name was Synge; and the famous libel on Ireland (and who is Ireland that she should not be libeled as other countries are by their great comedians?) was the truth about the world” (Shaw qtd. in Murray 86). If the Abbey was truly a place to advance the work of Irish artists on the basis of their literary and artistic merits, it must be open to the libels of comedy found in self-parody, privileging romantic freedom for authors, characters, and audiences alike over the stifling forces of conventional society.
William Fay once wrote, “It took many years for Ireland to learn – if indeed she has yet learned – that in J.M. Synge she had produced a great dramatist” (Fay 28). Fortunately, Synge’s legacy as one of Ireland’s greatest playwrights has endured to this day, and plays like *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Playboy of the Western World* are considered formative classics of Irish literature. Synge’s plays did much to establish the Abbey as a place where Ireland’s writers, performers, and producers could practice their arts without fear of censorship, creating in the nation a space of free expression. The battle, however, did not end with Synge. Many other playwrights who followed Synge in the Abbey’s controversial history would come up against many of the same issues that Synge faced. Synge certainly got Ireland talking about her national theatre, but many more voices would be heard in the debates to come.

One of these voices was that of Sean O’Casey, a playwright whose work was remarkably different from Synge’s, but who played a similar role in establishing the Abbey as a place of free expression. His Dublin Trilogy, containing *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *The Plough and the Stars* were as challenging to audiences in their representation of Dublin tenement life as they were movingly beautiful in their art. Written in the 1920s these plays came on the heels of some of Ireland’s bloodiest and most heart-rending moments in her struggle for autonomy. O’Casey responds to this period in Irish life with three tragedies that are both shattering and hopeful in their moments of raw, humanist emotion.
If I were to develop what I have begun in this paper into a Master’s thesis, I would explore the role that O’Casey played in defining the Abbey’s goals as a national theatre, pointing out how he shares in, and diverges from, Synge’s work as a national playwright. I am interested in the influence that the change of setting – moving the drama from the rural town to the urban slum – in his Dublin Trilogy had on audience reception. Once again, his plays inspired debate over which side of Ireland should be shown in the national theatre – the idealized pastoral environment or the daily reality of squalor experienced by many living in Dublin. O’Casey’s plays marked a powerful resurgence of the question of who had the right to define “Irishness,” and, as was seen during the first performances of Synge, certain audience members claimed that the Ireland presented on stage by O’Casey was not representative of Ireland at all. I would also like to explore how O’Casey created an atmosphere of self-recognition, all the while capturing the same sense of transcendence through lyricism seen in Synge’s plays – a characteristic that I believe is the key to the elements of liberation found in the Dublin Trilogy.
WORKS CITED


