

*Tikrit University*  
*College of Education for Humanities*  
*English Department*



*Higher Studies/ M.A./ English Literature*

*Drama*

*John Millington Synge*

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## *John Millington Synge*

John Millington Synge (1871–1909) was one of the most important Irish playwrights of the early 1900s. He is best known for capturing the hard lives, beautiful language (poetic use of the Hiberno-English dialect), and unique humor of the poor people living in the West of Ireland (pp. 7, 33).

### **His Life and Career**

**1-Background:** Born into a Protestant family in Dublin, he originally trained to be a professional violinist before moving to Paris to become a writer (pp. 68-69).

**2-The Turning Point:** In Paris, he met the poet W.B. Yeats, who told him to go to the Aran Islands to find his stories. Synge spent several summers there, taking notes on the local "fisher folk" and their ancient way of life (p. 69).

**3-**A leading figure of the Irish Literary Revival (also known as the Celtic Renaissance).

**4-The Abbey Theatre:** He became a director of the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin and wrote several plays that made Irish drama famous worldwide (pp. 33, 69).

**5-Style:** Synge rejected the "pallid realism" of his European contemporaries in favor of a unique **folk realism**. His plays are characterized by a highly stylized "peasant

dialect"—a musical blend of English words with Irish syntax and imagery.

## **Synge's Major Themes**

**1-Nature vs. Humanity:** His works often depict the relentless, often fatal, power of nature—particularly the sea—over human life.

**2-The Conflict of Generations:** Themes of rebellion against patriarchal authority and traditional social norms are central to his comedies.

**3-Illusion and Reality:** Characters often cling to stories or "rebellious stories" to escape the bleakness of their reality.

**4-Anti-Colonial Identity:** While writing in English, he sought to create an authentically "Irish" dramatic voice that challenged both British models and idealized Irish nationalist stereotypes.

## **J. M. Synge Works**

**-*In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903):** A story about a young woman in a lonely marriage who eventually leaves her husband to live a life of freedom on the road (p. 70).

**-*Riders to the Sea* (1904):** A very sad tragedy about an old mother, Maurya, who loses

all the men in her family to the dangerous sea (p. 71).

**-*The Well of the Saints* (1905):** About a blind couple who have their sight "cured" by a saint, only to realize the real world is much uglier than the beautiful one they imagined (pp. 71-72).

**-*The Playboy of the Western World* (1907):** His most famous work. It was so controversial when it first opened that it caused **riots** in the theater because some people felt it insulted the Irish character (pp. 68-69).

Synge died young from Hodgkin's disease at age 37 (p. 69). Although he only left a few plays, they are still performed today because they feel "real" and honest. He showed that the lives of ordinary, poor people could be the subject of great literature (pp. 32, 70).

The "Playboy Riots" were a series of public protests and disruptions that occurred during the opening week of J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in January 1907 at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

The outrage was driven by several cultural and political factors:

**1-Offensive Stereotypes:** Irish nationalists felt the play portrayed Irish people—especially the rural poor—as immoral and violent. They were particularly angry that the villagers in the play treated a man who claimed to have killed his father like a hero.

**2-Insulting "Irish Womanhood":** Protesters felt the play's depiction of women was

"vile" and unpatriotic.

**3-Language Conflict:** Some nationalists were also angry that the play was written in English rather than the Irish language.

The protests continued for a week, with the theater eventually calling in the police to keep order. W.B. Yeats, one of the theater's founders, famously scolded the crowd, telling them they had "disgraced" themselves by failing to recognize a work of genius. Today, the play is no longer seen as an insult but is celebrated as a masterpiece of modern drama.

**Source:**

Sternlicht, Sanford. (1998). A reader's guide to modern Irish drama. Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1998