



J. M. SYNGE, *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD*: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SYNGE'S MODERNIST AESTHETIC

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interplay between tradition and modernity in the formation of J. M. Synge's modernist aesthetic, focusing primarily on *The Playboy of the Western World*. Drawing on theories of ethnographic representation, commodified authenticity, and modernist aesthetics, it examines how Synge reworks Irish peasant culture and folkloric traditions into dramatic forms that contest both nationalist idealisation and colonial representations of Irish identity. Through close textual analysis, the study argues that Synge's dramaturgy negotiates a persistent tension between ethnographic observation and artistic autonomy. His dramatic treatment of violence, language, identity formation, and misrecognition reveals national identity and cultural authenticity as constructed, contested, and performatively sustained rather than fixed or inherited realities. The study contributes to Irish literary criticism, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, theatre and performance studies, and modernist scholarship. It also offers a comparative framework for examining how folklore and cultural identity are reinterpreted in other postcolonial and post-traditional contexts, including Indonesian literature, regional performance traditions, and cultural heritage studies. Overall, the analysis suggests that Synge's modernist practice transforms tradition from a static cultural inheritance into a dynamic resource, continually reconfigured through dramatic performance, narrative mediation, and aesthetic experimentation.

Keywords: *modernism, ethnography, commodified authenticity, J.M. Synge, The Playboy of the Western World, tradition*

1. INTRODUCTION

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Irish peasant emerged as a culturally and politically contested figure through whom competing understandings of Irish national identity were articulated. English representations frequently associated rural Irish communities with primitiveness, irrationality, and barbarism, whereas Irish nationalist discourse often idealised the peasant as an innocent, noble, and victimised embodiment of the nation (Hirsch, 1991). These contrasting representations

demonstrate that the peasant was not merely a social figure but also a symbolic construction shaped by colonial attitudes, nationalist aspirations, and literary conventions. The representation of rural Ireland consequently became a significant concern within the Irish Literary Revival, in which writers reworked vernacular traditions, folklore, and everyday rural experiences to articulate alternative visions of Irish cultural identity. Nevertheless, the literary celebration of peasant life could reproduce idealised images of an allegedly timeless national culture rather

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than represent the complexity of contemporary Irish society. This tension between cultural preservation and ideological construction is central to discussions of Irish modernism and the Celtic Revival (Castle, 2001, 2020; Cleary, 2014; Grene, 2019; Mathews, 2010).

J. M. Synge occupies a distinctive position within this literary and cultural context because his engagement with rural Ireland combined ethnographic observation with literary experimentation. His experiences among the inhabitants of the Aran Islands informed *The Aran Islands*, a work that records local customs, oral narratives, songs, beliefs, rituals, and everyday practices. However, the text cannot be understood simply as a transparent record of an existing culture. Rather, it occupies an intersection between travel writing, autobiographical reflection, folklore collection, and ethnographic representation (Lecossois, 2021; Synge, 2022). As Castle (2001) suggests, ethnographic representation can transform the practices of a particular community into seemingly enduring expressions of tradition. This process raises questions about the relationship between the observer and the observed, particularly when the writer claims to document cultural life while simultaneously selecting, interpreting, and reorganising it for literary purposes. Mattar (2004) examines the relationship between primitivism, scientific discourse, and the Irish Revival, providing a useful framework for considering how representations of rural Ireland may reflect the observer's aesthetic and ideological assumptions as much as the experiences of the people being represented. Synge's engagement with the islanders therefore invites scrutiny of the boundaries between ethnographic documentation, subjective observation, and literary construction.

The relationship between observation and artistic representation becomes especially significant when Synge's ethnographic interests are considered alongside his dramatic writing. Although his encounters with rural communities provided cultural and linguistic material for his plays, dramatic representation necessarily involved selection, arrangement, characterisation, and narrative transformation. *The Playboy of the Western World*, first staged in 1907, illustrates this process through its depiction of rural characters whose actions, language, and responses challenge conventional expectations of morality, heroism, and respectable national identity. The play's portrayal of the peasantry provoked controversy partly because it appeared to conflict with nationalist expectations of a dignified and idealised Irish community. As Hirsch (1991) observes, objections to Synge's representation reflected concerns that his dramatic characters misrepresented the Irish peasant. However, such criticism also raises a broader question: whether literary representation should reproduce an idealised collective identity or expose the contradictions underlying its construction. Synge's dramatic practice can be situated within debates about failed realism, peasant drama, and the relationship between national culture and theatrical form (Burke, 2016; Collins, 2016; Hwang, 2017). His treatment of violence and alleged parricide also complicates conventional moral categories, while the construction of Christy Mahon as a potential hero reveals how identity may emerge through storytelling, public recognition, and self-fashioning (Beirne & O'Donnell, 2010; Park, 2014). Such concerns are further illuminated by critical discussions of Synge's language, desire, and the representation of the present (Brazeau, 2009; Kilroy, 2020).

The play's representation of rural life also exposes the instability of cultural

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authenticity. Rather than presenting tradition as an untouched inheritance, Synge transforms local speech, folklore, and social practices into theatrical materials that acquire new meanings through performance. The stage setting, with its rough public-house interior, domestic objects, and representation of Pegeen Mike in conventional peasant clothing, establishes a recognisable rural environment while simultaneously making that environment available for aesthetic interpretation (Synge, 1968). The resulting dramatic world is neither a direct reproduction of rural Ireland nor an entirely autonomous imaginative creation. It emerges through the interaction of observed cultural practices, literary conventions, and theatrical construction. This tension can be examined through the concept of commodified authenticity, which considers how representations of cultural difference may acquire value when they are presented as genuine, traditional, or resistant to modern commercial life (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973). Outka (2009) similarly demonstrates the importance of understanding how modernist culture could transform tradition and authenticity into objects of aesthetic and commercial desire. From this perspective, Synge's representations of peasant life participate in a paradox: rural culture is presented as an alternative to modernity, yet it becomes a resource through which modernist art produces new forms of cultural value.

This paradox complicates any straightforward distinction between tradition and modernity. Synge's aesthetic depends on cultural materials associated with rural continuity, but their transformation into literary and theatrical forms disrupts the idea that tradition remains unchanged over time. The play's language, characterisation, and dramatic conflicts reveal that national identity is continually negotiated through representation rather than simply

inherited from the past. The relationship between cultural memory and the invention of tradition provides a broader framework for understanding this process (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Similarly, theories of imagined communities and national narration help explain how literary works contribute to the production and contestation of collective identity (Anderson, 2006; Bhabha, 1990). From a postcolonial perspective, Synge's representations can also be examined in relation to colonial power and the cultural assumptions through which national identities are defined (Said, 1993). These theoretical approaches do not imply that Synge's work can be reduced to a single political position. Rather, they highlight the tensions between cultural belonging, aesthetic independence, and the representational authority claimed by writers who transform local experience into literature.

Questions of embodiment, gender, performance, and authorship further complicate the relationship between rural identity and theatrical representation. Pegeen Mike, for instance, is not merely a marker of peasant culture but a character whose identity and social position are shaped by gendered expectations, interpersonal relationships, and the conditions of performance. Redwine (2021) provides a relevant perspective on gender, authorship, and theatrical ownership at the Abbey Theatre, while Lecossois (2021) examines the relationship between performance and modernity in Synge's plays. These concerns can be placed in dialogue with theories of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) and with scholarship on the cultural politics of the Irish Revival (Castle, 2001; Mattar, 2004). Synge's dramatic world also invites consideration of how theatrical performance preserves, modifies, and contests cultural memory. Theatre does not simply reproduce a pre-existing social reality; it reorganises cultural signs

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through embodied action, dialogue, staging, and audience interpretation (Carlson, 2003; Taylor, 2003). Accordingly, the meaning of *The Playboy of the Western World* emerges not only from its representation of rural Ireland but also from the ways its characters and cultural references are performed, received, and contested.

More recent scholarship continues to demonstrate the relevance of Synge's work to discussions of language, identity, social marginality, and theatrical reception. Research on Synge's treatment of vagrancy and institutional exclusion expands the analysis beyond idealised images of rural community (Collins, 2020). Studies of language and translation offer further insight into how linguistic choices participate in the construction of cultural identity (Chang, 2022), while examinations of modernity and the anti-hero illuminate the tensions between individual agency and social expectation in Synge's dramatic writing (Divine, 2022). Hewitt (2021) situates Synge's literary practice within broader relationships among nature, politics, and modernism, while Houston (2023) provides a related perspective on the rhetoric of health and cultural degeneration in Irish modernist discourse. Research on Pegeen Mike and theatrical ownership further demonstrates how performance can become a site of negotiation over gender, identity, and cultural authority (Redwine, 2021). These perspectives complement studies of contemporary reinterpretations of Synge's work, including discussions of adaptation, audience reception, and intercultural controversy (Greene, 2024; King & Spangler, 2024; Yang & Feng, 2025). Such scholarship suggests that the significance of *The Playboy of the Western World* extends beyond its original historical context, as its representations of national identity remain open to reinterpretation across

changing cultural and political circumstances.

The relationship between tradition and modernity in Synge's work can therefore be understood as an ongoing negotiation between ethnographic representation and aesthetic autonomy. His literary practice draws on local histories, folklore, vernacular speech, and rural social life, yet transforms these materials through narrative selection and dramatic experimentation. In doing so, Synge challenges both colonial stereotypes and nationalist idealisations without entirely escaping the representational tensions that shape them. The apparent authenticity of the rural world in *The Playboy of the Western World* is thus inseparable from the aesthetic strategies through which that world is constructed and presented to an audience. The play offers a productive basis for examining how cultural traditions become reinterpreted through modernist art and how literary representations participate in the formation, contestation, and circulation of national identity. This study consequently investigates how Synge negotiates the tension between tradition and modernity in the development of his modernist aesthetic, with particular attention to ethnographic representation, commodified authenticity, and the dramatic construction of Irish peasant identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on J. M. Synge has increasingly moved beyond the conventional interpretation of his work as a representation of Irish peasant life and the Irish Literary Revival. Instead, researchers have examined how Synge's dramatic works negotiate cultural representation, national identity, modernity, and artistic experimentation. These discussions provide an important foundation for understanding *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) as a dramatic text

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in which tradition is neither simply preserved nor faithfully reproduced, but transformed through theatrical performance, language, and aesthetic construction.

Castle (2001) provides one of the most relevant theoretical foundations for this study in Modernism and the Celtic Revival. In his discussion of ethnographic representation, Castle examines how the Celtic Revival's search for authentic Irish culture intersected with anthropology, folklore, mythology, and modernist literary production. His chapter on *The Playboy of the Western World* is particularly relevant because it interprets the play as an extension of Synge's ethnographic engagement with Irish culture. Castle argues that the play's theatrical form complicates the assumptions underlying ethnographic representation and challenges the primitivist perspectives through which rural communities were frequently understood. This approach establishes a connection between ethnography and modernist aesthetics, although the present study develops this relationship further by examining how authenticity becomes a dramatic and potentially commodified construction.

Richards (2010), in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, situates *The Playboy of the Western World* within the cultural and political tensions of the Irish Literary Revival. Richards highlights the significance of the western Irish setting and the play's departure from the idealisation of rural Ireland as a repository of national authenticity. Rather than presenting an uncomplicated return to an idealised cultural past, Synge's drama engages with contemporary social realities. This perspective is important because it suggests that the playwright's use of tradition should be understood as a process of selection, reinterpretation, and artistic transformation rather than as the reproduction of an unchanged cultural inheritance.

Hewitt (2021) extends this discussion in *J. M. Synge: Nature, Politics,*

Modernism. His study reconsiders Synge's literary development by examining the relationship between aesthetic experimentation, political consciousness, scientific discourse, and the intellectual contexts of the Irish Revival. In his discussion of *The Playboy of the Western World*, Hewitt examines the significance of degeneration, evolutionary thought, irony, violence, and the politics of cultural regeneration. His analysis demonstrates that Synge's modernism emerged through an engagement with the social and ideological discourses of his time. The present study builds on this understanding by focusing specifically on how folkloric and ethnographic materials are reorganised into a modernist dramatic aesthetic.

The relationship between Synge's dramatic form and modernist experimentation is also explored in the chapter "The Riot of Spring: Synge's 'Failed Realism' and the Peasant Drama," published in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (2016). This study places the controversy surrounding *The Playboy of the Western World* alongside the reception of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. It proposes that the play's disruptive reception can be understood through modernist primitivism and aesthetic shock rather than simply through its failure to conform to realist expectations. This interpretation is especially useful for the present research because it positions Synge's representation of peasant culture as an aesthetic intervention that unsettles established expectations of national drama.

Kilroy (2020) approaches the play through the development of Christy Mahon as a poetic figure. His analysis demonstrates how Christy's language becomes increasingly imaginative as the community responds to his account of violence. The relationship between speech, imagination, and social recognition reveals that the protagonist's identity is not merely an expression of an established social reality; it

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is also produced through storytelling and collective response. This argument supports the present study's examination of identity formation and misrecognition as dramatic mechanisms through which cultural meanings are constructed and contested.

Hwang (2017) approaches the play through Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious. His discussion connects individual dramatic discourse with collective ideological structures, particularly the tensions involving Irish peasant society and British colonial power. This approach is valuable for examining how the play's representations of rural life participate in broader political and ideological conflicts. However, the present study shifts the emphasis from ideological interpretation alone towards the interaction between ethnographic representation, the construction of authenticity, and the aesthetic reworking of tradition.

Recent scholarship has also expanded the discussion of gender, authorship, and theatrical performance. Redwine (2021), in *Gender, Performance, and Authorship at the Abbey Theatre*, reconsiders the contribution of actress Molly Allgood to the development and performance of *The Playboy of the Western World*. By examining correspondence, performance, and assumptions about authorship, Redwine demonstrates that the play's theatrical identity cannot be reduced to the playwright's individual authorship. This perspective reinforces the importance of performance as a site where dramatic meaning is produced and negotiated.

Yang and Feng (2025) examine the reception of *The Playboy of the Western World* during its 1911 American tour, focusing on sexuality, ethnicity, and American citizenship. Their research demonstrates that the play's meanings change across cultural and national contexts. Such a reception-oriented perspective is significant because it shows that cultural representation does not possess a fixed

meaning independent of its audience. The present study complements this line of inquiry by concentrating on the aesthetic mechanisms through which Synge constructs and destabilises authenticity within the dramatic text itself.

Greene (2024), in *Irish Theatre in the Twenty-First Century*, discusses the reinterpretation of Synge's work in contemporary theatre. His account of productions that relocate or recast *The Playboy of the Western World* demonstrates the continuing adaptability of the play across different cultural settings. These reinterpretations illustrate that theatrical tradition can remain culturally significant precisely because it is open to transformation. For the present study, this provides a broader context for understanding tradition as a dynamic resource rather than a stable or self-evident inheritance.

The literature reviewed above reveals several interconnected areas of existing scholarship. First, Castle (2001) establishes the importance of ethnographic representation in the relationship between Synge and the Celtic Revival. Second, Richards (2010) and Hewitt (2021) situate the playwright's work within the cultural, political, and aesthetic tensions of Irish modernity. Third, researchers such as Brazeau (2009), Beirne and O'Donnell (2010), Park (2014), and Hwang (2017) examine language, violence, heroic identity, and ideology. More recent studies by Kilroy (2020), Redwine (2021), Greene (2024), and Yang and Feng (2025) further illuminate poetic self-creation, theatrical authorship, contemporary reinterpretation, and transnational reception.

Although these studies offer substantial insights, the present research identifies an opportunity to integrate their concerns into a more cohesive analytical framework. In particular, it can examine the relationship between ethnographic representation, commodified authenticity, and modernist aesthetics more explicitly as a

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connected process. Rather than treating tradition primarily as a cultural inheritance, an ideological construct, or a resource for national identification, this study investigates how tradition is selected, stylised, and transformed through the dramatic form of *The Playboy of the Western World*.

The study therefore addresses three questions. First, how does Synge transform Irish folklore and representations of peasant life into modernist dramatic material? Second, how do language, violence, identity formation, and misrecognition destabilize claims to cultural and national authenticity? Third, how does the play negotiate the tension between ethnographic representation and aesthetic autonomy?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to Irish literary studies, modernist criticism, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies. Its principal contribution lies in connecting the representation of tradition to the aesthetic processes through which authenticity is constructed and contested. It also offers a comparative framework for future research on how local folklore and cultural identity are represented in other literary and performance traditions, including Indonesian literature and regional theatre. Such comparisons require context-specific analysis rather than assuming Ireland's historical experience is equivalent to Indonesia's.

3. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis using a textual and critical approach. The primary data consist of J. M. Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World*, supported by Synge's ethnographic prose work *The Aran Islands* and selected secondary sources on Irish modernism, ethnography, and cultural theory. The analysis is conducted through close reading, focusing on narrative structure, characterization, language, staging, and representations of violence and identity. This method allows for a detailed examination of

how ethnographic materials are transformed into dramatic and aesthetic forms. The study is theoretically informed by modernism, ethnography, and cultural criticism, particularly concepts of commodified authenticity and double colonisation, to analyze how gender, colonial power, and cultural identity intersect within the text. Data analysis follows three stages:

1. Textual identification, selecting key scenes, dialogues, and narrative moments that foreground issues of tradition, modernity, and representation.
2. Interpretative analysis, applying critical frameworks to examine how these textual elements construct meaning and negotiate cultural tensions.
3. Contextual interpretation, situating the findings within broader discussions of Irish Revivalism and European modernism.

By combining close reading with contextual and theoretical interpretation, this methodological approach enables a critical understanding of Synge's modernist aesthetic as a negotiation between ethnographic representation and artistic innovation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For Synge, staging ethnography brings the problem of representing national identities and self-determination. Synge wants to revise colonialist, anthropological attitudes and stereotypes not only in the Irish but also in the Revival's own projects of ethnographic redemption. In need of redemption, ethnographic knowledge has become social drama in which the West of Ireland is resignified and revalued as more than a primitive culture. Therefore, *The Playboy of the Western World* and its performances attempt to redress the discursive violence perpetrated by Revivalist, nationalist, and anthropological representations. The depiction of the violence in *The Playboy* drives the audience to feel an ugly depiction of Irish behaviour (Castle, 2001:150). As the violence in *The*

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Playboy is affected by what Synge had studied at the Sorbonne about Irish and Homeric civilization, he learned that ancient Celtic Ireland was a sexual society and violent (Collins, 2016:20). In *The Playboy*, there is an explicit relationship between language and violence, the play is between 'a gallous story and a dirty deed'. These dirty deeds can be seen in Christy Mahon's character: his dirty deeds are done offstage to make the discourse rather than a represented reality, while the violence, such as his betrayal, his capture and the burning of his leg, happens in front of the audience. Thus, the play shows the barbarous acts done by the villagers and also the story of Christy's crime is one of proliferation of gallous stories:

PEGEEN. I'll say, a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed. (To Men.) Take him on from this, or the lot of us will be likely put on trial for his deed to-day.

CHRISTY — [with horror in his voice.] — And it's yourself will send me off, to have a horny-fingered hangman hitching his bloody slip-knots at the butt of my ear.

MEN — [pulling rope.] — Come on, will you? [He is pulled down on the floor.]

CHRISTY — [twisting his legs round the table.] — Cut the rope, Pegeen, and I'll quit the lot of you, and live from this out, like the madmen of Keel, eating muck and green weeds, on the faces of the cliffs.

PEGEEN. And leave us to hang, is it, for a saucy liar, the like of you? (To men.) Take him on, out from this.

SHAWN. Pull a twist on his neck, and squeeze him so.

PHILLY. Twist yourself. Sure he cannot hurt you, if you keep your distance from his teeth alone.

SHAWN. I'm afeard of him. (To Pegeen.) Lift a lighted sod, will you, and scorch his leg.

PEGEEN — [blowing the fire, with a bellows.] Leave go now, young fellow, or I'll scorch your shins. (Synge, 1968, p. 169)

All the badtempered characters of the play were deliberated by Synge, he intended to write like a monochrome painting, all in shades of one colour that drives to his popularity and his style experiment led Synge as the modernist writer (Greene, 2019:87). Synge wrote the stories he heard from Irish people but he made them up into plays that bore little resemblance to their originals. By staging ethnography, Synge's dramatic work, *The Playboy*, has dramatised 'the constructedness of any original or definitive representation of national identity'.

The origin of *The Playboy* was an anecdote about a Connaught man that Synge had ever heard in the Aran Island. According to Aran folklore, the nickname of 'the playboy' was Mally, the islanders helped him to lose his appease in regretting for killing his father and then Synge took this story as one of the 'inspirations' for *The Playboy*. The story told that a Connaught man killed his father and then fled to the island where he can protect himself from the police and be helped by the natives: "He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related." (Synge, 2001:48) This is as the example of the practice of Synge in translating the ethnographic knowledge into his dramatic context:

CHRISTY. — [twisting round on her with a sharp cry of horror.] — Don't strike me. I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that.

PEGEEN. [with blank amazement.] — Is it killed your father?

CHRISTY. — [subsiding.] With the help of God I did surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother may intercede for his soul.

[....]

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MICHAEL — [with deference.] — Would you think well to stop here and be pot-boy, mister honey, if we gave you good wages, and didn't destroy you with the weight of work? (Synge, 1968:73-75)

The Playboy of The Western World has dramatized the anecdote by creating a concrete plot line, a cast of characters and actions (conversations, relationships, wakes, races, fights)' that is similar with the cultural materials that Synge had heard and observed in his fieldwork. Synge portrays his bardic hero as a peasant who had killed his father but Pegeen admires him for his bravery of heart' and his savagery or fine words':

PEGEEN — [with real tenderness.] — And what is it I have, Christy Mahon, to make me fitting entertainment for the like of you, that has such poet's talking, and such bravery of heart?

CHRISTY — [in a low voice.] — Isn't there the light of seven heavens in your heart alone, the way you'll be an angel's lamp to me from this out, and I abroad in the darkness, spearing salmons in the Owen, or the Carrowmore?

PEGEEN. If I was your wife, I'd be along with you those nights, Christy Mahon, the way you'd see I was a great hand at coaxing bailiffs, or coining funny nick-names for the stars of night. (Synge, 1968:149)

Here, Synge highlights the play's long-gone folkloric and nationalist conceptions of the bardic tradition. In the dramatisation of Christy's character, Synge explores the cultural consequences of the anecdote that he did not explain in *The Aran Islands*; by presenting the Connaught man as a facile constructor of his own identity, he undercuts the lack of the bardic model hero and what he recognizes as the unpleasant realities of peasant life in the West of Ireland. In addition, All women in *The Playboy* express the type of folklore heroics and primitive characteristics. For example, Pegeen as the Western Girl who expresses her violent nature in *The Playboy*. Also, The Widow Quin, who wants to marry Christy, expresses

not only loneliness but also her cunny hopes to help Shawn and get rewards from Shawn, Pegeen's fiance:

SHAWN — [walking about in desperation.] — Oh, Widow Quin, what'll I be doing now? I'd inform again him, but he'd burst from Kilmainham and he'd be sure and certain to destroy me. If I wasn't so God-fearing, I'd near have courage to come behind him and run a pike into his side. Oh, it's a hard case to be an orphan and not to have your father that you're used to, and you'd easy kill and make yourself a hero in the sight of all. (Coming up to her.) Oh, Widow Quin, will you find me some contrivance when I've promised you a ewe

WIDOW QUIN. A ewe's a small thing, but what would you give me if I did wed him and did save you so?

SHAWN — [with astonishment.] You?

WIDOW QUIN. Aye. Would you give me the red cow you have and the mountainy ram, and the right of way across your rye path, and a load of dung at Michaelmas, and turbary upon the western hill?

SHAWN — [radiant with hope.] — I would surely, and I'd give you the wedding-ring I have, and the loan of a new suit, the way you'd have him decent on the wedding-day. I'd give you two kids for your dinner, and a gallon of poteen, and I'd call the piper on the long car to your wedding from Crossmolina or from Ballina. I'd give you...

WIDOW QUIN. That'll do so, and let you whisht, for he's coming now again. [Christy comes in very natty in the new clothes. Widow Quin goes to him admiringly.] [...] [Widow Quin makes a sign to Shawn to leave them. (Synge, 1968:117)]

Identity formation is a problem in *The Playboy*; Synge shows his audience that the beloved image of Irish country folk is a mere construction. The main features of a transfigurative aesthetic show how people continuously misrecognise their world, which is never what it seems (Castle, 2020:212). This relates to Spencer's theory that reality is never objective but always subjective, shifting and changing. In *The Playboy*,

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Synge shifts reality for artistic purposes. For example, in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy Mahon's savagery is misrecognized as heroism, and Pegeen Mike's grief is twisted into a note of defiance at his loss. This misrecognition also appears when a reporter asked Synge whether his play is meant to represent Irish life; Synge replied that it is not. Synge clarifies that one of the play's most potent strategies is to mirror a true representation of life in the West of Ireland; it offers an improbability and a tactical falsehood that suggests the real and true Irish peasantry, even if it is only the constructedness of primitivist stereotypes. In constructing these images, Synge tries to change how we look by describing ethnographic fieldwork as transformed into an aesthetic perspective that values both objective and subjective impulses. In addition, Synge's notes on aesthetics claim that he has allowed the outside world to play on his emotions, making his work subjective and shaped by moods from his own life. Synge also confronts the dilemma between the real Aran stuff and the image he had constructed. In Synge's visual reconstruction of the Aran Islands, he shows the dislocating effects attached in a project of authentic reproduction of rural Ireland on a metropolitan stage.

In the early twentieth century, placing authentic objects or costumes on Dublin stages reasserted the distance between the audience and the communities the plays represented. Synge insisted on the authenticity of props and costumes in his plays' productions since real objects are believed to be conducive to truthful acting. These authentic properties also highlight the desire to blur the distinction between the theatrical and the real. Authentic reproduction and authentic props or costumes were valued as primitive culture; they symbolised the culture's irremediable pastness and shaped the audience's sense of its own modernity. Through representation and theatre, Synge displayed and recreated the authentic material culture of rural Western Ireland on the metropolitan stage as

a quintessentially modern gesture. Therefore, the commodified authentic emerged as an attractive tool, it is designed to satisfy 'a longing for tradition' and the quintessentially moving into the modern era. The commodified authentic becomes the selling of nostalgia and also as the innovation, as Outka argued:

"As with the nostalgic form, the originary authentic was in part defined by and valued for its alleged separation from the mass market, and it was likewise aggressively marketed in what are now familiar strategies: appeals to the coterie, to high fashion, to the limited edition. Part of the originary's allure was its evocation of the prototype. One was not buying the general but the genuine, the first model from which others might be made". (Outka, 2009:5)

In this way, the originary versions and the nostalgic commodification of authenticity are supposed to commercialise the pure realms of aesthetic pleasure and refinement. This commerce is seen as corrupting and intruding on the realm of true art. Therefore, writers and marketers imagined new heights of aesthetic and sensual pleasure that were sullied by their commerce, and they tried to purify. For Synge, aesthetic pleasure is an essential part of life that he can give to an anti-realistic style, the reality of Irish life, and a rich, copious style of characterisation and speech; this style violates the audience's expectations, which seek either ethnographic realism or nationalist idealisations masquerading as real. The idea of combining aesthetic pleasure and commerce becomes paramount in modernism's marketing and in modernist writing itself. Both writers and consumers seek not only aesthetic purity but also 'new ways to bring different sides together in a new combination that forms the commodified authentic, offering the most vital critical model for both modernism and modernity. The commodified authentic promised a purified vision of commerce and the pace of modern life. It also gives shape to the different expressions through staging, acting, and settings. These various constructions might suggest authenticity, a

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fixed identity, a nostalgic stability and an aesthetic refinement without commerce but encompass spaces and identities that constantly open to being remade. Thus, the audience and the readers can shape the authenticity images into various new forms and identities and they can see how commerce might deliver to a luxurious aesthetic refinement that became the key to the new literary experiments in modernism.

5. CONCLUSION

The Irish Literary Revival helped shape Irish modernism by negotiating the tension between modern innovation and inherited cultural traditions. Drawing on ethnography and anthropology, Revivalist writers sought to preserve the folk practices, narratives, and cultural expressions of the Irish peasantry. However, this engagement with traditional culture also risked reinforcing colonial assumptions and anthropological stereotypes, particularly when rural communities were represented as primitive or culturally distinct. Despite their commitment to innovation, both modernism and the Revival remained deeply invested in reconstructing the past. Their aesthetic orientations frequently drew on alternative systems of knowledge, including primitivism, mythology, occult traditions, and non-institutional forms of spirituality, as a means of challenging conventional religious and epistemological frameworks.

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge reinterprets the religious life of the islanders by foregrounding their spiritual beliefs and practices. His 1898 notes on *The Golden Bough* inform this representation of a religious system characterized by the absence of formal priesthood and temples, the recognition of spirits rather than gods, and the predominance of magical rather than priestly rituals. Nevertheless, Synge's portrayal of primitivism cannot be understood solely as a reflection of the islanders' natural environment. Rather, it is shaped by contemporary scientific and anthropological discourses that construct the islanders as culturally other. To sustain this image of primitivism, Synge reinterprets and

recontextualizes ethnographic knowledge, transforming the cultural materials documented in *The Aran Islands* into dramatic representations. Through this process, traditional Irish culture becomes the basis for a new artistic form that reimagines the lived experiences of rural communities. This transformation also reveals the complex relationship between cultural tradition, modernist aesthetics, and technological change.

The consumption and representation of tradition further contribute to the commodification of authenticity, positioning it as a central element in the construction of cultural meaning and the development of literary modernism. Within this framework, the modern theatre becomes modernist not merely through its formal innovations but also through its engagement with broader social and cultural functions. Synge's modernism thus emerges from his negotiation of tradition and modernity, through which inherited cultural materials are reworked into original dramatic forms and invested with new aesthetic significance.

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