

Narratology as a Means of Revealing Irish Traditions in J.M. Synge's The Playboy of the Western World

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Abstract

This paper studies J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1911) from a narrative perspective. It will concentrate on the play's discourse. In essence, the play's literary discourse conveys the author's point of view regarding the contemporary social affairs in Ireland. The study will focus on the imaginary aspects of the Irish society depicted in the play. Therefore, two narrative elements will be interpreted. They are the characters and the settings. On the one hand, the characters will be analyzed as fictional replica of the Synge's implied voice in the text. That is, the characters' discourse is a literary manifestation of the author's abstract conceptualization of the Irish social disposition that undergone radical changes. On the other hand, the play's setting is going to be analyzed as a quasi-real appropriation of the authentic Irish society portrayed by Synge. These elements are going to be analyzed by applying Mikail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. The concept of polyphony refers to the author's implicit voice that is carried out by literary characters' explicit voice in literary texts.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Discourse, Ireland, Polyphony, Synge

1. Introduction

J.M. Synge is a representative Irish author. His works are millstones in the Irish literary traditions. The discussion of Irish literary modes and traditions, to a great extent, would be incomplete without mentioning the literary position of Synge (Burke 40). This is due to the fact that he depicts the very sense of the Irish rural life and the social traditions in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. In essence, the bulk of Synge's works stand for the state of people in their society (Hogan 85). More specifically, people are depicted in terms of their relations with other people. The judgment of the Irish personality, or disposition, depends largely on the way by which Synge's characters behave and treat each other on the ground of inherited social traditions (Kelly 21). As such, Synge's characters are of paramount importance to deal with the archetypal disposition of Irish people. Being so, he is a key representative of the Irish Literary Revival movement (Ronsley 73).

Synge's literary language is also an indication of his erudite literary style. He uses specific expressions that obviously inform the reader of the real Irish linguistic attributes (Greene 96). In his works, especially, *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), there is an authorial acclaim of the Irish language (Lever 119). Therefore, the language of his literary characters is highly appreciated for their linguistic distinctiveness (Welch 35). Hence, the study of the literary characters' language is very vital for perceiving the author's (Synge's) concern with the traditional language of Irish people (Mahony 58). This attribute is evident in the opening paragraphs of *The Playboy of Western World* (1911) when he refers to the rhetorical aspects of Irish people. The core conceptual notion of the Irish people provides us with the literary tools used by Synge to construct a panoramic view of Irish life in its traditional peak. Being so, his works would be judged in the light of the rhetorical peculiarities (Donoghue 63).

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the literary nature of the characters language in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1911). Accordingly, the methodological analysis will be on the characters dialogues which convey the author's implied voice in the play's text.

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The study will apply one concept to analyze the characters' discourse in the course of the discussion. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony will be applied to explore the authorial implicit voice in the play. Before I explain the methodological application of this concept, I will briefly explain the meaning of the concept of polyphony. Bakhtin originally studied a number of literary works. He concluded that there is a certain language that represents a duality of speech in literary works. This duality involves both the author and the text.

The author has a certain ideology notions, attitudes, philosophical views, authorial styles and so on – that is projected in the literary work (Leech 102). Therefore, the language of literary works occupies a significant stance since it conveys the author's interest in many issues (McNally 67). The author, accordingly, does not have any way to express his/her views. As a result, he resorts to his/her text in order to express his/her views in the fictional modes of the text (Mackay 18). In this way, the text becomes a tool of expression of the author's voice. The characters explicit voices, which are the literary dialogues or speeches, are the actual manifestation of the author's implied voice (Morris 95). At this point, the text becomes the other side of the duality of the concept of polyphony. That is, the text's explicit voice embodies the author's implicit ideology (Mustienes 17).

The methodology of this study, therefore, will focus on the author's voice and the literary characters in the text of Synge's *The Playboy of Western World* (1911). On the one hand, the author (Synge) will be interpreted in terms of his views of the Irish social disposition that undergo radical changes. On the other hand, the dramatic text's characters will be interpreted as an incarnation of the authorial views regarding the Irish disposition. To illustrate, the analysis will focus on the depiction of Irish rural people in the play. The specific focus will be on the play's characters' speech and the setting. The characters' speech will be identified by applying Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. The setting will be studied within the Irish people's places. Therefore, the characters' speech will be explored as the author's (Synge's) treatment of the disposition of Irish people. Accordingly, the characters' speech will be analyzed as a tool of studying the disposition of Irish people.

2. About the Play: A Brief Synopsis

The Playboy of Western World's (1911) setting - time and place - happens in the first decades of the twentieth century in a place known as County Mayo in Ireland. The major events take place in Michael James Flaherty's pub where the main character, Christy Mahon, spends his time. He is a rural man. When, he comes to the pub, he tells the other people of his murder; he confesses that he killed his father by a loy (an Irish spade). But, later on, his father, Mahon, follows him to the pub. He was only injured by his son. Therefore, people try to avoid him on the ground that he is a coward and a liar. Pegeen, who is Flaherty's daughter and a central character, is passionately moved by Christy's story. But she also avoids him when she discovers his lie.

In order to prove his courage and honesty, Christy really attacks his old father; and this time he kills him. He does so in order to reclaim the villagers' respect and Pegeen's trust. However, they attack him and prepare to hang him to avoid the accusation of being involved in his crime. He is saved by his father, who crawls into the hanging scene with bleeding body. At that moment, they decide to make tours with each other; and Pegeen refuses Shawn's suggestion to marry Christy. The whole plot of the play is told in semi-poetic diction with some Irish vernacular dialects. We can see this language in the preface by the author who seems applauds the Irish poetic language in a striking way.

The play has many characters, but there are main characters that perform the main dramatic events. Christy is the protagonist. His full name is Christopher Mahon; Christy is a gentle man in his 20's. He visits a pub where he claims that he killed his father. When he tells his personal stories, he becomes an attractive man because of his eloquence. He became the most favorite man in the village, especially by women who try to seduce him, like Widow Quin. Old Mahon: is Christy's father, he addicts to drink. He frightened his son, Christy, when he was a child. Michael James is Pegeen's father. He is also the patron of the tavern (pub) in which the play's setting takes place. Honor Blake is a young girl, and she lives of County Mayo. She is attracted to Christy and tries to have a love affair with him. Pegeen is another main character. She is the barmaid. She is twenty years old, and she is the daughter of the pub's owner Michael James. She falls in love with Christy. Widow Quin is thirty years old. She is admired of Christy, and she fails to persuade him to have sex with him. She dislikes Pegeen because she is Christy's preferred woman. Shawn is a young and fervent man. He is Widow Quin's cousin. He is Pegeen's fiancé, but they break with each other because he is too loyal to the church; and he is frankly coward. Philly is Michael Flaherty's and a farmer. Jimmy is also Michael Flaherty's and a farmer. Sara, Nelly and Susan are village girls who live together with other peasants in County Mayo.

3. Discussion and Analysis

The language of literary works is very important for understanding their latent meanings (O'Neill 56). The concept of polyphony is a proper tool for exploring the inherent meanings of literary works (Patterson 132). The concept is defined as a fictional voice "in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects (characters' speech), without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (Lodge 86).

Bakhtin explicates the literary traditions of polyphony in a somewhat complicated manner. The characteristic of the polyphonic voice is that the discourse is completely detached from authorial discipline (Abu Jweid 532). According to Bakhtin, the author's voice is never prevalent in the literary text, and the characters "answer back" with great flexibility: the literary voice "stands along the author fictional position but independently; and the text "attends to the author implicit discourse. Consequently, it responds to the author in terms of "agreement or disagreement" (109).

In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), Synge uses his authorial voice to depict the traditional disposition of Irish people. In the following quotation, Pegeen's disposition refers to the Irish people's disposition in general. It represents their customs and fashions.

PEGEEN [slowly as she writes.] Six yards of stuff for to make a yellow gown. A pair of lace boots with lengthy heels on them and brassy eyes. A hat is suited for a wedding-day. A fine tooth comb. To be sent with three barrels of porter in Jimmy Farrell's creel cart on the evening of the coming Fair to Mister Michael James Flaherty. With the best compliments of this season. Margaret Flaherty. (4)

Here, Synge portrays the traditional life of Irish people. He provides comprehensive visions of their social relations. Therefore, the character's voice here carries out the author's polyphonic voice. Bakhtin argues that the fictional protagonist is a "thoroughly self-conscious" being capable of commenting on himself and on his surroundings (50). In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), the characters are self-conscious and they describe themselves: "PEGEEN [without looking at him (Christy).] He's coming. (She directs the letter.) To Mister Sheamus Mulroy, Wine and Spirit Dealer, Castlebar" (4). In this regard, the characters are aware of each other. This awareness represents the author's implied voice.

In this way, the concept of polyphony plays a significant role in carrying out the authorial discourse which is "defined in relation to its referential object ... or in relation to other discourses within the same context or the same speech" (Bakhtin: 1984, 185-86). The following quotation exemplifies this notion: "PEGEEN [impatiently.] He (Shawn) is surely, and leaving me lonesome on the scruff of the hill. (She gets up and puts envelope on dresser, then winds clock.) Isn't it long the nights are now, Shawn Keogh, to be leaving a poor girl with her own self counting the hours to the dawn of day?" (4). In this quote, Pegeen stands for the author's discourse that deals with some kind of Irish disposition, like poor people. This voice critiques the negative social manners of the Irish life.

The author's voice is treated stylistically as polyphony is directed towards its own "straightforward referential meaning" (Bakhtin: 1984, 187). In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), Pegeen stands for this position: "PEGEEN [with scorn.] As good, is it? Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet. Where will you find the like of them, I'm saying?" (6). In this quotation, these characters convey the author's (Synge's) view of the traditional disposition of Irish people who depends on their social stories. But this action takes place in an Irish atmosphere which is the play's central setting.

In his elaboration of the polyphonic discourse, Bakhtin claims that "the stylistic treatment of objectified discourse, that is, of a character's discourse, is subject- as if to a higher and ultimate authority- to the stylistic task of the author's context" (187). Christy, who is the play's protagonist, conveys the authorial polyphonic voice in the plot: "CHRISTY [very confidentially.] Up to the day I killed my father, there wasn't a person in Ireland knew the kind I was, and I there drinking, waking, eating, sleeping, a quiet, simple poor fellow with no man giving me heed" (8). Here, Christy embodies Synge's authorial polyphonic voice that critiques the deterioration of Irish disposition. That is, the Irish people's disposition became corrupt than before in their vernacular settings. This polyphonic is bilateral i.e., it involves the author's (Synge's) implied voice and Christy's explicit voice.

The contiguous relationship between the two voices is the nexus of polyphony as a concept. Bakhtin argues that the author's duty in the polyphonic discourse is diminished simply to explore the "direct authorial voice" (190). In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), both Pegeen and Christy incarnate the Synge's implied voice. They carry out the author's social ideology concerning the Irish traditional life.

Yet, Pegeen is an illustrative example of this authorial ideology: "PEGEEN [quite kindly at last.]I'm after going down and reading the fearful crimes of Ireland for two weeks or three, and there wasn't a word of your murder. (Getting up and going over to the counter.) They've likely not found the body. You're safe so with ourselves" (24). Again, Pegeen, the dramatic replica of Synge, comments on the corruption, such as crime, that became common in the Irish life. Here, the Irish disposition changes a lot. But it changes to the worst. This change includes the village (setting) life and its relevant customs and traditions. Therefore, this is the reflection of the author (Synge's) dissatisfaction with the Irish deteriorated life. As an erudite author, Synge depicts the precise features of the Irish society in the play. In so doing, he critiques the sense of social deterioration associated with the Irish society. This society undergoes radical changes that reflect the Synge's disappointment with the on-going changes. These changes manipulate the traditional impression of the Irish society.

The concept of polyphony is sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of dialogism. Dialogism is basically defined as "a new theory of authorial point of view elaborated by Bakhtin" (Holquist 3). Dialogism literally means "multi-voicedness" in fictional writings (Bakhtin 279). Dialogism appears in fiction when the private position of the author grants a distinguishable interaction with the fictional characters. Therefore, the characters in a dialogic novel are given ultimate capacity so that they could interact with each other and even with their real author. That is, in dialogic novels a number of narrative centers provide fictional consciousness which incarnate the scheme of the novel. According to David Lodge, a dialogic novel is a "novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (86). In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), the dialogic voice appears between the characters when they exchange information about their society. Jimmy, for example, does not accept the notion of killing a father in whatever way: "Jimmy. Bravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I'm thinking, would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell" (11). Here, the multi-voicedness occurs between Jimmy who tells Pegeen that killing a father is vicious act. In fact, he exemplifies Synge's discontent with the Irish society that deteriorated a lot. Such deterioration opposes the traditional image of Ireland as an ideal society.

As have argued in the previous paragraphs, the characteristic of the concept of polyphony is that the characters are completely detached from authorial discipline. According to Bakhtin, The author's voice is never prevalent in the dialogic novel, and the characters "answer back" with great flexibility. Thus, the protagonist occupies a special position in the polyphonic speech. His position is as significant as that of the authorial position. In this way, the protagonist "stands along the author fictional position but independently," and as another fictional element he "attends to the author implicit discourse. Consequently, he responds to the author in terms of "agreement or disagreement" (109).

Synge's voice, in *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), is detached from the characters' position in the text. However, they are used as a tool for commenting on the contemporary Irish social affairs. Shawn, for example, refuses the act of killing father. Though Christy feels proud that he killed his father, it does not mean that he is brave: "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" (26). In this quotation, Shawn is against murder even when it is considered a sign of bravery. This is because he feels that it is something new to the Irish society.

The phenomenon of the implicit interaction between the author and the characters is another characteristic of the polyphonic discourse. Bakhtin argues that the fictional protagonist is a "thoroughly self-conscious" being capable of commenting on himself and on his surroundings (50). Being so, the self-conscious protagonist requires a great ability to take information from the author about his position in the novel. In this way, discourse plays a significant role in carding out the authorial discourse which is "defined in relation to its referential object ... or in relation to other discourses within the same context or the same speech (stylistics in the narrow sense)" (Bakhtin: 1984, 185-86). In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), the protagonist, Christy, represents this polyphonic element. He is braggart.

He considers the killing of his father a token of courage: "I'm thinking this night wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by" (17). Christy continues to be so proud in the eyes of Irish people. He parades his will to be brave. Therefore, he mentions the killing of his father in order to make the Irish afraid of him. As such, in so doing, he stands for Synge's ideological interest in the changing Irish society that swerved severely in negative manners.

Christy represents Synge's polyphonic voice. In the polyphonic discourse, therefore, the self-conscious protagonist receives the authorial comments and informs the reader about his position in the novel from all sides. However, the protagonist gives referential meanings about his position which is stylistically enunciated in the fictional discourse because "the author's voice, on the contrary, is treated stylistically as discourse directed towards its own straightforward referential meaning" (Bakhtin: 1981, 69). Since the author's voice is objectified in the polyphonic novel, the textual meaning of the novel is obtained by the protagonist discourse. Here the stylistic presentation of the protagonist speech is of paramount importance because it substantiates the author's discourse; "the stylistic treatment of objectified discourse, that is, of a character's discourse, is subject- as if to a higher and ultimate authority- to the stylistic task of the author's context" (187). The protagonist Christy, in *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), commits a murder. He feels of the negative sequence of his crime. His fear appears when he shares his experience with Pegeen who informs him of the news about his crime:

CHRISTY — [suspiciously.] Is it news of my murder?

PEGEEN — [inside.] Murder, indeed.

CHRISTY — [loudly.] A murdered da? (22)

This dialogic speech between Christy and Pegeen is but a representation of the author's meticulous observation of the spread of crime in the Irish society. This crime did not use to take place in that society ever before. Obviously, the protagonist fictional position represents the characters position in polyphony. The unique position of the protagonist in the polyphonic novel demands an absolutely experimental methodology of fictional representation. On the other hand, the author's duty in the polyphonic novel is diminished simply to explore the "direct authorial voice" (190). Thus, the author's direct voice expresses his/her ideology by means of stylistic fabrication of the characters' discourse; Bakhtin adds: "for style presupposes the presence of authoritative points of view and authoritative, stabilized ideological value judgments" (192). In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), the murder haunts the protagonist, Christy: "CHRISTY. It's the walking spirit of my murdered da? (27). simultaneously, such murder haunts the author (Synge), but indirectly. It haunts the author in the polyphonic sense i.e., the protagonist speech exemplifies the author's abstract meanings regarding murder in the Irish society.

As such, the farthest narrative point in the polyphonic relationships engrosses the author's latent voice and its manifestation in the characters' speech. The author creates a fiction discourse by articulating it through the protagonist's voice. Polyphonic utterances augmented since the "dialogic relationships are absolutely impossible without logical relationships or relationships oriented toward a referential object, but they are not reducible to them, and they have their own specific character" (184). In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), similarly, the characters' speech is but a replica of the author's speech. The quotation below embodies the portrayal of the spread of murder in the Irish society. The dialogue is between Christy and Michael who talk about murder:

CHRISTY [with ferocity.] Take yourself from this, young fellow, or I'll maybe add a murder to my deeds to-day.

MICHAEL [springing up with a shriek.] Murder is it? Is it mad you are? Would you go making murder in this place, and it piled with poteen for our drink to-night? Go on to the foreshore if it's fighting you want, where the rising tide will wash all traces from the memory of man. [Pushing Shawn towards Christy.] (40)

This dialogue exemplifies Synge's refusal of the Irish social deterioration. He uses the polyphonic voice in order to achieve the effect of this deterioration of the Irish disposition. Here, the concept of "referential object" is designated as the author's ideology. Such ideology, thereupon, embroils in the author's intention, whereby "objectified discourse is likewise directed exclusively towards its object, but is at the same time the object of someone else's intention, the author's" (Bakhtin: 1984, 189). Furthermore, the author uses the characters' polyphonic utterance as a means of his/her indirect voice in the polyphonic utterances or, more appropriately, Bakhtin puts it as follows: "but the author may also make use of someone else's discourse for his own purposes, by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own" (189).

Thus, the characters' fictional discourse is the direct expression of the author's intention. In *The Playboy of Western World* (1911), the Irish disposition is portrayed through the sense of social deterioration, like murder. Pegeen says that there are many negative actions which are associated with murder: "PEGEEN ... (To Christy.) If you didn't commit murder or a bad, nasty thing, or false coining, or robbery, or butchery, or the like of them, there isn't anything that would be worth your troubling for to run from now. You did nothing at all" (9). Here, she seems to reprimand Christy for doing bad things, including murder. The polyphonic speech is the culmination of Synge's strict critique of the deterioration of the traditional Irish disposition. Thus, he uses polyphony as a tool to critique the new corrupt Irish disposition.

4. Conclusion

This essay has discussed the utilization of the polyphonic speech to critique the corrupt Irish disposition in Synge's *The Playboy of Western World* (1911). The study has focused on the position of the characters in the play's dramatic elements. That is, the characters and the setting. The characters are the literary persons who stand for the author's (Synge) notions projected into his dramatic events. These characters lead corrupt life. In the traditional sense, the Irish society did not use to live in severe corruption, including committing murder. In the play, there is an obvious meaning of corruption. The protagonist claims that he killed his father. The negative implication of this murder is that he feels that he is brave. Furthermore, he tries to gain the respect of Irish people. Therefore, the play's characters had been interpreted as quasi-real replicas of Irish people.

The Irish people stand for the Irish disposition. Consequently, the corrupt Irish people indicate the corrupt Irish disposition. More specifically, the Irish traditional disposition had been corrupted by negative acts, like murder. Moreover, the study has concentrated on the position of these characters in the play. Their position represents the position of the author who does not accept the corruption in the Irish society. Therefore, he puts forth his own repudiation of corruption in the characters' speeches. These speeches are the dialogic aspects of the play. For this reason, Bakhtin's concept of polyphony has been applied.

The application of the concept of polyphony has unraveled the duality of between the authors' voice and the characters' vices in the course of the plot. These are some dialogic voices that exemplify the authors' own voice. In this way, the analysis has concentrated on the characters' voices as explicit utterances of the author's implicit voice. In addition, the play's setting has been analyzed. In essence, the dramatic events that take place in the play relate to Irish places. The analysis of the Irish people in their national society has revealed Synge's discontent with the negative changes in the Irish personality. This personality has been particularly described and discussed as the Irish disposition.

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