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The Political Unconscious Staged in J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World**

Hwang, Hoon-sung
Dongguk University

I. Introduction

Following the taxonomy provided by Northrop Frye in "Theory of Symbols," Fredric Jameson puts forth four types of interpretation: 1) the Literal and Descriptive; 2) the Formal; 3) the Mythical and Archetypal; 4) the Analogic. The Literal and Descriptive interpretation pays "attention to verbal organization and to the order of language" (Jameson *The Political Unconscious* 71, *PU* in the following), whereas the Formal interpretation foregrounds "the phenomenological awareness of content as image, of the work's vocation to convey a symbolic structure or symbolic world by way of the first-level verbal construction" (Jameson *PU* 72).[1] Both the Literal and the Formal modes of

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1) As the Mythical and Archetypal as well as the Analogic interpretation concerns those narratives related to collective myths and archetypal patterns, I

interpretation, with their stress on the illumination of personal emotion and desire, tend to delimit textual interpretation to an individual level. By synthesizing these two modes of interpretation, I hope to divulge the political unconscious lurking in *The Playboy of the Western World*.[2] In order to link the individual discourse of a concrete text with the collective discourse of ideology, we need a new concept that melds the personal with the structural level of desire or, to put it another way, the textual (narrative) with the ideological level of interpretation. Adhering to this approach, I will establish the notion of *ideologème* coined by semiotic scholars as a useful tool for excavating the political unconscious hidden in the individual text. By way of example, Jameson, in his analysis of George Gissing's novels, imbues the Nietzschean-loaded term *ressentiment* (resentment), hitherto regarded as an individual and emotional concept, with ideological significance. Out of this comes the neologism, *ideologème*, a conceptual tool that provides the reader with a device to explore the hidden depth of the text. Likewise, I will identify the trope of loneliness as an *ideologème* that discloses the political unconscious in Synge's masterpiece.

First of all, the Literal and Descriptive interpretation that traces the evolution of the motif of loneliness has, by its nature, an inherent drawback; in its potential orientation toward a narrative and aesthetic closure, it tends to

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will focus my argument on the first two kinds of interpretation that shed light on individual dreams imbedded in concrete textual structures as well as in the imagery of narratives

2) The pagination of all subsequent citations from Synge's texts are based on *J. M. Synge: Riders to the Sea, The Shadow of the Glen, The Tinker's Wedding, The Well of the Saints, The Playboy of the Western World, Deidre of the Sorrows*. Ed. Ann Saddlemyer. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995 with the title followed by pagination.

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ignore disturbances or rifts inherent in the text. In effect, *The Playboy of the Western World* is a drama far removed from a well-wrought urn free of stains and cracks, to be subject to a Literal and Descriptive interpretation. This kind of New Critical Approach thus falls short of illuminating indeterminacies (*Unbestimmtheit* in Wolfgang Iser's term) which a more in-depth and dialectical interpretation could summon through a political reading. As Fredric Jameson proposes, "all cultural artifacts are to be read as a symbolic resolutions of real political and social contradictions deserves serious exploration and systematic experimental verification" (*PU* 80). Thus, by focusing on this specific work, I hope to trace the elements of political unconscious lurking within the text.

Largely thanks to the record of Synge' impressions in the Aran Islands, we are made privy to a moment of illumination *vis-à-vis* his obsession with the feeling of loneliness. Deeply touched by the pervasive loneliness of Irish country folks, Synge ruminates on an apparent dichotomy: "in spite of their high spirits, it gave me a sort of grief to feel the utter loneliness and desolation of the place that has given these people their finest qualities" (*The Playboy* 96). Little wonder that his sketch of natural landscape is soaked in desolate feeling: "As the night comes on, herons cry with a lonely desolate note that is echoed backwards and forwards among the hills" (253). He was greatly touched by what he perceived as the Irish peasants' natural, high spiritedness; especially, when such feelings found expression in the beautiful rhythms and cadences of their speech. Yet, at the same time Synge was saddened by the "utter loneliness and desolation of the place." Synge's statement however is replete with contradictions, thereby unwittingly disclosing his perplexed and ambivalent impressions about the Irish country folks.

How can one parse this common attribute shared between "high spirits,"

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"finest qualities," and "loneliness"? In other words, is it possible for people to have "high spirits" and to be utterly lonesome at the same time? And, further, how can "desolate" places bring out the "finest qualities" in a people? Christopher Murray also touches on this enigmatical statement, noting that the Aran Islands "is as full of morbidity as it is of joyousness" (65). He understands Synge's contradiction as follows:

> Synge read into the landscape his own romantic melancholy, and the landscape gave him back examples of the co-existence of death and endurance, material hardship and spiritual wonder, desolation and transcendence. (Murray 65)

With this sentimental projection of "romantic melancholy" into nature, Murray's apolitical interpretation however falls short of getting to the heart of the matter. Owing to this shortcoming, it is more advisable to critically examine the limits of Synge's political imagination. This would hopefully reveal the significant contradictions ingrained in the Irish peasantry class.[3)] Probably, Synge fails to see through the façade of their joviality behind which lurks the repression of a desperate desire to escape their locus. As Roche contends, his drama substantiates the "theme of a constricting environment and the dream of a fuller life *elsewhere*" (11 my emphasis).

In this view, their "high spirits" could be interpreted as mere affectation, an unhealthy stock response to the world around them. This discrepancy

3) Murray also highlights Synge's half-hearted yet subversive gestures inherent in primitivism which is quite discrete from my notion of subversive potentials based on real politics; "Synge endorsed primitivism and was within an ace of idealizing tradition in plays which provide . . . 'visions of pastoral' and yet Synge was subversive" (64).

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between the reality and the impression may be due to a recognizable misunderstanding on the part of the young traveler sick and tired of urban speeches of hypocritical gentility, experienced most notably during his exile in Paris. In this biographical context, the perception of a high-spirited Irish peasantry could be seen as a residual wish for a purer or more primitive form of discourse. For, despite such empathetic effort, Synge never quite felt at home with the people he valorized in his art. Indeed, Synge always thought of himself as an eternal stranger in the Irish countryside, a personage denied access to the hearts of the common folk whom he - at least from an aesthetic standpoint – loved and admired.[4] In other words, if only aesthetically, he may deserve to be honored as "a martyr to 'art'"; yet, politically, his reading of the peasantry is full of ideological contradictions. For instance, Synge is apparently far from enlightened on the tragic qualities of the pristine yet sub-human condition of the Irish peasantry. This is palpably evident regarding his disinterest in, or ignorance of the politico-economic and cultural conditions of the peasantry living under the yoke of colonial rule. The stereotyped image of Synge was as "an ascendancy dilettante" who

> dabbles in the bohemian fads of *fin de siècle* Europe before coming to his senses during his famous sojourns on the Aran Islands, where he becomes a wiling convert to Irish Revivalism on discovering the richness of Irish folk culture and the power of the Irish language: having bravely faced down both the inherited prejudices of his Anglo-Irish background and the chauvinistic extremes of Irish

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4) Quite to the contrary, Synge has been estimated to have been soaked in the real life of the Irish peasantry, which Lady Gregory endeavored to romanticize and idealize in a mythic fashion along with W. B. Yeats. However, it is obvious that Synge felt averse to concretely examining the political reality of the Irish peasantry

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> nationalism, Synge becomes *a martyr to 'art'*, brought down by the philistinism and intransigence of those consumed by the 'narrow' concerns of Irish politics. (Mathews 7 my emphasis)

Synge's ambiguous political stance induces the reader to uncover the heart of darkness which may be hidden in the repressed psyche of the 'lonely' Irish peasantry in the guise of loneliness. In that respect, my research corresponds with a postcolonial analysis of this play. Coincidentally, there is a correlation between Synge's pronouncement of the inherent impotency of the "pharmacopoeia of Galen," and Frantz Fanon's confession to his impotency as psychiatrist for the alienated Arabs. So alienated and psychologically estranged in their own country that they live "in a state of absolute depersonalization" (qtd. in Bhaba 113). Such existential abjection is, according to Fanon, politically determined: "The social structure existing in Algeria was hostile to any attempt to put the individual back where he belonged" (qtd. in Bhaba 113). Fanon's confession of impotency is thus a frustration of his dismal sense of hopelessness in curing his contemporary Arabs in psychotherapeutic terms.

What is politically exigent in Fanon's analysis is the "colonial alienation of the person" (Bhaba 114). In this view, Synge's romanticized impressions of the Irish folk's "high spirits" and their "finest qualities" do not do justice to their real situations. They are doomed, like Fanon's colonized Arabs, to dwell "in a state of absolute depersonalization." Therein lies the kernel of the sentiment of loneliness, which should be interpreted from a materialist perspective beyond the level of a romantic sentiment or existentialist jargon rendered in universal terms. In short, it should be illuminated only by uncovering politico-economic and cultural conditions.

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The matter of Synge's political orientation is controversial. Yeats asserts

that Synge is singularly "unfitted to think a political thought," or as Cairns and Richards explain, "the nature of the nation was Synge's fundamental concern" (qtd. in Murray 65). Murray keenly observes that, "although undoubtedly one of the 'last romantics', with a strong conservative streak, Synge was also in his own way a true radical" (64). According to this romantic interpretation, Christy is "a romantic poet and self-created myth maker" (64). Howe also observes that "Synge, being incapable of thinking a political thought, gave not a moment's heed to English jurisdiction" (109). Richards, while commenting on Synge's penchant for apolitical detachment, interprets "Christy's celebratory exit" as tantamount to "romantic anarchism" (39). Significantly remote from real politics, Kiberd's mythmaking and archetypal approach reveals Christy as "a mock-Cuchulain" (114), hence, *The Playboy of the Western World,* is a "mock-drama" (115).

Also, there exist certain critics who are armed with a political vision wider than mine. Roche, for example, locates a utopian vision in the "theme of a constricting environment and the dream of a fuller life elsewhere" (11) in terms of Utopianism. Like Roche, Deane juxtaposes also "the realm of the real suppressed, with [and] the realm of the possible," dramatized in this play (qtd. in Innes "Postcolonial Synge" 120). Innes interprets the drama as "a double-edged attack on the nationalist glorification of violence." (*Modern British Drama* 228) and applauds Synge's success in discovering "ways of making a subaltern group articulate and eloquent" ("Postcolonial Synge" 129). In Dobbins' words, Synge's politics also signifies the act of "negat[ing] the fetishization of the past)" (Dobbins 137).

Politically motivated or otherwise, defeatism, self-contempt and self-hatred are apparently ingrained deep within the psyche of an Irish peasantry class, psychological complexes which they are forced to overcome, if not, at least

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placate by means of self-mockery. They are gradually transformed into sado-masochists, ridiculing each other and poking fun at themselves in effusions of self-laceration. The colonial power has brainwashed the colonized into believing that they are inferior and helpless beings at the mercy of the enlightened authority, thereby to be reformed in moral and rational terms. As Fanon diagnoses, the colonial power is "a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offsprings from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts" (211). Of course, this is not a natural or accidental but an ingeniously and structurally practiced process as evidenced in an exemplum of Foucauldian power, that is, in accordance with a microphysics of power. Thus, the colonized's immanent fear of protective power is pervasive, since "the effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives' heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality" (Fanon 211).

If depersonalized or self-alienated, you cannot successfully connect yourself with others and the world. Deprived of your own subjecthood by the colonizing powers, you lose your own will and power to locate yourself. We can see this at its most abject form in the dramas of Beckett: people turn into tramps like Gogo and Didi, aimlessly wandering about the countryside; or, *reducto ad absurdum*, become nothing more, as evinced in *Not I,* than a disembodied Mouth, mumbling empty talks, with all the disenchantment of a *poet manqué.* Self-ridicule and self-contempt, deep-seated in your subconscious, are always near at hand to frequent your casual gestures and words in everyday life. This motif of grotesque action crammed with non-sequiturs and inconsequential, eccentric behavior is due to the characters' impotence to define their own identity. The loss of subjecthood and identity signifies the loss of meaningful contact with the world. Little wonder, then, that a human

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being is prone to the victimhood of loneliness.

II. The political unconscious

As aforesaid, the ultimate goal of this essay is to exhume elements of the political unconscious working beneath the sentimental trope of loneliness and to illuminate it as a political force in the era of Irish postcolonialism. Christopher Innes succinctly touches on the political innuendo hidden in *The Playboy of the Western World*:

> Seen in these political terms, the romanticized admiration for imaginary murder becomes *a double-edged attack on the nationalist glorification of violence*. If Christy's father symbolizes Britain, oppressive imperial rule, or the equally paternalistic landlords of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, then the actuality of violent revolution is exposed as despicable. At the same time, when the play was written, the burning of the great houses, the slaughter of the civil war and the murderous terrorism of the IRA had not yet happened. Republican sentiment was still largely restricted to words; and *Synge condemns this rhetorical attitude to politics as empty and self deceiving*. It is the twin pillars of Irish politics, religion and patriotism-not just the popular image of idealized peasantry-that the play ridicules. (*Modern British Drama* 228 my emphasis).

According to Innes's political interpretation, the ambiguity in this play is inherently related to Synge's contemporary political situation, and is characterized by "a double-edged attack on the nationalist glorification of violence." Innes's interpretation of Synge's political stance however is a bit far-fetched and too topically self-serving to his own purpose of historically

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tracing from the hindsight one of those causes of the outburst of IRA terrorism.[5] Synge never explicitly expressed his own political ideas, especially on the issue of British colonization, hence it is going too far to contend that "Synge condemns this rhetorical attitude to politics as empty and self-deceiving" (Innes 228). Rather, what engrossed Synge in the process of dramatic creation was how to overcome and supersede the influence of Ibsenite dramaturgy entrenched, as it was, in a didactic mission to imbue modern drama with socially instructive meanings. This tendency is perhaps best expressed in the prefaces to his dramatic pieces.

From this viewpoint, Synge's plays need to be illuminated through recourse to a more elaborate, poststructuralist analysis. The aesthetics proclaimed in the preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* may inform against the actual textualization of this play. The manifesto tellingly demonstrates that Synge is indubitably absorbed in explaining his drama from an aesthetic viewpoint, believing, as he articulated, "in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words" (*The Playboy* 96). Unlike Ibsen or Zola "dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid

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5) Innes's insight approximates Fanon's idea of evolution in native writings, according to which Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* is in the second phase. Fanon identifies three phases "native writing" in the works of native writers: 1) the first phase is characterized by "unqualified assimilation" on the part of native writers, importing "the culture of the occupying power"; 2) in the second phase, the native writer "only has exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall their life only ... old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism"; thus, it is "just-before-the-battle" (the battle, of course, presages IRA's terrorist attack mentioned by Innes); finally, the third phase is characterized by "the fighting" "revolution" of "national literature" (222-3).

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words," Synge believed in the imaginative power of language to "give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form" (96). His project of combining aesthetics with reality is redolent of Wordsworth's "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads"*. Wordsworth's revolutionary experimentation with poetic imagination is substantially rooted in realism. It is characterized by a belief in the life and language of common people, a position that is commensurate with the *Zeitgeist* of Romantic movement championing the ideology of democracy. Wordsworth found a new poetics reflective of aesthetico-politico concerns; however, Synge's attempt in his manifesto to aesthetically harmonize poetry and reality falls short of convincing the reader. This is largely because, unlike Wordsworth, Synge's conception of reality is devoid of substance and political concerns. His lack of political consciousness inevitably leads to his resorting to containment policy, as Jameson would argue, in the course of dramatic creation, demonstrated in the desire for aesthetic closure. Synge's overarching vision of romanticism necessarily imposes a narrative closure on the text. The truth however is that a dramatic text cannot be controlled and contained by aesthetic closure; fissures always attend an apparently unified and closed text.

As Fredric Jameson states, narrative closure cannot remain intact once it undergoes "historicizing reappropriation" (49). In order to trace the fissures embedded in Synge's play, let us examine his notion of reality. Synge's reality obviously refers to the real life of Irish folks, and their often deeply lonely life-experiences. In spite of this material fact, his vision of reality is implacably romanticized. This is because Synge's romantic or pastoral vision tends to be blind on the issue of alienation or depersonalization in real politics; thus, his attempt to trace the origin of loneliness in a universal condition of human existence is doomed to fail. In other words, his reality does not seem to be

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deeply rooted in the popular lives of the Irish folks. This is especially observable in those Prefaces where an archetypal sense of loneliness traceable to the disharmony of man with nature is emphatically pronounced. His romantic bent can be detectable in his explicit preference for a pastoral life over a life lived in an urban environment: "where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks" (*The Playboy* 97). The sentiment of loneliness goes beyond the matter of emotion in everyday life or, even, a universalized concept of existential loneliness. Rather, it should be understood as symbolic of undissolved sedimented trauma; as residual anguish lurking within the human psyche in the wake of political struggle. In other words, loneliness is an inevitable product of colonizing oppression, hence, Synge's dramatic texts, enclosed as they are by a unified ideology of romantic aesthetics, should be dismantled in order to uncover the political unconscious embedded within them.

To these purposes, Fredric Jameson proposes a poststructuralist method of interpretation with a view to excavating agenda relating to the political unconscious hidden in the text. Jameson defines the "function of the doctrine of a political unconscious" as follows:

> It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity. (*PU* 20)

Jameson is adamant in sticking to the Marxist tenet that "there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (20). Relying heavily on Jameson's method of interpretation, I intend to unmask "cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts" (20). The political

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unconscious is usually repressed and submerged under the surface text as the "*impensé* or *non-dit"* in a cultural text, which, however, can be exhumed "by means of a radically historicizing reappropriation" (49). In this process, "the ideal of logical closure" ultimately turns out to be "an indispensable instrument for revealing those logical and ideological centers" (49).

The politics of *The Playboy of the Western World* is characterized by two conspicuous phenomena in the *mise-en-scène* of the power struggle: the absence of the oppressor and the defeatism of the oppressed. Firstly, most of the dramatic characters on stage are representatives of the oppressed, whereas those representing the oppressor are invisible on stage. The paradox is that in the absence of the oppressive forces, the traumatic and actual scars left on the oppressed by them are strewn over the stage. Secondly, the victims of oppression, with the fear of authority seared within their psyches, are incapable of showing explicit hatred or rebellion against the opposing forces of colonization. Forgoing their natural right to rebel against oppressive powers, they cherish a dream of merely surviving the harsh reality. The sole, if ever, happiness allotted to them seems to be the fortunate happenstance of staying out of harm's way, that is, from the everyday colonial predations besetting the rest of Ireland. In this respect, they are akin to the "dull roots" who reject to be stirred "with spring rain"; the winter of colonization kept them "warm, covering/ Earth in forgettable snow, feeding/ A little life with dried tubers" ("The Waste Land"). The absence of the oppressor alongside the withdrawal of the will to resist on the part of the oppressed, moves the plot development toward an ambiguous ending, i.e. a tragic-comedy. No tragic hero to battle against the evil forces is present, no glimpse of a rosy future is visible; the sole hero presentable to the colonized people is a mock-hero from the Western world. Even worse, the colonized are not intellectually enlightened enough, that

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is, neither prepared to welcome nor enthrone Christy as a brave and legitimate warrior and fighter for freedom from political oppression. Skelton expounds on this very lack of cognitive will that besets the community:

> She (Pegeen) represents an Ireland that dreaming of independence cannot accept the consequences of the dream becoming reality any more than that faith is spiritual power to which she gives a lip service. For Christy is a representation of faith and spiritual power ... Poverty of spirit is the disease Pegeen and all Ireland must recognize (*The Writings* 130)

The ambiguous ending tends to weaken the political character of this play, which, however, does not necessarily diminish its political gravity. Political messages submerged under the smooth-looking surface text, intermittently seep through in the guise of passing remarks, complaints or relations of traumatic experience, for, as Jameson avers, political struggle has been universal and immanent over human history. These insignificant traces of traumatic experience thus constitute the centerpiece of Synge's political unconscious. Such traces, however, need to be examined more closely if we are to unearth the politics in *The Playboy of the Western World.*

For instance, the stereotyped image of the authority power for the Irish peasant is "like a gaudy officer you'd hear cursing and damning and swearing oaths" (*The Playboy* 110), as Christy depicts his father in drunken slumber. It is fair to say that in this analogic process, the attributes of the vehicle (e.g., a gaudy officer) are no less important than Christy's condemnation of his father. In other words, Christy's comparing his father to "a gaudy officer" ends up highlighting the evil character of the colonizing dominion, i.e., violence and oppression. His father was once also "locked in the asylums for battering

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peelers" (*The Playboy* 110). The audience is debarred from accessing what angered Old Mahon into battering the peelers so violently that he was put in an asylum. Crucially, they are also prevented from accessing Christy's emotional and political attitude toward these two incidents. Although the background of the incident is erased and the fiercely violent character of Christy's father is foregrounded for the sake of Christy's accusation, a perceptive audience will never fail to notice the hidden agenda of political nature in this context, and will also be alerted to the harsh reality of British colonization: Old Mahon was 'battering' a historically known collaborator of colonial administration. In short, the audience is completely in the dark about what is happening at least at the surface level of the text; however, these passing remarks, though truncated from the original context of relevance, trenchantly mirror the real politics of colonial dominion.

The colonized Ireland depicted in this play is an upside-down world in every respect. The world of the Irish peasantry is twisted and depraved; moreover, the values of the traditional community have seemingly gone astray. Moral yardsticks are differently applied, depending on social standing that is mainly determined by the spectrum of colonial hierarchy. As the result, power elites from the class of colonial collaborators in this situation tend to exempt themselves from all kinds of moral obligation and social justice. They take advantage of their status, gained through the colonial hierarchy, by standing above the Law. The wonders of the Western world are no less than the list of these real but socially distorted pictures, even though they are aesthetically rendered in both rhythmically euphonic and humorous lines. Pirates and preachers change roles and parching peelers are in collusion with poteen-makers or jobbing jockies to exploit the peasant class; "There now, Drink a health to the wonders of the Western world, the pirates, preachers,

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poteen-makers, with the jobbing jockies, parching peelers, and the juries fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law" (*The Playboy* 119).[6] This passage is rife with political implications. But Robin Skelton fights shy of making a political interpretation: the tenor of the play is all about "cynical realism as well as the romantic love of wildness and roguery which is characteristic of the Western world" (*The Writings* 126). However, the prime source of these twisted and depraved pictures is arguably none other than the Western world colonized by the Eastern Empire in the form of the British Empire.

What is at stake in the peasantry in the Aran Islands is the interiorized consciousness of colonization as described by Fanon; it is here where Synge's political unconscious seems to be seeping through. Very few can be alert to the political reality of their own present situation, especially when they have been immersed in the habits and *modus vivendi* of everyday life over a long history of colonization. Every incident of social evils is interiorized and habitualized in individual *habitus*. Naturally habitualized into these practices and customs, the colonized subjects are blind to the contradictions generated by the political system that subjugates them thereby getting torpidly oblivious to the oppressive violence in their wake. All kinds of structural evils - inconveniences, inequality and injustice suffered by the Irish peasantry in their everyday life - are particularized as shortcomings or moral defects felt at an individual level. As

6) Sharing with other critics the well-known fact that "Synge, being incapable of thinking a political thought, gave not a moment's heed to English jurisdiction," Howe however believes that Synge has actually seen through it, "The impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the West. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime" (qtd. in Howe 108-9)

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Mathews contends, "the politics of agrarian unrest are not the focus—they are a given. It is the exhaustion and trauma left in their wake at an individual level that is of most concern" (10).

The colonized people are ready to put blame on their ignorance, laziness, foolishness, or cowardice, and their unfair treatment and false victimization in lieu of showing their will to rectify wrongdoings perpetrated by the colonizer. Gradually they fall victims to a psychically abnormal phenomenon of depersonalization. This is what Mathews means when he refers to the "cultural torpidity evident within Gaelic and Anglo-Ireland" which "is most obviously manifested in the wild, visceral and subversive acts of defiance perpetrated by so many of his heroes and heroines in response to cultural stagnation and fragmentation" (10). "Cultural torpidity" practiced in everyday life is no less devastating than politic-economic exploitation, since it can transform independent and free subjects into willingly colonized slaves. The loss of human subjecthood is thus the key message this play intends to address.

Pegeen's sardonic complaints epitomize the hopeless condition of a people who have even been abandoned by the Holy Father Himself. In effect, Father Reilly does not "bother with" a land that abounds only in progenies of physically impaired people: "Red Linahan has a squint in his eye, Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the Mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits, we're a queer lot these times to go troubling the Holy Father on his sacred seat" (100). Widow Quin murdered her husband. Michael's drinking song also reflects the imprisonment of the Irish peasantry: "The jailor and the turnkey/ They quickly ran us down,/ And brought us back as prisoners/ Once more to Cavan town/ There we lay bewailing/ All in a prison bound.../" (138).

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This is "a demoralized, impoverished place, that looks for its authority from elsewhere (whether it is the approval to marry from the courts of Rome or

selling judgments of the English law)" (Roche 84). The avant-gardes of oppressive authority are peelers, policemen who execute real and physical violence on common people on behalf of the dominant class of colonization: "In the colonies, the official, the legitimate agent, the spokesperson for the colonizer and the regime of oppression, is the police officer or the soldier" (Fanon 3). Daneen Sullivan's eyes are also burst by these executioners who carry out orders on behalf of the exploiting landlord class and the British Empire.

III. Loneliness as *Ideologème*

All of these maimed images of deprivation, repression and violence coalesce into the Irish sentiment of loneliness. Their loneliness cannot be confined to a pure and private feeling in the guise of "an individual parole or utterance" but is crucially embedded in "the great collective and class discourses" (*PU* 76). This sentiment of loneliness should be thus illuminated in terms of a new concept of "collective discourse" i.e., *ideologème*. For, as Fredric Jameson contends, "our object of study will prove to be the *ideologème*, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes" (76). Through such a prism, textual analysis amounts to a political project that identifies *ideologèmes* which work to transcend both the Literal and Descriptive as well as Formal interpretation.

Ideologèmes are "those narrative unities of a socially symbolic type" (185). Jameson, in his study of Gissing's novels, attempts to illustrate them by electing *ressentiment* as a textual sign that critiques "Victorian moralism and hypocrisy" (201). He posits the theory of *ideologème* on three attributes: 1)"an

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amphibious formation" between pseudoidea and protonarrative (87); 2) a diachronic quality materialized as historical sedimentation; 3) revolutionary potentials embraced by the have-nots and "alienated intellectuals" (87).

Firstly, appertaining to "an amphibious formation," Jameson gives the formulation of *ideologème* credit for "its capacity to mediate between conceptions of ideology as abstract opinion, class value, and the like, and the narrative materials" (87). Semiotically speaking, *ideologème* manifests itself either "as a pseudoidea" or "as a protonarrative" (87). In *The Playboy of the Western World*, pseudoidea refers to the Lacanian big Other as "a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice," while protonarrative indicates the "ultimate class fantasy" of the colonized Irish peasants "about the 'collective characters' which are the classes in opposition" (87). Applied to *The Playboy of the Western World*, their "class fantasy" is no less than the proto-textual vision of reclaiming their proper identity under the colonial dominion. The sad thing is that the cognitive passage toward emancipation is inherently blocked under the colonial system, since the process of identification is paradoxically "itself an imperial process, a form of violent appropriation in which the Other is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of Self" (Fuss 6). "The imperial subject" builds unwittingly "an Empire of the Same and installs at its center a tyrannical dictator, 'His Majesty, the Ego" (Fuss 6). In this play, exiled from the "Empire of the Same," the Irish peasantry class thusly colonized remain eternal wanderers in their own land. Little wonder that Synge's play is inundated with the elements of "*impensé* or *non-dit.*" None of the characters articulate a desire to reclaim their authentic identity in a total torpid situation. Absence of colonial forces on stage is ominously contrasted with the helpless yet visible presence of the victims of colonization. The former does not need to show up personally, the "Empire of the Same" rules by itself.

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Devoid of the other antagonistic force in conflict, this play does not conform to the tragedy in the Hegelian sense: the tragic conflict between two opposing forces with equal power and legitimacy in confrontation. It is thus destined to fall into a tragic-comic or mock-heroic farce.

Secondly, Jameson stresses the "residual effect" (186) of historical sedimentation as a way of conceptualizing *ideologème*. Running counter to contemporary trends of synchronic approaches to narratives, Jameson as a Marxist, endeavors to diachronically "defend the primacy of 'class conflict' against the [synchronic] critiques of 'codes, contexts and circumstances'" (Mahling 283). He supposes there exists "the raw material, the inherited narrative paradigms, upon which the novel as a process works and which it transforms into texts of a different order" (185). In this view, the history of narrative is no more than that of a series of repeated *ideologèmes* in variation. They do not manifest themselves in popular or secular literature but in "derivate literature" which is "a potential storehouse of such materials" (186). Jameson thus pigeonholes Gissing's novels within the category of Dickensian derivation, which utilizes "sentiment and melodrama" as a narrative device of "the carrot and stick of nineteenth-century middle-class moralizing about the lower class" (186). In other words, the seminal *ideologème* textualized in Gissing's novels is the reemergence of *ressentiment* in Dickens's novels.

The significance of excavating *ideologème* in narratives thus can be affirmed by the novelist's capacity to illuminate "the cultural Symbolic order of" a specific period (201). The theme of "alienated intellectuals", for example, as historical sign or *ideologème* usually "vanishes into the past along with" "the objective spirit" of a specific period, "leaving only its traces-material signifiers, lexemes, enigmatic words and phrases-behind it" (201). The critic's job is then to excavate the political unconscious by reconstructing the narrative text based

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on those residual material signs. The project of reconstructing it thus creates parallels with "the reconstruction and inventory of the *ideologèmes* of the historical period in question," since it signifies the work of retracing "such vanished lexical meanings and connotations and of the semantic systems that generate them" (201).

The absence of fatherhood constitutes such semantic system in *The Playboy of the Western World*. It has a "residual effect" on the psyche of the Irish peasantry thereby reemerging ultimately as the *ideologème* of loneliness in this play. The absence of fatherhood is materialized as the absence of two Fathers on stage, an English and an Italian, as James Joyce would say. In this regard, the key theme of patricide in this play is very paradoxical, since patriarchal power has already lost its authority and legitimacy to control the community as dramatized in the play. Pegeen's father, a drunken buffoon, falls into a drinking spree, "leaving a poor girl with her own self counting the hours to the dawn of day"(*The Playboy* 98). However, the religious patriarchy still reigns with might and main. Her fiancé, Shawn is an egregiously deplorable coward who incarnates the absence of male empowerment and authority. Both males show slavish adherence to the symbolic power of such patriarchal structures as the Roman Catholic and British Imperialist authorities. However passionately Shawn may love Pegeen, he cannot propose to her without obtaining "Father Reilly's dispensation from the bishops, or the Court of Rome" (100).

Given the analogy of a father image associated with the colonial power, the violent repression of the ruling class and authority power, Old Mahon's despotic order for Christy to marry Widow Casey parallels those exorbitant demands made by the peelers and managing officers of the landlords and colonial administration. The Colonial threat is personified, somewhat misogynically through reference to the ugly nag, "a walking terror from beyond

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the hills, and she two score and five years, and two hundred weights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye" (118). As backlash against their humiliation, male folks tend to vent their suppressed anger by resorting to atrocious behavior like having a dog "screeching and wriggling three hours at the butt of a string, swearing it was a dead dog" (*The Playboy* 106). The macabre images and gruesome words scattered in this play are beyond our imagination; however, Synge justifies his text by maintaining that "the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed, compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay" (*The Playboy* 96).

Synge himself once criticized the political oppression practiced in Aran Islands, Mathews interprets:

> Having visited the congested districts of the west of Ireland he was all too well aware that the cosy alliance between business, parliamentary politics, religion and the professions was as culpable in visiting unspeakable misery on the most marginalised of the Irish peasantry as was the colonial administration. (Mathews 10-1).

Christy's father, Old Mahon is arguably a ludicrous parody of the British Empire in the sense that the Oedipal patricide perpetrated by Christy is no more than a theatrical travesty of the real politics occurring in Synge's contemporary Ireland.

Thirdly, by excavating *ressentiment* as a vital *ideologème* in Gissing's Novels, Jameson foregrounds its power to illustrate the hidden motivation lurking in social change. The phenomenon of revolution, thus may be more lucidly illuminated by virtue of the *ideologème* of *ressentiment* in a twofold way. The first concerns its psychological nature in the sense that "the

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ideologème of *ressentiment* can seem to account in a 'psychological' and nonmaterialistic sense for the destructive envy the have-nots feel for the haves"(201). The second adumbrates the revolutionary potential that this feeling nurtures. Unlike its negative implication, Jameson contends, it is an enormously positive and constructive feeling shared by have-nots as well as 'ascetic scholars' armed with "natural vitality and aggressive, properly aristocratic insolence" (201). This feeling, usually lying dormant in times of relative social stability, is ready to explode into a revolutionary force in a transition period. This lends credence to Nietzsche's picture of "ascetic priests, the intellectuals *par excellence* - unsuccessful writers and poets, bad philosophers, bilious journalists, and failures of all kinds—whose private dissatisfactions lead them to their vocations as political and revolutionary militants" (202). Sadly, unlike Gissing's novels, the *ideologème* of loneliness in *The Playboy of the Western World*, emptied of constructive and explosive force, does not lead to a brave rebellion against colonial oppression.

Ideologème usually functions at the level of the tension and struggle between social classes.[7] The stark truth in all this is that the Irish peasantry are unable to gain access to the very real and violent power that oppresses them. Power in this colonial context is no longer visible; it functions as "a microphysics of power" in the Foucauldian sense. A black-and-white yardstick

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7) Jameson also confesses to the notoriously illusive character of *ideologème* "The immense preparatory task of identifying and inventorying such *ideologème* has scarcely even begun, and to it the present book will make *the most modest contribution*: most notably in its isolation of that fundamental nineteenth-century *ideologème* which is the "theory" of *ressentiment*, and in its "unmasking" of ethics and the ethical binary opposition of good and evil as one of the fundamental forms of ideological thought in Western culture" (*PU* 88 my emphasis)

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of the good and the bad is not valid any longer. The collaborators of the colonial government do not have a bad conscience, as they imagine themselves as ethical and legitimate executives of colonial administration. Nevertheless, the reality of violence and power is immediate and forcefully affects the community:

> The agent does not alleviate oppression or mask domination. He displays and demonstrates them with the clear conscience of the law enforcer, and brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject. (Fanon 4)

Through her heartfelt storytelling of holy Ireland, Marcus Quin could move old people to tears but she "got six months for maiming ewes" (100). There is more than a suggestion here that she deliberately maimed her landlord's ewes. Nonetheless, she could not be protected by her male partners, including her husband, who had already genuflected to the exploiting powers of colonization. Little wonder that "Bravery is a treasure in a lonesome place" (106). "[With] blind rages tearing within," the female folks were always in pursuit of "fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused" (109).

IV. Conclusion

The Playboy of the Western World is both an aesthetic and "symbolic resolution" of the political and religious contradictions under the regime of British colonization. The textual evidence lying latent beneath the surface text ubiquitously testifies to the cultural torpidity underpinning the sundry macabre images of animal torture, the grotesque and repeated admissions of spousal

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homicide committed by Widow Quin, and the litany of maimed people brutalized by the colonial and Roman Catholic authorities. Alienated from the center of powerful authority, the Irish peasants portrayed in this tragic-comedy are extremely lonesome in a politico-economic sense as much as spiritually and emotionally. The symbolical resolution should be attained through a dramatic incarnation of a hero gifted with the attributes of a romantic poet and a brave warrior i.e., the former for healing their loneliness in soft words and the latter for fighting to reclaim the dispossessed power. In this context, the key motif of patricide is more than fitting, since the two Fathers of the Irish peasant are the British colonizers and Roman Catholics.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, the two forces in confrontation are obviously the Irish peasantry and the British colonialists plus a handful of Irish collaborators, including landowners and civic servants. Amidst the conflict between these forces in confrontation, the Irish colonized people sense that they, substantially removed as they are from the center of hegemonic power, are bereft of all kinds of privileges that would lead to human happiness. Fundamentally alienated in politico-economical terms, they are deprived of the position to reclaim their identity. Alienation, existentialist or sociological, leads the Irish peasants to feel desolate and lonely. In this respect, their loneliness is not restricted to an individualized sentiment. It goes beyond the private discontent and frustration thereby entering the realm of collective and ideological discourse. As an intersection with amphibious character, the *ideologème* is capable of mediating conceptions of abstract ideology, worldviews and value systems with narrative practices manifested in the text as an intersection between *langue* as ideological scheme of class struggle and *parole* as concrete textual phenomena. Thus the sentiment of loneliness graphically links the words and deeds of an Irish peasantry soaked in loneliness

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with the abstract theory of ideology concerning the politico-economical practices of exploitation under the regime of colonization. Clearly, the *ideologème* of loneliness plays a crucial role in connecting “a conceptual description” with “a narrative manifestation” (*PU* 87)

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The Political Unconscious Staged in J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*

Abstract

Hwang, Hoon-sung

This paper aims to excavate the political unconscious hidden in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. Heavily relying on Fredric Jameson's critical insight on the process of historicizing reappropriation, it adopts the semiotic term, *ideologème* in order to link the individual discourse of a concrete text with the collective discourse of ideology. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, the two forces in confrontation are obviously the Irish peasantry and the British colonialists. The former, fundamentally alienated in politico-economical terms, are deprived of the position to reclaim their identity. As the result, alienation, existentialist or sociological, leads the Irish peasants to feel desolate and lonely.

In this view, their loneliness is not confined to an individualized sentiment but is transformed into an *ideologème*. As an intersection with amphibious character, the *ideologème* is capable of mediating conceptions of abstract ideology, worldviews and value systems with narrative practices manifested in the text as an intersection between *langue* as ideological scheme of class struggle and *parole* as concrete textual phenomena. Thus the sentiment of loneliness graphically links the words and deeds of an Irish peasantry soaked in loneliness with the abstract theory of ideology concerning the politico-economical practices of exploitation under the regime of colonization.

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Key Words Political Unconscious, Synge, Irish Drama, Postcolonial Drama, Fredric Jameson, Playboy of the Western World

황훈성(단독연구)
동국대학교

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