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**Theatrical Articulation of Irish Nationalism in the Abbey Theatre:**

**Contexts of Discontents and Controversies**

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**Abstract**

The Irish theatre has been a significant platform for cultural expression and socio-political discourse. Throughout its history, however, it has also witnessed several instances of riots, where conflicts stemming from differing ideological, cultural, and nationalistic viewpoints erupted into violence. This paper seeks to analyze the causes, events, and outcomes of these riots, shedding light on the broader implications for Irish society and its artistic landscape. Each riot can be attributed to a complex interplay of socio-political factors, including religious conflicts, national identity struggles, economic inequality, and cultural representation disputes. The paper examines how these elements interacted within the specific historical context of each incident, contributing to the eruption of violence. Riots in the Irish theatre provide valuable insights into the complexities of socio-political interactions within the cultural domain. By understanding the causes, events, and outcomes of these riots, we can better appreciate the significance of theatre as a reflection of society and as a tool for shaping collective identity.

**Keywords:**

Irish theatre, riots, artistic freedom, socio-political factors, cultural expression, nationalism, historical analysis, identity formation, discourse.

If the Playboy is art, to hell with art and those who create it.

(Joseph McGarrity in a letter to Patrick McCartan. April 16, 1912)

The Abbey Theatre and the plays performed by its founding figures have been examined with their theoretical contents and theatrical depictions, bearing the dissatisfactions and riotous sentiments of the audiences. The riots and the controversies that the plays generated during and after the performance disrupted the playwrights' intentions and imaginations of creating an Irish Nation through literary and theatrical adventures. The nationalist press echoed with disgrace and condemned the play as an "unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and, worse still, upon Irish peasant girlhood." (Kilroy, 7) The furor came to be known as the "Playboy riots."

The Abbey Theatre played a significant role in articulating Irish nationalism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This period was marked by various contexts of discontent and controversies that shaped the theatre's mission and productions. Let me briefly explore the historical and cultural backdrop against which the Abbey Theatre emerged, its contribution to Irish nationalism, and some controversies it faced. Colonialism and cultural suppression as a means to subjugate Ireland was a British colonial intent. Ireland had a long history of English colonialism and cultural suppression, which profoundly impacted the Irish people's sense of identity and nationhood. The Irish language, traditions, and culture were systematically marginalized during this period.

The emergence of the Abbey Theatre and the founding figures W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and John Millington Synge in 1904 were established to promote Irish playwrights, actors, and cultural expression. The Abbey Theatre became a platform for promoting Irish culture, history, and nationalism. It played a pivotal role in the revival of Irish literature and theater. Representation of Irish Life by Playwrights associated with the Abbey, like J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey, depicted the lives of ordinary Irish people, often focusing on their struggles and injustices.

Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) stirred controversy due to its portrayal of rural Irish life and its use of vernacular language. Upon its premiere, it faced protests and riots

in Dublin, as some Irish nationalists viewed it as disrespectful to Irish culture. The Abbey Theatre often faced censorship and opposition from conservative elements within Irish society who disagreed with its artistic choices and perceived it as too progressive. The Abbey's involvement in political matters, including its support for the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic League, also led to controversies and disagreements within the nationalist movement.

Despite controversies, the Abbey Theatre played a crucial role in the cultural renaissance of Ireland. It nurtured talented playwrights and actors, contributing to Irish literature and theater development. The Abbey inspired many Irish people to embrace and celebrate their cultural heritage, fostering a sense of Irish nationalism. The Abbey Theatre served as a significant platform for the theatrical articulation of Irish nationalism during a tumultuous period in Irish history. While it faced various controversies and challenges, it played a vital role in shaping Irish cultural identity and promoting the nation's rich literary and theatrical traditions.

The colonial Ireland in the early phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a growth of sentiment against the English occupation, forcing the inhabitants to take a stand on nationalism. Though most favored Irish autonomy, much contention grew to overachieving independence and proceeding after winning it. The more revolutionary Republican nationalists, who sought the collaboration of the masses and often advocated the use of radical - sometimes violent - ways to pursue their cause, attempted to build a foundation for unified patriotism, choosing the Irish peasant as their primary emblem and demanding that in any depiction this icon be portrayed as unfailingly heroic and virtuous. On the other hand, the Cultural Revivalists mentioned in the introduction generally concerned themselves with building Ireland's reputation through the creation of great art and with using parliamentary means to gain their freedoms.

Nevertheless, they needed to consider this construct a reality. The "peasant plays" that supported the nationalist point of view did prove popular in Dublin theaters, but, refusing to follow the party line, the artists at the Abbey Theatre frequently challenged the idealized image of the Irish peasant perpetuated by the Gaelic League and other nationalist societies in their campaigns and replaced it with portraits which, by painting in the warts and wrinkles, transformed the peasants from political icons into - in their view - iconoclastic works of art.

Throughout the years leading up to *The Playboy of the Western World*, each group fought for its chosen depiction as objective truth, and as Ireland moved towards independence, the battle over the image of the Irish peasant often mirrored the actual or perceived class divisions between the Catholic Irish and the Protestant Ascendancy outlined in the introduction. Whereas *The Countess Cathleen*'s supposed affronts to peasants appear to have been unpremeditated, a few years later, the Abbey Theatre company began to move toward a more confrontational relationship with its audience, gaining a climax in *The Playboy of the Western World*. When the audiences at the Abbey Theatre saw the contemptible characters and the dishonorably satirical social attack that Synge served them on stage instead of the ideal vision of Ireland and its people they wanted to see, they responded with a riot.

The Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland, has a rich history of producing plays that often explore themes of conflict and controversy. Over the years, it has been central to many debates and disputes within the theatre community and the broader Irish society. Here are some key examples of conflicts and controversies associated with plays at the Abbey Theatre:

J.M. Synge's play caused a major disgrace when enacted at the National Theatre. The story of a young man who boasts about killing his father shocked the conservative Irish audience, leading to riots and protests. The play was seen as a challenge to traditional Irish values. It sparked debates about censorship and the theatres as a cultural apparatus to help shape the nation's cultural identity. *The Plough and the Stars* by Sean O'Casey, set during the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, depicted the lives of working-class characters caught up in the conflict. When it premiered, some audience members took offense at its portrayal of Irish nationalism and working-class struggles. Riots broke out, and the controversy surrounding the play led to discussions about the representation of Irish history on stage.

*The Senator* by Denis Johnston was banned by the Irish government because it was seen as a critique of the political establishment. The censorship of the play raised questions about artistic freedom and government control over the theatre. *The Plough and the Stars* (1937): The play by Sean O'Casey once again stirred controversy when revived at the Abbey Theatre in 1937. This time, the controversy centered on concerns about how it depicted the Irish struggle

for independence, with some feeling it was unpatriotic. Others saw it as a truthful reflection of the period.

The significant impact of controversies in the context of Irish theatrical performances in the Abbey Theatre was a phenomenon. Controversies have impacted the Irish people associated with the theater in some ways. Artistic Expression and National Identity were affected by the riots and controversies in the Abbey Theatre. The Abbey Theatre played a crucial role in shaping Irish national identity through artistic works. Controversies surrounding the content of plays or the representation of Irish culture can lead to debates about what it means to be Irish. Such controversies can prompt discussions about cultural authenticity, national pride, and the role of art in shaping identity.

**Censorship and Freedom of Expression:** Throughout its history, the Abbey Theatre faced censorship and bans on certain plays. Controversies related to censorship highlight the tension between artistic freedom and societal norms. Irish people may view these controversies as battles for free expression and resistance against censorship. Controversies related to these themes resonate deeply with the Irish people, as they often touch on traumatic and unresolved issues from the past.

Discussions around the underrepresentation of women playwrights, directors, and actors may lead to calls for greater gender equality and inclusivity within the theater community. These internal debates have had a lasting impact on the morale and direction of the Abbey Theatre. Controversies often lead to increased public attention and engagement with the theater. While some may be drawn to the theater due to the controversy, others may distance themselves. This dynamic can shape the theater's audience and relationship with the broader Irish population. Some controversies may be remembered as pivotal moments in Irish cultural history, while others might be seen as regrettable missteps. Irish people used these controversies as opportunities to address deep-seated issues, such as representation, diversity, and the role of the arts in contemporary society.

The controversies and riots in the Abbey Theatre cast a wide-ranging impact on the Irish people, influencing discussions about identity, freedom of expression, politics, gender, and the

role of art in society. These controversies are important moments of reflection and change within the theater community and the broader Irish cultural context.

These riots and controversies raised questions about the representation of Irish nationalism. These controversies at the Abbey Theatre reflect Ireland's complex relationship between art, politics, and societal norms. The theatre has often been a platform for challenging established ideas and sparking meaningful conversations about Irish identity, history, and culture. The Abbey Theatre riots in 1907 were primarily associated with the premiere of J.M. Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World*. This event is one of the most famous controversies in the history of the Abbey Theatre and had a significant impact on Irish theater and cultural discourse.

The premiere of *The Playboy of the Western World* led to protests and riots among the audience. The controversy was not limited to one night but continued for several performances. Some audience members took offense at what they perceived as the play's disrespectful treatment of Irish culture and the portrayal of Christy Mahon as a hero for patricide. Nationalists and conservatives in the audience were particularly outraged by the play, and they disrupted performances by shouting, throwing objects, and even engaging in physical confrontations with actors and other audience members.

The riots warranted significant attention, and *The Playboy of the Western World*, as one of the most talked-about productions of its time, highlighted the cultural and political tensions in Irish society during the early 20th century, particularly between those who wanted to preserve traditional Irish values and those who sought to challenge and modernize them. Despite the initial uproar, the play eventually gained recognition for its artistic merit and is now considered a classic of Irish literature. The Abbey Theatre riots over *The Playboy of the Western World* marked a pivotal moment in the history of Irish theater, reflecting the changing attitudes and values in Ireland during that period. The controversy surrounding the play also underscored the power of theater to provoke discussion and challenge societal norms.

As a self-assigned mediator between the Western Irish peasant and the Dublin theatergoer, he spent sufficient time with his subjects to give credibility to his reportage. In A

*Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak provides a telling description of a privileged writer's relationship to working-class society that resonates in examining Synge's interactions with the Irish peasants. "Can the subaltern speak?" by Spivak poses a grave question because the poorest members of society are usually the least educated, "members of the Indian elite are, of course, informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the other."

During and after the turmoil instigated by the first performances of *The Playboy*, he repeatedly denied including any political content in the play. Furthermore, the evidence shows that Synge did remove much of the political and social context, founding earlier drafts of the work.

In 1903, at a time when productions with a positive spin on Irish peasant life were delighting audiences, Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* caused Willie Fay to remark on its contrast with their other more popular rustic plays. Later, Fay noted the author's inability to "forgive the crass ignorance, the fatuity, the malevolence with which *The Well of the Saints* had been received" in 1905. Despite Lady Gregory's claim that Synge had little interest in politics, he certainly did not mind using the theater to challenge those critics who misinterpreted or unfairly judged his plays.

While the protesters equated anything less than a virtuous and heroic portrayal of the peasant with the hated "Stage Irishman," and the playwrights at the Abbey Theatre fought for their artistic vision, life continued in County Mayo. Evidently, the battle over the image of the Irish peasant that led to rioting in Dublin that January week in 1907 meant much more to others than it meant to the people who had been portrayed themselves. So, after several years of inciting growing wrath among nationalists by taking an inartistic stance that did not always agree with the Republican point of view, the Abbey Theatre began to challenge the opinions of nationalists actively and to insist on the right to present a different perspective on the political state of Ireland at the time. However, nationalism was not the only issue to spark controversy during the period.

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