



ANTISOCIAL ELEMENTS IN THE PLAYS OF SEAN O' CASEY

S. SHEEBA

Research Scholar, Department of English,
Scott Christian College, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu



ABSTRACT

In Ireland, drama has begun as an offshoot of religious rites, even as a part of religious ritual, and observances. The Catholic Church actively aided the growth and spread of this simple drama throughout Europe, and in England as early as the ninth century tropes. With Ibsen and Strindberg the Scandinavian drama burst forth in revolt. When Irish drama came, about the same time, there was little of revolt in it resembled the drama of Holberg rather than that of Ibsen. From this class came the long line of dramatists which gave to the world Irish dramatists rather than Irish drama. It was international socialism which informed the work of Sean O' Casey from the Dublin Trilogy through to his plays such as *The star Turns Red*. This article concerned with Sean O' Casey's plays address specifically the social milieu. O' Casey as a socialist, reveals the real conditions of the Irish people and the antisocial characters in his plays. It also emphasises the poverty and moral degradation.

Key words: Ireland, Social environment, Antiheroes, Boasting

Article Info:

Received 11/02/2015

Revised on: 24/02/2015

Accepted on: 28/02/2015

© Copyright KY Publications

INTRODUCTION

Sean O' Casey's (1880-1964) early plays has come up. He is considered Ireland's greatest playwright. O' Casey offered the Irish national theatre and its audience a new set of challenges. O' Casey was a communist and an anti-Catholic, a realist with a cause, a passionate Dublin writing for Dubliners. O' Casey put on a naturalistic stage, the Dublin working class he knew so well. He demanded a new ironic kind of realism and it worked out. His master piece *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Plough and the Star*, *The Shadow of a Gunman* were the greatest success in the twenty-year history of Abbey Theatre. Lennox Robinson considered that the play *Juno and the Paycock* had rescued the Irish national

theatre from "artistic as well as financial bankruptcy" (Styan 106). His dramas are set in the crowded overflowing life of a Dublin tenement house, which is O' Casey major early setting.

O' Casey's family was poor, but his parents were cultivated people. His father Micheal Casey, with his modest salary he just managed to get by, raising a large family and living in the poorer section in the city. O' Casey's family appears throughout the volume of O' Casey's autobiography "Although the family seems to have had middle-class standards of behaviour, O' Casey was a natural rebel" (Atkinson 11). O' Casey's early years of pain and isolation left deep scars on the mind and body of the young O' Casey, but they were only a prelude to the years of

deprivation and bitterness that awaited him in young manhood. The Casey's were Protestants in a country particularly a city where the rich were generally Protestants and the poor mostly Roman Catholics and religious and social barriers between them jealously preserved. So O' Casey was isolated from his neighbours by his Protestantism and from other Protestants by his poverty. His attitude was greatly influenced by the poverty and squalor he witnessed in Dublin's slum and by the Irish labour leader Jim Larkin. He was personally acquainted with the miseries of the Irish working class. He was raised and resided in the slums of Dublin for forty years. O' Casey had known intimately all his life with its "poverty, irresponsibility, temperament, kindness, treachery and civil war" (Atkinson 12).

O' CASEY AS A SOCIALIST

O' Casey as a social has several focus in his plays as 'working-class background, his involvement and role in the 1913 Dublin Lock out, and his criticism of 1916 leaders, his great Boyle of proletarian drama and prose, and his support for the soviet, union" (Richard 128). This proves that O' Casey as one of the world's greatest human, experiments in creating a society of new type. In O' Casey there was an ongoing war, a class war between capitalism and communism and from these years with Larkin. O' Casey always felt a strong sense of loyalty to whichever side he chooses. O' Casey believed that only a healthy society can reap the benefits of poetry, drama and literature, that only a people whose lives were secure, who had no fear of poverty, unemployment, and all the ravages of capitalism only they had the potential to enjoy the full richness of the total human contribution.

As a socialist he believed that human suffering in appalling because it is avoidable. In O' Casey's plays we could see his belief in utopian solutions to social problems waver. The effect of historical background deeply disturbed his instincts to find a secular, socialist remedy to the problems generated by social and political conditions.

O' CASEY'S MORAL CONCIOUS

O' Casey maintains a venue of moral coherence to gloss over the characters in his plays. God is mentioned frequently in regular speech which more often than not, does not relate to

religious discussion and is not mentioned in prayer. God and other religious connotations are regularly recruitment in frequently request for forgiveness, displays of gratitude, bouts of frustration, fear, grief and sorrow. The characters themselves are quite vivid, and it is often their religious viewpoints that make them so. Some of the major conflicts which characterized O' Casey's Dublin are conflicts between labour and capital, socialism and clericalism and they all let their make on him. Gregory declared that much of O' Casey's "conduct" was "inhuman, certainly...inhumane", and after admitting his "enjoyment and human touch" took back even this faint praise by concluding : "as some Regency snobs were said to love a lord, so he delights in loving New York drama critics" (West 355).

All his plays mentioned were all serious social dramas they were all in the manner of the English Repertory School, and they have all been dropped from the repertoire of the theatre. Such is the usual fate of plays which deal seriously with serious subjects. "Life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel" (Malone 212). Sean O' Casey gives the audience what they want, and they can laugh uproariously at satire of themselves. O' Casey's drama was for many years ahead of the theatrical practice of his time more recently, "practical as well as theoretical advances have been reflected in much praised innovative productions of several of these experimental works" (Ayling, Introduction: Seven Plays by Sean O' Casey xxi).

THE NOTORIOUS BRAGGARTS

A few of the characters in the plays are notorious than social. In *Shadow of the Gunman* all the characters serve Minnie, are contemptibly cowering and selfish, and all, save Seumas Shields, entwine themselves in communal heroic fantasy, which mask their natures. Davoren looks down on the people around him and is too complacent in his effete despondency to allow their projections to unlock his powers of self-realization. Compared to Davoren's world-weary posturing and to the corrosive, self-serving cynicism of Seumas Shields, Minnie Powell's "Youth naivety and credulity appear almost heroic" (Richards 142). Davoran, prove to be

better in talking than in doing. He himself, presumably more or less unconsciously, recognizes his lack in activity. James Simmons remarks, "He is revealed as a coward, his civilizing notions do not support him in the crisis" (36). Seumas Shield retires from action by talking to religion piety. His cowardice is more pervasive than that of Tommy or Grigson because he has some rational super structure.

The plays most intriguing feature is the disorientation in the dialectic between despair and false hope. For Davoren's carefully cultivated dejection in just another form of posturing self-deception, despite his self-assurance at the end of Act I, Davoren bitterly comes to realize the great danger in being *The Shadow of a Gunman*. The recognition, however, brings no catharsis or renewal society integration because Davoren's self-knowledge is ultimately fraudulent. His new knowledge of his cowardice is all too easily assimilated into his practiced linguistic rituals, the pretence of brave confrontation, filtered through poetry and melodrama, ironically protects his calloused sensibility. Even as he strives for melodrama import, his high flown rhetoric indicates that he is hiding behind his pessimism, rather than confronting his pretentious vanity and culpable passivity. The recognition of gait, couched in this over rich idiom, becomes a mockery of itself. Davoren replaces "bogus and pseudo-poetic self-delusion with bogus and pseudo-poetic self-knowledge no indication that he has actually had a change of heart" (Murray 317) because he mourns for Minnie's death, but later this shows he mourns only to pity for his own self, and not for Minnie.

In *Juno* Jack Boyle, called "Captain" or "Paycock", is one of the antisocial characters. He tells stories about him being a captain, and he always tries to keep the appearance of an experienced man. "I see things ..." he says, "that no moral man should speak about that knows his catechism" –"we're Dublin men, an' not boys that's only afther comin' 'up from the bog o' Allen". But when he is confronted with a situation which urges him to take to action, he turns out to be a coward, he is too lazy to start working, even though Jerry Devine offers a job to him and he is not capable of

keeping the family together in the end. In the last scene Jack Boyle and Joxer Daly, Who is similarly incapable of adequate action, is an expression of his state drunken, not knowing what is going on and yet uttering follow phrases about Ireland's politics. "Ireland sober... is Irelan... free" Heinz Kosak remarks, "He (Captain Boyle) epitomizes his chronic capacity for self-knowledge and the blind in adaptability which, century to his heroic understanding of himself, has contributed to the disintegration of the family" (45).

O' Casey satirizes them unsparingly for the shiftless rascals that they are, yet because he also sees the amusement of a universal frailty in them. They are fools not knaves he is able to laugh with as well as at their hilarious mischief. Boyle the universal "braggart-warrior Joxer the universal parasite-slave" (Christopher 247), both of them derived from the well-known clown of Roman and Elizabethan comedy. It is also possible that many men are more than amused by the "Paycock's" game and secretly envy the captain and his "buttie" their merry pranks. The average men who realize he cannot cope with his besetting problem in a heroic scale may well have an unconscious desire to get rid of his problems entirely by emulating the captain in his irresponsible and therefore irresistible dreaming and singing and dancing.

In *Plough*, Fluther Good is drawn like Falstaffian mould but he is sufficiently different from Captain Boyle to emerge with the stamp of his own individuality. He too is roistering fellow, a drinking and bragging clown, but he is more impetuous than the captain, more aggressive and daring, in his guarded way. He is more of a blustering game cock than a "struttin Paycock". He has more stomach for a fight than the wily captain, though his fighting is discreetly confined to rhetorical invective. He has no trouble annihilating little Peter Flynn-that ridiculous "patriot" clad in the full-dress uniform of national benevolent association. When "out pether" brags about never having missed a pilgrimage to Bodenstown to the shrine of Wolfe Tone. But he has to "sing on the high notes" of his ignorance when he gets into shouting contest with the clever covey who dumbfounds Fluther with materialistic catechism from his vade-meeum, Jenersky's thesis on *The*

Origin Development and Consolidation of Evolutionary idea of the proletariat, a tone which understand fills the covey with a proletarian fervour that makes him imperious to the protest of Fluther, patriots and prostitute. Fluther the "well-flavoured" man is a magnificent mixture of contradictions. Among the ladies he is a protector and a peace-maker, when he gallantly protects Rosie Redmond and her venerable profession from the "thwarting" covey, she describes him as a man "that's well flavoured in th knowledge of th' world he's livin in" (PS 209). But with the men he is full of himself and his inimitable Fluther wrath or full of Irish whiskey. His rock is worse than his bite, he starts more arguments than he can settle he rages and boasts, lies and threatens when he is cornered, he swears abstinence then drowns himself in drink when the shops are looted, crying "up the Rebels" and "th whole city can topple home to hell" (PS 237) in the same drunken breath, he can defend a prostates good name, and then go off to spend the night with her "well flavoured" man that he is, the mock hero of the play. All times he has a moral conscious with the society. Christopher Murray writes that O' Casey's characters cope with their powerlessness in the face of historical circumstance "by invent ending and sustaining eccentricities of manner and speech which force others in the community to beware and to make space for them" (104).

In *Silver Tassie* cynical mothers and beaten wives encourage men to go to the Front so that they will receive separation money. Here, the women are as vainglorious petty and self-serving as the men and there is strong hint that the violence does not intrude into the home from the outside, but rather that was in a symptom of domestic or innate aggression. The priority which naturalist form gives to the home, the coherent domestic reality before eyes seeming more 'real' than wide social forces, is avoided in the brilliant second act. Jessie, with Barney she is responsive "to all the animal impulses of life", she is "not excited" and desires red wine to celebrate the "passion and the power and the pain of life" (ST 234) she is pre-presented as the kind of female who "gives her favour to the prominent and popular" (ST 194). When Harry's strength and speed won the final for his club he a "tangled body" (ST

234) from the war she gave her favours to Barney. In her world no moral scruples are respected. Similarly Barney "lust lordship" over Jessie, "mid sounds of merriment and excitement" erupts and is enacted in his ripping of her "shoulder strap so that her dress leaves her shoulders and bosom bare" (ST 245).

Though in the first act they were friends later in the last act, the fickle Jessie Taite has abandoned the invalid Harry for the healthy Barney, who has now won Harry's girl as well as the Victoria Cross for carrying him out of the line of fire. The attitude of Barney is he had betrayed Harry showing his ability. This is the real nature of the humans. A careful and close shift of character, objects, and perspective, enlarges their vision and deepens their knowledge of reality. Barney, decorated for saving his life, is further rewarded with the possession of Jessie, who has callously deserted Harry. Mr. Shaw regards this play as a smashing piece of anti-war propaganda, bringing, "the voodoo war poetry with an ironic crash to the earth in ruins" (Ayling, Sean O' Casey 101), but it is more than that.

In *Star Turns Red* there is the level of the Fascist type state itself, in which the most scarifying figure is that of the purple priest "the purple priest of the politicians" he is called' by Julia, the young working class girl. The purple-priest, as much for Julia's pretty face and vital demeanour as for her defiance of the Troopers, Condone the flogging, "Let what is to do be done". A passing pain will take some glitter out of the dress and dream of reduction. It is good that the little immodest wretch should have the lash laid on her back, "lest worse befall her" (STR 273). O' Casey's shows the people like purple priest were still existing, who has given the real life of the priest in good men are good and bad, men are bad, this play is very much better than most moralities.

Tim Mullcanny in *Red Roses for Me* is an atheist whose evolutionary beliefs get him and the Breydon into trouble. Mullcanny is known for his attempts to undermine religious belief in the Dublin community. Only scientific materialism can lead the way to salvation, he taunts everyone with his glib lectures on evolution for which he is later beaten up by a mob of irate believes, when he gives his copy of Haeckel to Ayamonn him shelter in their apartment.

But the incensed Roory condemns the book and Mullcanny.

In *Shadow*, Tommy Owens like Jack Boyle is only boasting, without having any idea about what is really going on. He is a new worshipper and, like many others, he is anxious to be an familiar terms with those whose he thinks are braver than he is himself, and whose approbation he tries he tries to win by an assumption equal to the their own. He talks in a staccato manner. His intrusion in Shields room reveals a good deal of his character "I never got chance- they never gave me a chance-but all the same I'd be there if I was called on" (SG 113). Further he says "why is any man in Ireland without with the I.R.A up with the barricades up with the barricades!" (SG 113). He often sings a favourite romantic nationalist song about three martyrs for Ireland. His singing in the culmination is a process of lending them Dutch courage through boasting speech. The songs are the quintessence of this form of self-hypnotisation.

O' Casey shows his talk and violent rebellion and Irish freedom proves worthless when action is really needed. Bentham in *Juno* is another character who seems to be highly intellectual but nevertheless they fail from a moral point of view. Like Donal Davoren, he is also an outsider. Bentham acts as a catalyst in the play. First, he is the agent of the will-bearer, writer and reader of that miraculous document which seems to be the solution of Boyle's material problems. Second he is the precipitator of Johnny's hysterical 'vision' Third, he acts on Mary's general dissatisfaction with her lot to cause her down fall. He appears from outside the Boyle's circle to alienate her from Jerry, with whom she had apparently shared happy loving loves until she 'clicked' with this, "then, lanky strip of a micky Dazzler" (JP 51). His significant that Bentham never has a loving scene with Mary in the play as Jerry does. Mary's motives are not purely materialistic. Jerry can lift her out of 'all this' when he get his salary of \$ 350 a year. But Bentham represents gentility in elegant contrast with Jerry's down-to-earth labour interest. He will lift her out of her class with politeness and snack talk. His conversational accessories are just as glaring and vulgar. His theosophy is one manifestation of this vulgarity. In

his autobiography, O' Casey describes the poet A.E. Malone, a leading theosophist, as "Dublin glittering guy" (Barbara 60), mocking the superficiality of his art and of his spiritualism Bentham's belief in the universal life-breath looks flimsy, set against his attitude to the Republicans, callously voiced directly after Mrs. Tancred's appearance. It is not the Boyles who are not good enough for Bentham; it is he who has failed theme. Indeed, they are worse off after his apparently benevolent interventions.

O' Casey shows in his Irish plays he was treating event through which he had himself lived and the artistic method, the notorious braggart, the antisocial characters sprang directly from his own experience David Krause remarks "Although O' Casey associates his myth with an idyllic Russian society, a dialectical Marxist would probably find little room in his system for this type of eclectic and poetic humanism" (Lindsay 202).

CONCLUSION

O' Casey as an artist seeking to tell the whole human truth and the plays also set that proletariat in a critical perspective. Against the baffling and confusing elements in the situation there were set the unquenchable energies of the people and the deep forces of devotion in the women, which hold things together in even the most desperate conditions. Professor Walter Starkie comments that "When I watch crowded houses at the O' Casey plays I am struck by the restless attitude of the audience towards events that were so familiar. They are fascinated by them" (164). Minnie Powell, Juno Boyle and Ginnie Gogan are sometimes against all likelihood, the capacity for heroism, solidarity self-dedication among the women. Fluthers simple Catholicism against the covey's Marxism, Joy Bell the self-centred, uniformed Catholic, Jack Boyle, the Paycock, Bentham the micky dazzler were some of the antisocial characters who were the babblers and fantasists, here in all O' Casey's work that we feel the possibilities of great positive liberations. There is a sense of the potentialities of transformation in the people through the ceaseless leaving of realism with fantasy. Raymond William in his crassness calls "naturalistic caricature" (Lindsay 195).

The people are crushed, they are perpetually rising above that limits oppressed existences in tangential burst of energy and, their drunkenness, expressed by a garrulous high-spirited response to events, which service of reality in action that changes the word. Therefore an essential part of it still looks beyond the world of power and property, of the dehumanizing cash nexus, into socialism and their moral conscious. Then working out in the lives of his Dubliners enabled O' Casey and he felt to penetrate deep into the social and personal reality, not only of Irishmen, but of everyone caught up in the crisis of bourgeois society. Harry is a sort of inverted Christ-character, going his frustrated way to death, but unlike him, struggling to break through the rigid pattern and come out into another sort of life, a true life. As a morality representation of the dead end into which the Christian bourgeois world has run, the play has much subtly and humour. Harry and the girls like Susie and Tessie is significant in showing explicitly the positive factors in a situation and to explore ways in which the deadlock is to be broken down. Through Ayamonn O' Casey succeeded in both giving a convincing picture of working class struggle and poetically linking the realistic material with imagery of transformations.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, Brooks. *Sean O' Casey: From Times Past*. New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982. Print.
- Ayling, Ronald. *Sean O' Casey*. London: Macmillan, 1969. Print.
- Ayling, Ronald, ed. *Introduction: Seven Plays by Sean O' Casey*. London: Macmillan, 1995. Print.
- Barbara, Hayley. *York Notes on Juno and the Paycock*. New York: Longman, 1981. Print.
- Christopher, Giroux. "Sean O' Casey 1880-1964." *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 88 (1995): 233-288. Print.
- Kosok, Heinz. *O' Casey The Dramatist*. New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1985. Print.
- Lindsay, Jack. "Sean O' Casey as a Socialist Artist." *Sean O' Casey: Modern Judgements*. Ed. Ronald Ayling. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1966. Print.
- Malone, A.E. *The Irish Drama 1896-1928*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929. Print.
- Murray, Christopher. *A Faber Critical Guide: Sean O' Casey – 'The Shadow of a Gunman', 'Juno and the Paycock', 'The Plough and the Star.'* London: Faber and Faber, 2000. Print.
- O' Casey, Sean. *The Shadow of a Gunman*. London: Macmillan, 1923. Print.
- O' Casey, Sean. *Juno and the Paycock*. London: Macmillan, 1924. Print.
- O' Casey, Sean. *The Plough and the Star's*. London: Macmillan, 1926. Print.
- O' Casey, Sean. *The Silver Tassie*. London: Macmillan, 1929. Print.
- O' Casey, Sean. *The Star Turns Red*. London: Macmillan, 1940. Print.
- O' Casey, Sean. *Red Rose For Me*. London: Macmillan, 1943. Print.
- Richards, Shaun. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Simmons, James. *Sean O' Casey*. London: Macmillan, 1989. Print.
- Styan, J.L. *Modern Drama in theory and practice. Vol. I Realism and Naturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Print.
- Starkie, Walter. "Sean O' Casey." *The Irish Theatre*. Ed. Lennox Robinson. London: Macmillon. 1939. Print.
- West, E.J. "Sunset and Evening Star by Sean O' Casey: Selected Plays of Sean O' Casey by Sean O' Casey". *Educational Theatre Journal* 17.4(1955): 354-356. Print.