

RESEARCH ARTICLE



SEAN O' CASEY'S JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK AS A REALISTIC PLAY

S. SHEEBA

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



S. SHEEBA

ABSTRACT

Modern drama begins with Ibsen. A hundred years after Ibsen, the drama written and performed itself is a remarkable major achievement. There has been innovation and experiment and this has been related throughout to the growth, crisis of civilization which drama has given forth certain trends like dramatic naturalism, realism, expressionism and related movements. This article is concerned with Sean O' Casey's play the Juno and the Paycock as a realistic play and how far the backgrounds and the characters are realistically depicted in the play. O' Casey reveals the real conditions of the Irish people during the civil war and the real men and women one can see many parts of the world. In fact, the Irish play-wright set forth the highest labour ideals and principles, which makes the characters fail to live up to them. The peculiar density of Irish tenement world also emphasises the poverty and moral degradation.

Key words: Civil war 1922-1923, plight of working class - social - political condition, the war torn Ireland

Article Info:

Article Received:01/03/2014

Revised on:15/3/2014

Accepted for Publication:16/03/2014

@ Copyright, KY Publications

INTRODUCTION

Modern period and its drama were shaped by world-changing forces, such as industrial-technological, democratic, and intellectual revolution that have disrupted earlier conceptions of time, space, the divine, human psychology, and social order. As a result, a theatre of challenge and experimentation emerged.

Realism, has an Aristotelian overtone, involves a scientific and objective outlook of life:

“the world as it is, in psychological, sociological, political, and like terms” (Lowry 94). It is a movement with the pervasive and long-lived effect on modern theatre was conceived as a laboratory in which the ills of society, familial problems, and the nature of relationships could be objectively presented for the judgement of impartial observers. Its goal of likeness to life demanded that settings resemble their prescribed locales precisely. The playwright Henrik Ibsen initiated the realistic movement with plays focused on contemporary,

day-to-day themes, capturing psychological detail. Anton Chekhov in Russia, has brought the form to its stylistic apogee with plays whose even minor characters seem to breathe the air we do and in which the plots and themes are developed primarily between the lines.

Naturalism is an even more extreme attempt to dramatize human reality without the appearance of dramaturgic shaping. The naturalistic vision draws its strength from empiricism in philosophy, which Ian Watt has related to "the rise of the modern novel and from this the development of science in Europe since the early seventeenth century" (Gaskell 14). With the same reverence for nature, the human being was conceived as a mere biological phenomenon whose behaviour was determined by heredity and environment.

A counterforce to realism, initiated by symbolism, began in the late nineteenth century that has expanded into what might be called antirealist theatre. Symbolism would contest realism's apparent spiritual bankruptcy with a form that would explore, through images and metaphors, the inner realities of human experience that cannot be directly perceived.

Life of Sean O' Casey

Sean O' Casey is an acclaimed Irish dramatist, auto biographer, poet, short story writer and a critic. He is considered to be one of the most original and accomplished dramatists of the twentieth century. His plays are critical of war and celebrate the perseverance of the working class. An individualist and controversial figure, he is seen as an avowed Irish nationalist and an advocate of communism during the early part of his career.

Sean O' Casey (1880-1964), the last of thirteen children, eight of whom had already died in infancy, was born to Michael and Susan Casey on 30th March 1880 in Dublin. O' Casey was personally acquainted with the miseries of the Irish working class, as he was raised and resided in the slums of Dublin for forty years. Around 1911, he met his first hero, James Larkin, the labour leader and served as one of the lieutenants grouped around him through

the terrible Dublin lock out of 1913, and served as secretary of the Irish Citizen Army, a well-trained militant body. Though pledged to the cause of labour, O' Casey fought, gallantly in the rebellion of 1916 and published his first major piece of writing, a short history of the Irish Citizen Army.

Dublin Trilogy

O' Casey's early Dublin plays are Realistic, and the germs of his later experimental surrealist ones are symbolic. The first three plays of Sean O' Casey are 'The Shadow of a Gunman' (O' Casey, The Shadow of a Gunman), 'Juno and the Paycock' (O' Casey, Juno and the Paycock) and 'The Plough and the Star's' (O' Casey, The Plough and the Star's). These plays are called the 'Dublin Trilogy'. The 'Dublin Trilogy' provides a lot to interpret and to discuss from various viewpoints. The 'Dublin Trilogy' are realistic plays about life in the slums of Dublin and its tenements with its tragic comic ideas. The exigent realities of the Dublin of his youth dominate in these early works. The plays show cases the varied emotional, enthusiastic and visionary reactions of the tenement dwellers at times of crisis and mostly, they do not abide the test of action. In O'Casey the writing of a few dramas has been incidental to his living in a world of ordinary men and women who have worked for their bread and butter by the sweat of their brows.

O' Casey's second play, 'Juno and the Paycock', with its cohesive plot and comic vitality has been successful than the first. The comedy of Irish characters and tragedy of Irish political life in fairly equal parts, compromises the substance of the play. Both these elements convey the full quality of the public life in Dublin tenements during these days. The events of the day is described by George Moore as "even within the few days I have been in Ireland that Ireland is spoken of not as a geographical but a sort of human entity" (Atkinson 30).

Juno and the Paycock, is based on historical, sociological, political and religious background of the time. In this play, O'Casey's characters strive to know the reality of the conditions.

Realism

'Realism' is a slippery term in dramatic criticism. It is axiomatic that each generation feels that its theatre is in some way more "real" (Styan 1), as for example Euripides, over Sophocles, Moliere over the comedian Dell arte, Goldsmith over Steele, Ibsen over Schiller and Brecht over Ibsen. The claims seem to echo one another and realism needs finally be evaluated, not by the style of a play or a performance, but by the image of truth its audience perceive. By the end of nineteenth century, the new play and it's mode of production were in conscious rebellion against the characteristically romantic form of drama, popular at that time. The realistic rebellion seemed too many people unpleasant and consciously shocking. The realist at that time was in rebellion against romantic situations and characterization and tried to put on the stage only by observing ordinary life. Much stronger demand would force the realists to depart even further from verisimilitude, and be even more selective in the material makeup of the play.

In Ibsen's case, "realism and symbolism have thriven very well together and his nature incline him at once to fidelity to fact, and to mysticism" (William 53). Through his plays, Ibsen had paved the way for the coming of modern realism. Like Ibsen, Anton Chekhov has also followed the same trend. Synge's 'Riders to the Sea' the little tragic masterpiece of Irish life and character has become ever more realism of the ironic variety, with locations far away from cosmopolitan Dublin. O' Casey has followed the trend of Chekhov, a realist with a cause, a passionate Dubliner writing for his real Dubliners and achieved the Chekhovian objectivity.

Juno and the Paycock

In Juno and the Paycock, the O' Casey touch is a new, tragic kind of realism. This paper proposes to examine O' Casey's Juno and the Paycock as a realistic play and how far the backgrounds and the characters are realistically, depicted in the play. The play Juno and the Paycock is set in a tenement house in Dublin in the poor 'two - room - tenancy' of the Boyle family. It is during the civil war (1922),

between those Irish men who accepted the 'Irish Free State' treaty with England giving the land the status of a dominion within the British commonwealth and those "Die - hard" or entrenched Republicans who consider the treaty a betrayal of their ideal of a completely independent Ireland. The Civil Wars, forming a general background of the play, give rise to one of its four main plots, all of which are held together by the dominating figure of Juno Boyle. This plot concerns her son Johnny, who has been wounded in the two previous Republican conflicts of 1916 and 1920. Juno and the Paycock has its superficial qualities, but it is uplifted and ennobled by the character of Juno (Malone 230).

The story of Johnny, his betrayal of his Republican comrade and neighbour Robbie Tancred is unfolded by allusion, reaction and accusation through the play's three Acts. Retribution for having 'informed' draws closer and closer from the first mysterious knocks to the visit of the two 'irregulars' or extreme Republicans who take him away to be shot, at the end of the Act III. This plot allows memorable moments like the funeral of Robbie Tancred and Johnny's hysterical 'vision' of Tancred's dead body. Juno's part in it include her maternal worry and grief for her son and her view of the civil war as wasteful, destructive and irrelevant to the real problems of Irish life. According to Krause she is O'Casey's "universal mother" (69).

Another Plot, which involves Juno on several levels, is that of the 'will'. The Boyle's as demonstrated through the first Act are extremely poor, living on credit and scarcely able to afford food. Only Juno is earning, her daughter Mary is on strike, Johnny has lost his arm and so cannot work and her husband 'Captain Boyle' is an idler who cannot or will not find a job. At the beginning of Act I, Juno despairing over money, despises her husband for strutting idly around like 'Paycock', with his friend Joxer Daly. At the end of the Act, Capt. Boyle is told by Charlie Bentham, a school teacher turned lawyer that he has been left anything between \$1500 and \$2000 in his cousin's will. The Boyle's life is changed to one of parties and plenty.

Act II is full of the cheap luxuries, which they buy for themselves on credit raised in expectation of their wealth. Juno's attitude to Capt. Boyle become more tolerant and she too spends without her previous grinding worry about where the money is to come from. In Act III, it is disclosed that the will was incompetently drawn up by Bentham and the Boyles are to get no money. The creditors close in, their new possessions are taken away and Juno's feeling for her husband reverts to scorn as he has known for some time that the will is invalid and yet continue to live on credit.

A third plot concerns Juno's daughter Mary, seen first as an independent girl of intellectual ideas and labour sympathies, reading Ibsen, going on strike and quoting trade union 'principles'. She is being courted by another trade unionist, Jerry Devine, with whom she was once in love. In Act II, she has thrown Jerry over for Charlie Bentham and by Act III Bentham has gone away leaving her pregnant. Jerry then reappears to reaffirm his love for her until she tells him that she is going to have a baby, when he rejects her cruelly asking, "Have you fallen as low as that?" (O' Casey, Juno and the Paycock 96). Juno rallies to her daughter's defense. When Capt. Boyle turns against her, she decides to leave him to make a new house for Mary's baby - a positive, optimistic dedication of herself to the new generation. Her resolution that she and Mart will "work together for the sake of the baby" (JP, 99) and her decision to leave captain. Boyle to "furrage for himself" (Hayley 53) are not feminist but for self-realising. Mrs Boyle takes a realistic position for sustaining life.

A fourth plot, the backbone of the play, links these stories of Johnny, the Will and Mary to that of Mrs Boyle and her husband, or Juno and the Paycock. Their relationship move from antagonism borne of poverty in the first Act, towards temporary truce when they think they have money but by the end of the play, Capt. Boyle has failed his family and Juno renounces him. "I have done all I could an' it was of no use; he'll be hopeless till the end of his days" (O' Casey, Juno and the Paycock 99). The Boyle's home is dead and empty; Johnny has been executed, the furniture has been taken away, and

Capt. Boyle is out getting drunk with Joxer, providing no support of any kind to his family. The finest thing in the play is the drunken frolicking of Boyle and Joxer, which immediately follows its most tragic moment: Johnny's death and Juno's great prayer. Robert Hogan has called it, "one of the most devastating moments of modern drama" (41). Juno and Mary live and in the plays tragically funny endings, Capt. Boyle and Joxer stagger back to the tenement, full of bombast and drunk and without noticing that the flat is completely empty, decide that the world is in what to them is its usual "terrible state O' Chassis" or chaos (O' Casey, Juno and the Paycock 101).

Realistic background

The historical and sociological elements in the play are skilfully woven in with its action. The political situation in 1922 was that after more than a century of British rule, and many years of fighting and negotiating for an independent Irish Republic, a treaty between British and Ireland was signed giving Ireland limited independence as a free state. The "Die hard" Republicans refused to accept this treaty and were engaged in a civil war with those who did accept as depicted in, 'The Shadow of a Gunman' and 'The Plough and the Stars'. Also political situation is evident not only in large matters like Johnny's story, but in small points like Joxer being afraid to look out of the window for fear of 'a bullet in the kisser', and 'the troubles' as they were called, have seeped into the vocabulary and imagery of the characters speech in 'Juno and the Paycock'

The nationalist background plays a large part both in O'Casey's life and in the settings of his early plays. Ireland had been part of Great Britain with no independent parliament of her own but with members elected to the British Parliament. This parliamentary party had been agitating for Home Rule for Ireland. Not all Irish people agreed with this aim. Some 'Nationalist's' wanted total independence and an Irish Republic and others called 'Unionists', wished to continue the union with great Britain. O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock shares similar view towards violence as reflected in the struggle between Irish factions during the civil war of the early 1920s. The general perception was that

when war comes to Ireland she must welcome it as she would welcome the 'Angel of God' (Atkinson 36). Another realistic issue that forms the background of the play is the Labour movement. O'Casey's work for the 1913 lockout and his admiration for Jim Larkin gave him very high ideals for it. Here he shows the forces against which it had to contend in Ireland. Jerry, the representative of the Labour movement in the play fails in his private life to live up to O'Casey's humanitarian principles. In his last scene with Mary, he says "with labour, Mary, humanity is above everything. We are the leaders in the fight for a new life" (O' Casey, Juno and the Paycock 95). This seems to be O' Casey's own ideal of the world labour movement.

Another serious factor forming the background of the play is religion. The role of the Catholic Church in Irish Politics is seen by Capt. Boyle according to his finances. When poor, he accuses the priests of preventing the starving people from corn during the famine or letting down the Fenian rebels, and of destroying Parnell. When he feels affluent, they are patriots who have led the fight for Ireland's freedom. He acknowledges their influence and like Juno, feels that the church should be wakened when her son was killed. Like Mrs Tancred's, the reiteration of prayers and hymns counter points the 'Hail Mary' sung at Tancred's funeral. When the mobilizer comes for Johnny, he repeats the prayer to himself as he is taken to be punished for Tancred's death. Even the rosary bead he takes with him is at the same time an emblem of prayer and an emblem of death. It is customary to entwine a dead person's beads in his fingers in the coffin.

O' Casey's characters are real men and women. In the treatment of the subject, there is objectivity like the naturalistic depiction. O' Casey has selected the environment of ordinary human beings like the slum dwellers and shopkeepers' and present facts of life with mixture of tragedy and comedy. There is a humanitarian desire to change the existing social condition. Boyle and his wife Juno reflect the tough realities of Dublin life and when Jerry discovers that Mary is pregnant; his charity does not extend to fathering another man's child. This is a reality of life we see around the play. As this

is an ever deepening crisis, a solution too eludes their grasp. Edmund Fuller says that "in our age man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but also from inner problem, a conviction and meaninglessness in his way of existence' (Fuller 3). In this play, most of the characters are real life characters, one could see in day-to-day life in a city slum. "To be able to evoke sentiment, breathing creature men and women with the impress of life upon them - out of blank space in half the creative writer's equipment. It is the touchstone of all the great literary artists from Shakespeare to Chekov and Mr O' Casey is a juvenist of their order" (Giroux 236).

CONCLUSION

In the history of Ireland, there had been countless risings, and nationalists sought to achieve their independence through armed struggle. However, the years between 1916 and 1923 were so dramatic in terms of bloodshed, terror and violence. This article is concerned with Sean O' Casey's experience of rebellion and war and his rendering of them in his work. Although the play considered in this article Juno and the Paycock is not necessarily mirror of the historical times in which it was written, they contain enough elements that reflect a great deal of the life in Ireland in the periods considered. Indeed, politics occupies a prominent position in his work. O' Casey decided to reveal the real conditions of the Irish people during the Easter Week Uprising, the War of Independence and then the Civil War by rendering on stage their daily social, economic and political problems. In fact, the Irish playwright went so far as to consider his plays a realistic picture of Ireland, reflecting a consistent social and political point of view. His plays are informed by rootedness in his country and abhorrence of social injustice and moral degradation.

O' Casey's original motive in writing this play was to give a voice to a class never heard seriously on the stage before, the Dublin poor. This voice was as individual as that given by John Millington Synge to Irish peasants. The overall impression one gets from the play is its unequivocal realism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my deepest gratitude and respect for Dr. Joseph Dunston, Principal in DIMI Arts and Science College, Chennai who guided and oversaw this study with extraordinary patience. I am especially indebted to Dr. R. Wilson, Reader in St. Jude's College, Thoothoor, my professor in Graduation and my MPhil guide, for his professional aid and his personal encouragement.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, Brooks. Sean O' Casey: From Times Past. New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982.
- Fuller, Edmund. Man in Modern Fiction: some minority opinions on contemporary American writing. New York: Random House, 1958.
- Gaskell, Ronald. Drama and Reality: The European Theatre since Isben. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.
- Hayley, Barbara. Yark Notes on Juno and the Paycock. New York: Longman, 1981.
- Hogan, Robert Goode. The Experiment of Sean O' Casey. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960.
- Krause, David. The Man and His Work. New York: Macmillan, 1960.
- Lowry G., Robert. O' Casey Annual No: 2. London: Macmillan, 1983.
- Malone, A.E. The Irish Drama 1896-1928. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929.
- Giroux, Christopher. "Sean O' Casey 1880-1964". Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 88 (1995): 233-288.
- O'Casey, Sean. The Shadow of a Gunman. London: Macmillan, 1923.
- O'Casey, Sean. Juno and the Paycock. London: Macmillan, 1924.
- O'Casey, Sean. The Plough and the Star's. London: Macmillan, 1926.
- Styan, J.L. Modern Drama in theory and practice. Vol. I. Realism and Naturalism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
-