A SURVEY OF SEAN O'CASEY'S ROLE IN THE POST-WAR ABBEY THEATRE: 1923-28

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A SURVEY OF SEAN O'CASEY'S ROLE IN THE POST-WAR ABBEY THEATRE: 1923-28

by

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A THESIS

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science in partial fullfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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INTRODUCTION

Considering O'Casey's stature in modern drama, it is strange that there is but one full length study[1] and few short ones of the man. This lack of interest might be traceable to O'Casey's Communistic activities (he has been a member of the editorial board for the London Daily Worker since 1940), or it could be that he is too close to the contemporary scene. It is fairly certain that O'Casey's greatest triumphs were in his Abbey Theatre association, perhaps in itself an explanation of why there has been little recent critical interest.

It is with this period of O'Casey's dramatic contribution that this essay will be primarily concerned. Most critics refer to this period as the Irish national period (1923-26) when the Abbey Theatre produced what most critics regard as his three best full length plays, The Shadow of a Gunman, Juno and the Paycock, and The Plough and the Stars. The essay will also consider briefly the literary, social, political, and religious influences that shaped one of Ireland's greatest dramatists.

The essay is divided into four chapters. Chapter I will deal briefly with the Irish national theatre movement and the subsequent birth and history of the Abbey Theatre before

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[1]Jules Koslow, The Green and the Red (New York, 1950). The study is based upon the social and political aspects of O'Casey's plays.

O'Casey's "knock" was heard. Chapter II will consider O'Casey's life prior to his acceptance by the Abbey Theatre in 1923. Chapter III will focus attention on O'Casey's role in the Abbey Theatre through a discussion of his nationalistic plays. O'Casey's changing dramatic mood after his self-imposed exile to England and a general summary of the essay will be included in Chapter IV.

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CHAPTER I

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ABBEY THEATRE

To understand Ireland's position in the drama, one must first look to Ireland's past. Unlike other European countries that were swept by great literary movements, Ireland had no national drama until the end of the nineteenth century. It is indeed odd that Ireland, one of the oldest of European civilizations did not give dramatic expression to any of its national endeavors. Many have given Ireland's political and social upheavels as the reason for the lack of any national drama, but other countries in Europe suffered through wars, pillage, and persecutions and still manifest a great desire to establish a national theatre. Some have advanced the theory that the Celtic race was too dreamy and otherworldy to plunge into the mechanics of stagecraft. They point to the Scots and the Welsh, who established a national drama even later than the Irish.

According to Andrew E. Malone, drama emerged from religious ritual and observances from Classical Greece through medieval France, Germany, Italy and England, and "there was no apparent obstacle to prevent the comparatively simple people of these lands from performing, understanding and enjoying the dramatic representations which were sometimes complex and sophisticated but which were generally simple tales presented very simply."[2]

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[2]A. E. Malone, The Irish Drama (London, 1929), p. 5.

The Catholic Church was a great force in these early dramatic forms as it lent its clergy in the composition and presenttation of these ritualistic dramas. And as time went on the musical texts written in dramatic form became detached and were presented aside from the original ritual. It was inevitable that native speech should replace the Latin until "the drama began to move definitely toward the people and to be shaped by the genius of the different nations and races."[3]

But, as song developed into drama along with religious ritual from classical Greece on, there was in Ireland no such emergence. The Catholic Church in Ireland fostered few dramatic forms of worship as it had in other European countries, and the song, in Ireland was to remain nothing more than song. Recitation took the place of drama with the bards performing for the aristocracy and the shanachies reciting their stories at the peasant hearthside. The great Renaissance was hardly heeded in Ireland. Mostly because the people lacked the curiosity and impulse to emulate so necessary to a literary movement. Ireland had to wait until 1901 to see a play written in the language of their own country. Until the eighteenth century, the mass of the people were content to listen to the recitations of their story tellers and were, with the exception, of some in the larger cities, coldly indifferent to or ignorant of any drama except the most horrendous farces or bloodletting melodrama.

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[3] Ibid.

Ireland in the nineteenth century, depended entirely upon England for its drama. To England Ireland had given such great dramatists as George Farquhar, William Congreve, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. Yet these men contributed very little to Irish drama. The eighteenth centruy theatre in Dublin was as good as it was in London, but the drama belonged to England and not to Ireland. Ireland was merely an English colony enjoying the mode of the London stage.

During the eighteenth century the drama was popular in Dublin and in some provincial towns. But the theatre began to degenerate in England in the nineteenth century, and, with the coming of Robertson as the leading dramatist, the Irish interest in drama began to wane. The plays of Robertson were too localized for an Irish audience. Into this gap came Dion Boucicault, an American-Irish playwright whose melodramatic plays brought the Irish masses surging back to the theatres. His plays brought the characters and actions that the Irish could understand. J. W. Whitebread, who continued Boucicaults work, brought back such patriotic heroes as Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, and Edward Fitzgerald, living and dying for Ireland in the most melodramatic of melodrama. These plays were among the first to be Irish in theme and character. They were as Irish as Robertson's were English.

The nineteenth century saw a concerted movement by the Irish to free themselves of English domination. This cycle of political events, contributed to the Irish literary renaissance in the last half of the century. The Parliamentary Union of Ireland with Great Britain in 1800 resulted in an abortive revolt of a small group of Irish nationalists, led by Robert Emmet in 1803. From this date a myriad of events were to take place to fan the flames of Irish hatred of England.

During the Napoleonic Wars Ireland had enjoyed its most prosperous times, but it suffered nothing but agrarian and industrial decline thereafter. While an estimated one million people starved to death during the Great Famine of 1845-48, England insisted on large grain exports from Ireland. The year that ended the potatoe blight which had caused the famine in Ireland, saw all of Europe in violent eruption. In that year of 1848, an extremist group known as the Young Irelanders revolted against English rule in a minor skirmish that was quickly squelched. The leaders of this revolt became heroes in the eyes of the Irish who condoned their violence and dismissed any thought of possible treason. This rebellion marked an important milestone in Irelands long struggle toward freedom. One historian says, "The Young Irelanders went down in history, looking rather to a physical force than to constitutional efforts as the most effective means

of redress, in the struggle of Ireland - a small disarmed nation against England, a great European power."[4]

With the coming of Parnell, the nationalistic spirit took on more direction. Parnell's brilliant political maneuvering and his use of obstructionistic tactics resulted in Gladstones First Bill for Home Rule in 1886. However, this political triumph was greatly weakened by the scandal of Parnell's love affair with Mrs. Kitty O'Shea which caused the Catholic Church to withdraw its support, resulting in a serious split in the dominating Irish nationalist party.

Out of the political and economic chaos of the nineteenth century came a great literary revival. With Parnell's death, politics lost favor with the younger men who were turning to literature. The Gaelic League was formed in 1883 to restore the Irish language to national prominence. Douglas Hyde, one of the League's founders, published his Love Songs of Connacht and Religious Songs of Connacht with an English translation. The beauty of these translations gave the Irish idiom literary standing. Irish Literary Societies were founded in Dublin and in London with "the declared purpose to foster the growth of a new and distinctively Irish literature in English, and to that end the organized lectures and discussions on Irish literary topics, aided

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[4]Tom Ireland, Ireland Past and Present, (New York, 1942) pp. 253-54.

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the publication of the work of neglected writers, and gave opportunities to the younger writers who were striving to have themselves heard."[5]

It would be remiss to leave out Standish James Grady, called by many the "Father of the Irish Literary Revival." It was his book, History of Ireland, sometimes referred to as The Bardic History, written in 1878-80, that inspired many of the poets and writers during the Irish literary renaissance. Ironically, few of the dramatists brought Standish's heroic figures from Ireland's past to the stage. Those that did were those active in the Irish dramatic movement, Yates, Martyn, Moore, Synge, Russell and Lady Gregory. These writers used the heroic names of Deirdre, Maeve and Grania on the stage. Standish was more truly the father of the Irish Literary Revival.

It was to the non-dramatic poets, men, that out of this revival "in all things Irish" was born the Irish Literary Theatre, Irelands first attempt at a national theatre. An afternoon conversation in 1898 between W. B. Yates, Edward Martyn, and Lady Gregory in the latter's London drawing room actually launched the project. In her book, Our Irish Theatre, Lady Gregory relates that the conversation began with Martyn's desire to have his two new plays, The Heather Field, and Maeve, "produced in Germany

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[5]Irish Drama, p. 29

where there seemed to be more room for new drama than in England. I said it was a pity we had no Irish Theatre where such plays could be played. Mr. Yates said that it had always been a dream of his, but he had later thought it an impossible one, for it could not at first pay its way, and there was no money to be found for such a thing in Ireland. We went on talking about it and things seemed to grow more possible as we talked, and before the end of the afternoon we had made our plans. We said we would collect money, or rather ask to have a certain sum of money guaranteed. We would take a Dublin theatre and give a performance of Mr. Martyn's Heather Field and one of Mr. Yeats own plays, The Countess Cathleen. I offered the first guarantee of 25 pounds."[6]

Although lasting for only three seasons (1899-1901), the Irish Literary Theatre, founded by W. B. Yeats, Edward Martyn, George Moore, and Lady Gregory, was to be the well spring of the Abbey Theatre, destined to become one of Europes greatest theatres. W. B. Yeats was unable to look back far enough in 1909 when he wrote, "Whether the Irish Literary Theatre has a successor made on its own model or not, we can claim that a dramatic movement which will not die has been started."[7] While this new dramatic

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[6]Lady Gregory as quoted in Dawson Byrne's The Story of Ireland's National Theatre, (Dublin, 1929), p. 2.

[7]William B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies (New York 1924), p. 4.

movement in Dublin was an integral part of the Irish Literary Revival, it was nevertheless a later phase of an earlier dramatic revival felt all over Europe a reaction against the existing commercial and materialistic theatres.

The three season history of the Irish Literary Theatre began with Yeat's The Countess Cathleen on May 8, 1899, and Martyn's The Heather Field presented on the following evening. George Moore's Bending Of the Bough, one of the first Irish plays to deal with a domestic problem; Alice Milligan's The Last Feast of the Fianna, and Martyn's Maeve made up the 1900 season. Only two plays were produced in the final season, Diarmuid and Grania written by Yeats and Moore in collaboration, and Douglas Hyde's Casadh an x t-Sgain (Twisting of the Rope), the first play in Gaelic to be produced in any theatre.

This first adventure in a national theatre was not successful in itself primarily because of the lack of Irish actors and a permanent stage. That it was located in Ireland was, in the beginning, not the desire of W. B. Yeats, the man most responsible for giving the idea form. Yeats felt that it should be a "little theatre" located somewhere in a London suberb.

It was the "brothers Fay" who saved the floundering Irish National theatre from falling into obscurity. The

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two brothers, Frank J. and William G., had earlier organized a young amateur dramatic group calling themselves the "Ormond Dramatic Society" and had established something of a reputation among theatrical audiences. Early in 1901 Frank Fay read an article by William Archer, an English critic and scholar, describing the struggle of Ole Bull in establishing an experimental theatre in Bergen, Norway, and of the apprenticeship of Henrik Ibsen, who acted as stage manager in the theatre's third season. Fay had also heard of the French amateur, Andre Antoine, who had founded the Theatre Libre in Paris. Impressed and encouraged by the work of these men, Frank suggested to his brother that they form a small company of Irish Players to specialize in Irish plays.

Hearing that "AE" (George W. Russell) had written two acts of a play entitled Deirdre, the Fay brothers went to him and requested that he finish the play and allow their small company to produce it. Yeats, invited by "AE" to watch the rehersal of Deirdre, was so impressed with the Fays and their company that he offered them his Cathleen ni Houlihan. Both plays were presented on April 2, 1902 at St. Theresa's Hall, Dublin, with great audience and critical acclaim. According to A. E. Malone this performance marked "the real beginning of the Irish National Theatre; for the first time the plays were written by Irish playwrights,

acted by an Irish company, and staged by an Irish producer."[8]

After this first triumph the Fays and their company formed the Irish National Theatre Society with W. B. Yeats as president, "AE", Douglas Hyde, and Miss Maude Gonne as vice-president. Through the influence of Stephen Gwynn, novelist, poet, critic, and then secretary of the London Irish Literary Society, who saw their performances at the Antient Concert Rooms, Dublin, during the Samhain Festival in November, 1902; the Society was asked to perform in London at Queen's Gate Hall, Kensington. It was here that the company entrenched themselves in the hearts of their critics and it was here that Miss A.E.F. Horniman, later to be the Abbey Theatre's biggest financial benefactor, saw the group for the first time. So impressed was she after their performance that in a conversation with Yeats she pledged her support in finding permanent quarters for the group if they could stay together for a year.

During the next year the group moved to a hall in Camden Street, Dublin, where were rehearsed such plays as Fred Ryan's The Laying of the Foundation, Lady Gregory's Twenty-Five, Yeat's Hour Glass, Kings Threshold, Pot of Broth, Padraic Colum's Broken Soil, and Synge's In the Shadow of the Glen. At London's Royalty Theatre in March, 1904, the group reached the end of their struggle for

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[8]The Irish Drama, p. 39

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recognition and permanence. The plays, with the exception of Gregory's Twenty-Five were produced in Molesworth Hall. The theatre was packed with celebrities who were enthusiastic about the performances, and the troupe received widespread critical acclaim.

That same year Miss A.E.F. Horniman made good her promise to the Company. She obtained the lease of the old Mechanics Institute Theatre in Dublin, renamed it the Abbey Theatre, and spent 7,000 pounds in refurnishing it. It was given outright for a period of six years at no expense to the Irish National Theatre Society.

The Abbey Theatre opened its doors to world fame on Tuesday evening December 27, 1904 with the following plays on the program, Yeat's Cathleen ni Houlihan and Baile's Strand, Lady Gregory's Spreading the News, and John Millington Synge's In the Shadow of the Glen. That first evening was a phrophetic one as it gave to the Abbey three dramatists destined to dominate its life for many years.

After the Abbey's rather auspicious opening and a successful tour to England and Scotland, nothing significant took place until 1907 when the Abbey soared to great artistic heights and to national notoriety with the production of Synge's play, The Playboy of the Western World. Synge's first play, presented by the National Theatre Society at Molesworth Hall in 1903, was met with angry demonstrations at what the audience called a slur

on the Irish people. But nothing was to stir up such a storm in the Abbey as did the Playboy until the production of Sean O'Casey's Plough and the Stars in 1926. Critics agree that there is little in the Playboy that alluded to political or national problems that could have fired up such a disturbance. It is generally believed that the primary resentment was directed toward a piece of feminine underclothing referred to as "shift" in the play. Some feel that the play was too much of a joke on a nation that was trying to hold its head up before the world in their quest for Home Rule.

For an entire week the people of Dublin demonstrated violently against the Playboy. Here Yeats described a typical night:

> About forty men who sat in the middle of the pit succeeded in making the play entirely inaudible. Some of them brought tin-trumpets, and the noise began immediately on the rise of the curtain. For days articles in the press called for the withdrawal of the play, but we played for the seven nights we had announced; and before the week's end opinion had turned in our favor. There were, however nightly distrubances and a good deal of rioting in the surrounding streets. On the last night of the play there were, I believe, five

> hundred police keeping order in the theatre and in its neighborhood.[9]

And in a debate on freedom of the stage on the following night, Yeats told his audience:

> Gentlemen of the little clubs and societies, do not mistake the meaning of our victory; it means something for us, but more for you. When the curtain of the Playboy fell on Saturday night in the midst of what the Sunday Independent- no friendly witness- described as "thunders of applause, I am confident that I saw the rise in this country of a new thought, a new opinion, that we had long needed.[10]

The Abbey had successfully set itself above dictation from mob violence but was forced two years later to make another stand for its freedom when G. B. Shaw gave them his Blanco Posnet, which had been banned in England for production. This time the fight was against Dublin Castle, the seat of British domination in the form of the Lord Lieutenant, who threatened to lift the Abbey's patent if they produced Mr. Shaw's play. Both Yeats and Lady Gregory went ahead with rehersals and on opening night expected the production to be the Abbey's death-knell. On opening

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[9]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 195

[10]Ibid., p. 193

night Lady Gregory describes it in this way:

> The play began, and till near the end it was received in perfect silence. Perhaps the audience were waiting for the wicked bits to begin. Then, at the end, there was a tremendous burst of cheering, and we knew we had won. Some stranger outside asked what was going on in the theatre. 'They are defying the Lord Lieutenant' was the answer; and when the crowd heard the cheering, they took it up and it went far out through the streets.[11]

After this second victory over tyranny, the Abbey and the world were saddened by the death of Synge, who had lived long enough to see the approval of his revived Playboy in 1909, the year that he died. Mr. John Gassner says of Synge's death that "Genius was absent for fifteen years in the Irish Theatre... Nevertheless respectable talent remained abundant, and in the nick of time genius also appeared... it arose in Sean O'Casey, moreover he followed Synge's example of combining salty comedy with irony and he took up the work of Synge at the point at which death had interrupted it--namely, the drama of the cities and their proletariat."[12]

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[11] Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, as quoted by Una Ellis-Fermor in The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1939), p. 53.

[12] John Gassner, Masters of the Drama, (New York, 1940) p. 562.

The "respectable talent" that stepped into the breach left by Synge's death included Lennox Robinson, who later became manager and then producer of the Abbey; Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats Probably the most prolific of Irish dramatists: St. John G. Irvine, who was responsible for the breaking up of the old Abbey company; and William Boyle, a writer of competent comedy; and a host of lesser writers.

Remarking upon the death of Synge and the subsequent appointment of Lennox Robinson to the joint position of manager-producer of the Abbey, A. E. Malone tells us that "Synge was dead, the brothers Fay had departed, and the time was opportune for a new orientation in the Irish dramatic movement...in the direction of naturalism and away from the poetic drama; and it is in this direction that the Abbey Theatre, with short interruption, has gone under Mr. Robinson's guidance for nearly twenty years."[13] And in the same vein Una Ellis-Fermor says, "it is at once the conclusion of the early phase and a fresh beginning...the beginnings of the later Irish drama are already there in the early years of the movement and the naturalism that we associate with the names of Colum, Robinson, Murray and a long line of writers down to O'Casey is already a part of Synge's mastery..."[14]

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[13] The Irish Drama, p. 289

[14] Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London 1939) p. 187-8.

Surveying the Abbey after twenty years of association, W. B. Yeats said in a letter to Lady Gregory in 1919, "Our dramatists, and I am not speaking of your work or Synge's but of those to whom you and Synge and I gave an opportunity have been excellent just in so far as they have become all eye and ear, their minds not smoking lamps, as at times they would have wished, but clear mirrors."[15] Here Yeats is just a little disappointed at not having had the drama in the Abbey he would have liked. His friend Edward Martyn, one of the early Irish Literary Theatre founders, who had wanted to establish a theatre that would have an international repertory, had been far more successful in his Irish Theatre venture than had Yeats. Martyn and George Moore, another Irish Literary Theatre founder, felt that the drama should be one of ideas or intellect in the style of Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg and Galsworthy. Yeats and Lady Gregory, on the other hand, were primarily interested in the poetic folk drama of Ireland. Yeats goes on to say, "We have been the first to create a true 'Peoples Theatre,' and we have succeeded because it is not an exploitation of local colour, or of a limited form of drama possessing a temporary novelty, but the first doing of something for which the world is ripe, something that will be done all over the world and done more and more perfectly, the making articulate of all the dumb

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[15]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 204-5.

classes each with its own dignity... Yet we did not set out to create this sort of theatre, and its success has been to me a discouragement and a defeat."[16]

The loss of Arthur Sinclair and the entire company of Abbey Theatre players in 1916 because of a dispute between them and St. John Irvine was a serious blow to the Abbey. Sinclair and the Abbey company formed into the Irish Players and played in England and the U.S. with superlative success. The loss of the Fays, Sara Allgood, Synge, and finally the whole company did nothing to revive the sagging spirit of the Abbey. Aside from the domestic problem and the lack of a dramatic "giant," the Abbey had to fight to stay open during the exploding tensions that surrounded the little theatre in the Easter Rebellion of 1916 and a Civil War that threatened to engulf it completely.

Sean O'Casey was the dramatic genius that was to catapult the Abbey back into world prominence after "this general drought". Walter Starkie has this to say about the Abbey and O'Casey: "Life has changed greatly in Ireland since 1914. Not only has the "stage Irishman" completely disappeared, but his offspring the political playboy type has become rarer and rarer. The seriousness of the modern revolutionary Irishman contributes to produce a grotesque humor which acts like Pirandello's demon and destroys every

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[16] Ibid. p. 206.

image created by the emotions. Sean O'Casey is the dramatist of Ireland who has reflected these tendencies most unmistakably in modern drama. He is the completest expression of the drama of the post war movement--the drama of the city, in contrast to the drama of the rural districts."[17]

Although the theatre that W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory hoped to have was passing further from reality, they, nevertheless, carried on the work of productions cheerfully looking to the Abbey's future. Lady Gregory, as she was to Yeats, was O'Casey's closest literary friend and admirer. The names of Yeats and Lady Gregory will always be spoken in the same breath with that of the Abbey Theatre, and in the following chapters an attempt will be made to show O'Casey's place in its illustrious history.

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[17]Walter Starkie, "Sean O'Casey" in The Irish Theatre, ed. by Lennox Robinson, (London, 1939), p. 149.

CHAPTER II

SEAN O'CASEY'S EARLY LIFE: A STRUGGLE FOR EXPRESSION

Sean O'Casey has every right to be called the dramatist of the proletariat. In the most literal sense, O'Casey's early tenement background is that of a proletariat. Yet his was the genius that emerged from the slimy slum district of Dublin to revive the floundering Abbey Theatre and to begin a new era of Irish dramatic writing. Koslow says this of him: "For O'Casey, more than any other living dramatist, has exploited the events of his own life, his surroundings and the people he knew and observed."[1]

Christened John Casside, O'Casey was born to Sue and Michael Casside in the Dublin tenements in 1884. He changed his name to Sean O'Casey while active in the Gaelic League in 1904. O'Casey was one of thirteen children, only five of whom lived to maturity. Two of those that had died had been named John.

O'Casey's father, Michael, died at the age of 46 of cancer while O'Casey was still quite young. Born into rather a large family in Limerick, Michael was raised a protestant, his mother's faith. His father was a Roman Catholic. The older brother and sisters were raised in the Roman Catholic faith and because of religious dissension

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[1] Jules Koslow, The Green and the Red, (New York, 1950) p. 20.

in the family, O'Casey's father moved to Dublin where he met and married Sue.

Little is known of the family background of O'Casey's mother. She was born, was raised and died in the squalor of the Dublin slums. Although she had little formal education herself, she insisted that her children should receive all the advantages of education, however scanty, that were then available. After her husbands death she managed to keep the family together on a small pension, starving herself so that her children might survive the cold and hunger that seeped into their bones. She was never heard to complain, outwardly accepting her poverty reluctantly but cheerfully. And no matter how dingy her existence, she always found some beauty around her. Probably no other single force guided O'Casey in his youth as did the patient and practical Sue.

Here O'Casey pays a last tribute to his mother at her death:

> She had died divested of decoration, even of one word of glittering praise.. No earthly diadem would be brilliant enough to wear well on that seamed and fearless brow. All the perfume of Arabia could add no further beauty to those worn and gnarled hands. Only such a gem as the evening star on that forehead could safely set off that hardy, gentle, patient face. He

> bent down and kissed her. Her lips were very cold now. Careless, he let the tears fall on the wrinkled cheeks, but no lids fluttered open to let the bright, dark eyes stare hope and courage into his own now; nor did the cracked lips give as much as a quiver. Ah! Jack, Jack, she is dead indeed![2]

And on the afternoon of her funeral he says:

> Strive as he might, he couldn't force himself to realize that all life had left the frail body lying so safe and still in its faintly polished box. He would have been shocked, but not surprised, if he had heard her voice crooning quietly some old, sweet song; or saw her suddenly lean out of the window to send a greeting down to a passing neighbor. Perhaps, a young, black-haired Miss once more, she was with her Michael again, he with his white brow and bronze beard looking down at her, stroking her hand, and murmuring, you took a long time to come to me Sue; a long, long time. And she would say, I came quick as I could, Michael; and when I found the way I hurried.[3]

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[2]Sean O'Casey, Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well, (New York, 1949), p. 33.

[3]Ibid., p. 36

Although the doctors advised against schooling because of an eye affliction, O'Casey's mother was prevailed upon by a protestant clergyman, Reverend Hunter, to enroll young Johnny in school. However, his formal education was short lived when, after a beating by the instructor, O'Casey banged "an ebony ruler down on the pink, baldy, hoary oul' head of hoary oul' Slogan."[4] He remarked bitterly of "being lugged along at the backside of this soft-hatted stiff-collared oul' henchman of heaven, to be added to his swarm of urchins cowering and groping about in the rag and bone education provided by the church and the state for the children of those who hadn't the wherewithal to do anything better."[5]

O'Casey's first job was as a stockboy in the firm of Hymdim, Leadem and Company, Dublin. He was not yet fourteen and, tutored by his sister Ella, a school teacher, he was just learning to read. He gives us this account of his "comin' of age:"

> Johnny was getting on in years now, growing old with the world and all who were in it. Lean and lanky he grew, with masses of hair growing low down in front that his mother labored to brush back from his forehead... a few days before his fourteenth birthday he could manage to read, skipping

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[4]Sean O'Casey, I knock at the Door (New York, 1939) p. 132.

[5]Ibid., P. 207

> the biggest words, the stories in The Boys of London and New York, and the various coloured-cover penny adventure books... he knew nearly as much as there was to be known, and fit he was to take his place in the world.[6]

From stockboy O'Casey was promoted to clerk and once a week on Friday, "he was allowed to stretch out his hand for fourteen shillings in a clean little white envelope."[7] But an argument over being unjustly kept overtime and being fined for subsequent insubordination soon terminated O'Casey's dint of labor at Hymdim, Leadem and Company. The management disliked O'Casey primarily because, although a protestant, he refused to join them at evangelical meetings in Merrion Hall. He once remarked to one of the "evangelical whisperers" who asked him to attend the meetings " that he'd rather open a girl's bodice than open a prayer book."[8]

His next job was in the warehouse of Jason and Sons, Dublin wholesale news dealer. Again O'Casey's resentment toward the men in the shops caused him to lose his job. O'Casey felt that the rule forcing the men to remove their hats while being paid was rediculous. His refusal to remove his hat at the paywindow resulted in his being fired,

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[6]Sean O'Casey, Pictures in the Hallway, (New York, 1942) p. 89

[7]Ibid, p. 111.

[8]Ibid., p. 117.

although he had planned to quit anyway because of the physical hardship he had to endure in the job. Following a short period of unemployment, O'Casey was hired by the Harnsworth Agency, a magazine distributing house. But here again lost his job. This time he was beginning to awake to the political scene around him and to talk of Republicanism. Inclined toward the more conservative and monarchist view, Harmsworth soon separated itself from the rebellious O'Casey.

During this period (1900-1905) of working in the shops of Dublin, O'Casey was educating himself. His father had been a book lover and had left behind a few of the classics and some religious books. To these O'Casey added "three of Dickens' and four of Scott's; two of Balzac's and one of Hugo's; Ruskin's Seven Lamps of Architecture, Sesame and Lilies, Ethics of the Dust, The Crown of Wild Olives, and Unto This Last; Darwin's Origin of Species and Descent of Man...Fenimore Cooper...Dumas...Tacitus; Germania and the Life of Agricola with Plutarch's Lives...Reade's Cloister and the Hearth; Carlyle's French Revolution...Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress...Sheridans plays...Aeneid and a Classical Geography...the works of Byron, Shelly, Keats, Goldsmith, Crabbe, Tennyson, Eliza Cook--a terrible waste of sixpence--Gray and the Golden Treasure, with the glorious

Globe edition of Shakespeare falling to bits; all backed up with Chamber's Dictionary."[9]

Free from the shops, O'Casey got a job on a railroad gang digging sidings. In delicate health since childhood, O'Casey all but died on his feet during the first few days at work. "He went home, night after night a clumsy-moving mass of aching stiffness, seeing when he got home an anxious look in his mother's eyes..when she saw the raw red on the palms of his hands".[10] O'Casey stuck it out until "his body was...in fine alignment with his mind."[11] He never again returned to shop work, preferring outside work such as dockworking, hod-carrying and stonebreaking on the roads.

O'Casey had stayed away from the church after his early experiences with the Reverend Hunter's attempts at educating him. However, the family moved close to St. Barnupus, a small protestant church in Dublin, and O'Casey was befriended by its rector, the Reverend Harry Fletcher. He began attending church regularly and even became secretary of the church's Mission Aid Society. His faith in the church was weakened temporarily (it was later to be weakened permanently) at Fletcher's forced resignation

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[9]Ibid., p. 177.

[10]Sean O'Casey, Drums Under the Windows (New York, 1946), p. 7.

[11]Ibid., p. 8.

because he could not fight "the deep set emotions of an ignorant evangelism...preventing our people from seeing the truth in the Scriptures and the church's tradition."[12] Some of the new rector's troubles [13] were the same ones that Harry Fletcher had left behind, but the Reverend Edward Griffin decided to fight for his rights. He and O'Casey became fast friends, and O'Casey with some of the congregation helped Griffin in his struggle for religious freedom in the parish.

One feels that in reading O'Casey's work there is a tinge of atheism in the man and, of course, his present Communist sympathies might logically substantiate that feeling. However, even when one views casually O'Casey's religious or political attitudes, it is obvious that the man had excellent reason for being suspicious of the Church. He tells us that "the hold of faith had weakened..he no longer thought that God's right hand, or His left one either had handed down the bible out of Heaven...Darwin's flame of thought had burned away a lot of the sacred straw and stubble...how incredible much of the bible was,

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[12] Pictures in the Hallway, p. 285

[13] There was at this time a marked Protestant-Catholic cleavage with the Protestant church becoming increasingly narrow and evangelistic, distrusting and hating anything that might be Catholic in form: Fletcher asked the blessings for the dead and kept a crucifix on his study wall. Griffin had done nothing more than add simple decorations to the alter.

contradicting itself so often and so early that no-one could argue with it."[14] At the time of his brother Tom's death, O'Casey reveals another reason for losing his faith in the church when he says, "Nothing seemed to be able to frighten the clergy...it went about as if Jesus had never got out of the manger...if this kind of life was a preparation for Heaven, then Heaven could go to hell for him, for the saints would be scurvy companions. In what do we behold His glory...in the stunted efforts of poor dead Tom...the squalor of the homes where the people lived?" [15] O'Casey felt that the clergy were wrong in telling the people to endure their oppressive poverty without complaint as they would be rewarded in heaven. His weakening faith, then can be attributed to an intellectual suspicion of the Scriptures from his reading in Darwin and to a bitter disappointment in God's benevolence toward the impoverished Dublin.

Of his early life, O'Casey says that there were "Three appeals to him, the humblest Roman of them all; for God, for Man, and for Country; three so different from each other, yet all alike in so far that each was made in the dimness, silently, and in fear."[16] They were to him appeals for freedom from employers, freedom from sin,

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[14]Sean O'Casey, Drums Under the Window, p. 32.

[15]Ibid., pp. 51-2.

[16]Sean O'Casey, Pictures in the Hallway, p. 264.

freedom from national oppression."[17] As one critic says, "from three directions the call came to him--the church, socialism, the Gaelic League."[18] However the calls did not come in that order. With his interest in the church practically dead O'Casey next turned to the Gaelic League. In this organization he rose in 1907 to be secretary of his local chapter. He received the name of "Irish Jack" from his railroad gang because of his constant pleas with them to join the League. An avid student of the language, O'Casey boasted proudly, "there were few of them (Gaelic Leaguers) could speak as well as he; and none of them with such a fire of eloquence."[19] Although he worked in the Gaelic League for many years, O'Casey became disgusted with it when it did not have the courage to back Dr. Michael O'Hickey, professor of Irish in Maynooth College, in his fight to make Irish a regular part of the curriculum. The Gaelic League declined to side with O'Hickey for fear of alienating the clergy, and for this cowardice O'Casey never forgave them.

The next call O'Casey answered was Socialism and the Militant Labor Movement. O'Casey seemed totally ignorant of the Irish Socialist Republican Party until he heard a speech by James Connolly, secretary of the party, in 1903. It was not until 1908 that O'Casey began to take an active

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[17] Ibid., p. 264

[18] Jules Koslow, The Green and the Red, pp. 14-15

[19] Sean O'Casey, Drums under the Windows, p. 28

interest in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, as the party was called. In an effort to coordinate the work of the I.R.B. and the Militant Labor Movement, O'Casey called on Jim Larkin, then head of the labor movement. He says of his decision, "Few of the Republicans were of his kinship. Here in these houses in the purple of poverty and decay, dwelt his genuine brethern. Why shouldn't he fight for them against the frauds that kept them prisoners there."[20] O'Casey a few years later joined the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. During the bitter Transportation Strike of 1913, O'Casey helped raise funds for the families of the strikers while he himself was cold and hungry.

Out of the Transportation Strike came the formation of the Citizen's Army in 1914 with O'Casey playing a major role in its organization and in the writing of its constitution. However, a dispute with Countess Markieviez over her membership in both the Citizen's Army and its counterpart in southern Ireland, The Irish Volunteers, resulted in his resignation in 1915.[21]

After leaving the Citizens Army, O'Casey's political interest completely waned. He was able, because of his

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[20]Sean O'Casey, Drums Under the Windows, p. 243

[21]O'Casey had presented a motion to the Citizens Army that Countess Markieviez resign from one of the organizations. The motion was turned down and Countess Markieviez asked for an apology from O'Casey. He preferred resignation to an apology. Another example of O'Casey's rebellious spirit.

disassociation in politics, to view most of the Easter Week Rebellion of 1916, the war with England in 1920 and the Irish Civil War in 1922 with a great deal of detachment. However, during the Easter Week Rebellion he was placed against a wall to be searched by British soldiers and, he felt, to be shot. But a disturbance at the end of the street allowed him to escape. He was later made a political prisoner and escaped most of the rebellion's tempest. He admired the courage and ideals of the rebellionists but he felt that the manner of fight was wrong. O'Casey saw little sense in the Irish Civil War because of the similiarities between the Treaty and DeValeris Document No. 2.

On looking briefly at O'Casey's early life, it is easy to see how his early drama was to be so spontaneous and natural. Here was a man literally hewn out of the dank brownstone of the Dublin slums, a man with a clear preception of all that swirled before his ulcerated and blurred eyesight. In all that he attempted, it was with a spirit of lifting himself out of the filthy morass of the tenements where "the frauds kept him prisoner." Each of his calls, the church, the Gaelic League, and Socialism was to blend in the genius that has gone into his early plays. He now "could put away the tools of the worker and take up the tools of the writer."[22]

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[22]Jules Koslow, The Green and the Red, p. 14

CHAPTER III

SEAN O'CASEY'S ROLE IN THE ABBEY THEATRE

After O'Casey left the shops in 1905 and turned his labours to that of the outdoor workingman, he turned seriously to writing. All of his writing in the beginning was political, and he published many articles in the new political periodicals of the day, such as the Irish Nation and The Freeman. The first published work for which he received money was a "tiny booklet" entitled The Story of the Irish Citizen Army. Tragedy stepped in on the day he received his money as his mother died on that day. The fifteen pounds that he received was used to pay for his mother's funeral.

Shortly after beginning his first job, O'Casey became interested in the theatre and with his brother Archie helped form an amateur group, the Townshend Dramatic Society. It is somewhat coincidental that he should have his first dramatical experience in a theatre that was to make him famous twenty three years later. He tells us that "with the world's people fading into ignorance and low regards, he had to do the best he could for the drama by playing in the Mechanics Theatre, in Abbey Street, strutting the stage there before a rough-and-randy crowd who came to while away the time, but who put great pass on the suffering and rollicking that shivered and shone on the stage."[1]

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[1] Pictures, pp. 193-194.

When he was seventeen O'Casey wrote his first play, Frost in the Flower, but it "was rejected by a little theatre because it was highly satirical of the members of that group."[2] After this first disappointment, O'Casey turned to political writing and his playwriting seemed to have ended there. However, in 1922 he published one act play, The Robe of Rosheen, in a Dublin political magazine called The Plain People. Although the play passed unnoticed, O'Casey had reached an important new concept of his playwriting goals. "He had shifted away from the active Ireland, and was growing contentedly active in himself. Instead of trying to form Ireland's life, he would shape his own. He would splash his thoughts over what he had seen and heard; keep eyes and ears open to see and hear what life did, what life had to say, and how life said it, life drunk or sober; life sickly or sturdy; life sensible or half demented; life well-off or poor; life on its knees in prayer, or shouting up a wild curse to heaven's centre."[3]

It has been popularly thought that Sean O'Casey learned playwriting by watching the productions at the Abbey Theatre. This, however, is a misconception. In 1920 he resubmitted The Frost and the Flower to the Abbey, but they rejected it on the grounds that some of the characters were too

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[2]Koslow, The Green and the Red, p. 17

[3]Sean O'Casey, Inishfallen Fare Thee Well, pp. 151-2

imitative of those seen at the Abbey.[4] But O'Casey, angry with this criticism, said, "This comment was wrong, and a little rediculous, since he had been in the theatre but twice...and had seen...nothing that he could try to imitate."[5] O'Casey learned playwriting by reading plays and acting them out with his brother Archie.

The Frost and the Flower had to do "with a young man, a lay teacher in a Christian Brother's School, who though full of confidence on gigantic questions he was never called upon to touch, was timid as a new-born mouse over simple questions concerning himself. He got a very small salary from the Brothers, paid to him quarterly, mostly in sixpenny pieces and three penny bits. A teachership in elementary mathematics and elementary English fell vacant in a technical school, the gift of a Dublin Council Committee, and Sean's timid friend, certain he hadn't a chance of getting it, applied for the job. To his frightened dismay, he was elected by a fine vote, and everyone in the parish brought him all kinds of books to help him for the work he would have to do. Though he had the ability, he hadn't the willpower; and the play ends in the midst of a party given in his honor, at which it became known that he had resigned from his job, to become the scorn of his family and joke of the parish."[6]

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[4] Ibid, p. 152

[5] Ibid. p. 152

[6] Ibid. p. 152-3

The second play which O'Casey submitted to the Abbey was the Harvest Festival, which dealt "with the efforts of militant members of the unskilled unions to put more of the fibre of resistance to evil conditions of pay and life into the hearts and minds of the Craft unions whose gospel was that what was good enough for the fathers was good enough for the sons. The action took place in the busy preparations made by a church for holding the annual harvest festival, which the Anglo-Catholics sneeringly called the Feast of Saint Pumpkin and all Vegetables."[7] The Abbey wrote O'Casey a letter "saying that the work was well conceived, but badly executed; with an added note from Mr. Lennox Robinson...saying that he liked very much the character of the clergyman in the play,...which was something though not enough for Sean."[8]

"He had made up his mind years ago that the Abbey Theatre curtain would go up on a play of his; and up it would go, sooner or later."[9] O'Casey was angry when he made this resolution. The Abbey had lost the manuscript of the third play he had submitted, The Crimson in the Tri-Colour. He was to wait for more than a year before the manuscript was found and then rejected. But he had another almost finished, The Shadow of a Gunman, which was to bring him fame and the Abbey a much needed revival.

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[7]Sean O'Casey, Inishfallen Fare Thee Well, p. 153

[8]Ibid., p. 153

[9]Ibid., p. 156

Lady Gregory had wanted to produce The Crimson in the Tri-Colour and her interest in O'Casey gave him new strength at a time when he was almost ready to return to the toils of a common laborer. She told him "I believe there is something in you and your strong point is characterization."[10] She goes on to say, "I had wanted to pull that play together and put it on to give him experience, but Yeats was down on it."[11] Of the rejection O'Casey says, "It was years after, when he had left Ireland forever, that bitterness, mingled with scorn, overtook him, for he began to realize that the plays refused by the Abbey Theatre were a lot better than many they had welcomed."[12]

"Well, he had done what he had set himself to do seven or more years ago; he had mounted a play of his on the Abbey stage."[13] The Abbey Theatre finally accepted his The Shadow of a Gunman and on the evening of April 9, 1923, O'Casey's "knock on the door" was heard, and he became famous almost overnight. Lady Gregory says, of the opening night that "The Shadow of a Gunman was an immense success, beautifully acted, all the political points taken up with delight by a big audience. Sean O'Casey...only saw it from the side wings the first night but had to appear to make his bow."[14]

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[10]Lady Augusta Gregory, Lady Gregory's Journals, ed Lennox Robinson (New York, 1947), p. 73.

[11]Journals, p. 73.

[12]Inishfallen, p. 156

[13]Ibid., p. 164

[14]Journals, p. 71

It was characteristic of O'Casey that he appeared at the theatre for his first dramatic triumph in his working clothes, refusing to remove his cap during the performance as was the custom of the working class.

For O'Casey this acceptance by the Abbey was the climax of a twenty-one year struggle to be heard in literary circles, seven of it with the Abbey in mind. He had gone hungry to buy books to satisfy a more desirable hunger for knowledge. His nights writing were filled with the rattle of machine guns of the Sinn Feiners and the Black and Tans. And after the death of his mother, he had to live with his drunken brother, Mick, who night after night taunted him about his writing. He tells us of the night that climaxed his rooming with brother Mick: "From the corner of an eye, he saw the touseled figure staggering into the room, knocking clumsily and intentionally against the table at which Sean was sitting while an envious, dirty hand, sliding along it, sent the little ink-bottle flying to the floor. Sean said nothing but sat quietly where he was."[15]

If the acceptance by the Abbey Theatre of The Shadow of a Gunman was a boon to its author, it became doubly so to the Abbey. After Synge's death in 1910, the Abbey repretory depended primarily upon the rural folk drama that Synge had lent his genius to. But there were no dramatists until the arrival of O'Casey that matched Synge's dramatic

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[15]Sean O'Casey, Inishfallen, p. 47

stature at the Abbey. And the Abbey's Company dwindled with each passing season. Robinson says in Lady Gregory's Journals, "the theatre had fallen on lean days...its best players, Sara Allgood, Arthur Sinclair, J. M. Kerrigan, and others had left for England...and now the Theatre was faced with a new desertion...that of Fred O'Donovan and other players."[16] This was in 1919. Lady Gregory goes on to say, "the remains of the Company were feeling uneasy, fearing we would come to an end."[17] In February, 1923, at a time when the Abbey had fallen into financial difficulties, Lady Gregory appealed to the government for a subsidy which was finally granted in 1924. However, Mr. Thomas Johnson, a government man who was sympathetic toward the Abbey, offered this criticism to Lady Gregory: "There is a feeling that there is too much repetition of old work...and that more translations of foreign work would be good."[18]

Gassner says of O'Casey's coming to the Abbey, "In this general drought, which the Abbey failed to end with a few foreign imports by Shaw and Evreinov and with a belated production of a Doll's House (in 1923) it suddenly discovered a potent rain-maker and a veritable man of thunder...it found him where the Abbey's directors had been least inclined to look, among the urban proletariat."[19] The audiences had

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[16] Journals, p. 54

[17] Ibid., p. 56

[18] Ibid., p. 70

[19] Masters of the Drama, p. 566

grown tired of the same playwrights, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Lennox Robinson, who offered up substantially the same fare season after season. The success of O'Casey was due in large measure to his freshness. His was a new naturalistic approach in a new setting. There had been playwrights before him in the Abbey that had touched on the urban scene, but none were equipped with the tools or the genius of O'Casey. He arose in a spontaneous fashion to project for the first time the real slums, their inhabitants, and the effects of civil strife on their lives. All that O'Casey revealed, whether they liked what they saw or not, was something that was personal to them. They had all lived through the Easter Rebellion of 1916. They had dodged the bullets and suffered the indignaties of the ruthless searching of their homes by the Black and Tans. They knew Larkin, Connelly, Parnell. They had their Juno's and their "Paycocks" living below them and above them. They had known their Nora Clitheroe's, Seumus Shield's and "Joxer" Daly's; and Rosie Redmond, whose name was unchanged in the Plough and Stars, was a prostitute they actually knew or had heard about. O'Casey's world was their world, and if he treated it at times unsympathetically or unkindly, he alone suffered the wrath of the audience as he did in The Plough and the Stars. But for O'Casey there was no compromise. He did not write to please an audience, but to please himself.

There are three distinct periods in O'Casey's work. The first, the one which we are concerned primarily with in this essay, are the plays of the Irish war period or the naturalistic period. The second is the transition period after his leaving Ireland when he turned to expressionism in The Silver Tassie and Within the Gates. The third termed the "world outlook" period of his later plays such as The Star Turns Red and Red Roses for Me. It was in the naturalistic period, however, that O'Casey has found his greatest success.

The action of The Shadow of a Gunman takes place in the Dublin slums in May, 1920. It is a time of terror, death, and destruction between the Sinn Fein and the Black and Tans.[20] The peddler, Seumas Shield, in the play gives a graphic description of the country's plight when he says:

> The country is gone mad . Instead of counting their beads now they're countin' bullets; their Hail Marys and paternosters are burstin' bombs...burstin' bombs, and the

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[20]The Sinn Fein (Gaelic meaning "Home Rule") was a political party that replaced the Constitutional Nationalist party as the party dominant among Irish Nationalists in 1918 with Eamon De Valera as President. This shift in power was a victory for physical violence (Sinn Fein) over the constitutional revision theory for gaining independence. The Black and Tans were the men England sent to subdue the Sinn Feiners, but who were undisciplined and entered into a wave of terror of their own. They received their names from their uniforms of kahki pants and dark tunics.

> rattle of machine guns; petrol is their holy water; their Mass is a burnin' buldin'; their De Profundis is "The Soldiers' Song", an' their creed is, I believe in the gun almighty, maker of heaven an' earth...an' it's all for "the glory o' God an' the honour o' Ireland".
>
> (Act II)

During the reign of terror, life in Dublin tenements must somehow continue and as the play opens, Seumas Shield, about thirty-five discovers that he has overslept and is late for work. Living with Seumas is Donal Dovoren, a young poet whom everyone in the tenement believes to be a gunman in hiding because he speaks so glowingly of Ireland's fight for independence. Donal leads Minnie Powell, an attractive young girl living in the same tenement, into believing that he is a gunman and a member of the Irish Republican Army. That night the Black and Tans raid the tenement and Seumus and Donal discover that a friend has left a piece of luggage containing bombs in their room. Minnie in an effort to save Donal takes the luggage, is taken prisoner, and subsequently killed in the fight that results. Seumas and Donal do nothing more than cringe in fear while at the same time they mouth heroic phrases that are as shallow as their own heoric intentions. After Minnie has been taken away, Seumus keeps saying over and over "Oh, grant she won't say anything!

God grant she won't say anything."[21] When Donal tells Seumas that Minnie has been shot trying to escape, Seumas says, "For God's sake speak easy, an' don't bring them in here on top of us again."[22] But Donal confesses his and Seumas' cowardice in the end by saying, "It's terrible to think that little Minnie is dead, but it's still more terrible to think that Davoren and Shilds are alive. Oh, Donal Davoren, Shame is your portion now till the silver cord is loosened and the golden bowl be broken. Oh, Davoren, Donal Davoren, poet and poltroon, poltroon and poet."[23]

In the play O'Casey has attempted to show the slum dwellers side of the story in revolutionary Ireland. "And while the city resounds with rifle fire and the sky is lit up with flares, inside the tenements the ordinary everyday life continues with its monotonous round of squalid tasks and intrigues...now and then a bullet pierces a window and kills someone...Black and Tans rush in to search the house armed to the teeth with revolvers. Life becomes intense because death is present on all sides."[24] O'Casey is bitter toward the loud-mouthed idealists, speechmakers and poets, who incite death and destruction but are unwilling to take

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[21] Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays (London, 1950) p. 153.

[22] Ibid., p. 155

[23] Ibid., pp. 156-7

[24] Irish Theatre, pp. 153-4

a part in it. The play shows "nationalism as the last refuge of poltroons."[25]

O'Casey was disappointed in the money he received for his The Shadow of a Gunman. He had expected twenty pounds but received only four. "Dimly he began to realize that the Abbey Theatre would never provide a living...the amount didn't even extend to the purchase of a book...he would start a new play that very night."[26] He did and it was called Cathleen Listens In, a jovial sardonic sketch on the various parties in conflict over Irish politics...Sin Fein, Free State, and Labour. The play, however, was not well received. "He was the one and only playwright to have had a play received in silence by an Abbey audience; the only one to be deprived of even a single timid hand-clap."[27]

His next play, Juno and the Paycock, was an immediate success and O'Casey tells us that "Yeats halted in his meditations to tell him that he had given new hope and new life to the theatre."[28]

Like The Shadow of a Gunman, the setting for Juno and the Paycock is the Dublin slums in 1922 when the battle

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[25]Ivor Brown, "The Theatre", The Saturday Review, 143:959 June 18, 1927

[26]Inishfallen, p. 229

[27]Ibid., p. 230

[28]Ibid., p. 230

between the Free Staters and the Republican Die-Hards was raging in bloody conflict. In this play, however, the atmosphere of terror and violence does not become the important element in the play as it had been in The Shadow of a Gunman. The political struggle remains in the background while the real issues of poverty are revealed. It is a "wonderful and terrible play of futility, of irony, humour, tragedy."[29]

Probably no other character in O'Casey's plays has been so well done as Juno Boyle, possibly a portrait of his own mother whom he deeply loved and upon whom he had been so dependent in sickness and hunger. O'Casey describes Juno, the mother of the play, thus:

Twenty years ago she must have been a pretty woman but her face now assumed that look which ultimately settles down upon the faces of the women of the working-class, a look of listless monotony and harassed anxiety, blending with an expression of mechanical resistance. In the play she tries desperately to hold her family together while her husband, Captain Boyle, the "paycock" is lounging away his time with another wastrel and his drinking companion, "Joxer" Daly.

As the play opens, Mary, the daughter, is out on strike, and son Johnny, who had been severely shot in the hip during Easter Week and who later loses his arm, is at home ill.

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[29] Gregory's Journals, p. 74

Amidst the strife, illness, and squalor, good fortune comes to the Boyles in a supposed bequest from a distant relative in England. The Boyles begin to buy articles to refurnish their home on credit and the "paycock" struts in a new suit of clothes. With the pending prosperity, Mary, looking to brighter days, leaves Jerry Devine, union organizer, and becomes infatuated with Charlie Bentham a school teacher and aspiring lawyer. But good fortune turns suddenly into tragedy when it is learned that the bequest is all a mistake. Creditors come and strip the apartment, Charlie Bentham leaves Mary bewildered and pregnant, and Johnny, who had informed on a comrade, is taken away and shot by two Irregulars. Juno with her home and family wrecked, cries out: "Sacred Heart o' Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone, and give us hearts o' flesh. Take away this murdherin' hate, and give us thine own eternal love." As the play ends "the paycock" and his drinking friend, "Joxer" Daly, come in roaring drunk. Boyle takes his last sixpence from his pocket and lets it drop to the floor, exclaiming, "Wan single, solitary tanner left out of all I borreyed...the blinds is down Joxer, the blinds is down."[30] And as the curtain falls, Boyle, in a drunken stupor, tells Joxer that "th' whole worl's in a terrible state o' chasis."[31]

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[30] Collected Plays, I., p. 87

[31] Ibid., p. 89

Juno has been said to be one of the finest characters in all of Irish drama.[32] At the same time, the character delineation of "The Paycock" and Joxer Daly are notable in that they are a double injection of the comic force, however viscious and pessimistic. There is a suggestion that "The Paycock" might have been a better man without the influence of Joxer. In the first act the audience is somewhat prepared for the impending tragedy in the presence of Johnny Boyle with "the look of indefinite fear" on his face. Starkie said, "O'Casey has that power which Tchekhov possessed, of painting the grey lives of those who are destined to become a failure."[33] Gassner points out that "not only are O'Casey's poor Irish afflicted by circumstance in general, but they are making a frightful mess of their lives by their perversities, while innocent people like Mary and her long-suffering understandably tart mother are the greatest victims."[34] One feels in reading the play that O'Casey is drawing from life. This impression is substantiated by Starkie, who remembers O'Casey telling him that he actually knew these people and in certain instances he has used the names of actual people.[35]

It is interesting to note that in the selection of Berry Fitzgerald for the role of "Captain" Boyle, O'Casey

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[32]Starkie, Irish Theatre, p. 159

[33]Ibid., p. 160

[34]Masters of the Drama, p. 568

[35]Robinson, The Irish Theatre, p. 157

became involved in the first of a series of differences with the Abbey company that was to estrange him completely from that group in 1926. O'Casey had been impressed with Fitzgeralds performance as the clergyman in Ervine's play, Mary, Mary Quite Contrary, a year before Juno and the Paycock was produced. After the performance of Ervine's play, O'Casey had run excitedly back to the dressing room exclaiming loudly that for all to hear that Fitzgerald was "a grand comedian; an artist born suddenly for the theatre."[36] But O'Casey was not aware of the jealousies that were nourished back-stage and "his ardent acclaim of what he thought was fine raised the first breeze of coolness between him and the Abbey actors."[37]

O'Casey's next play, produced September 29, 1924, was "Nannies Night Out", a one act work that no-one liked except A.E., otherwise known as George Russell, who thought it O'Casey's best work; an opinion that didn't bother Sean, for he knew A.E. knew nothing about the drama."[38] With this failure out of the way, he began for the first time to take an active part in rehersals. His third full length play, in rehersal then, was The Plough and the Stars.

It is obvious from O'Casey's autobiography that he had an ulterior purpose, very probably unknown to the Abbey, in wanting his plays to be a success, not critically but

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[36] Inishfallen, p. 233

[37] Ibid., p. 233

[38] Ibid., p. 234

financially. After Juno and the Paycock had netted him 25 pounds (he had received four for Shadow of a Gunman) he says, "Books, books, more books! And a step nearer to a trip over the waters to England"[39] And after the failure of "Nannies Night Out, he gives his real reasons for wanting more money.

> But Sean's persuasion laboured on for he saw before him clearly now a fine library and a visit to England where his second play Juno and the Paycock was doing well in the West End of London...He wanted to move somewhere else to a place in which he would find fairer comfort, greater space, and a steady quietness...but the expense would be great and he hesitated. If the plays brought in double of what he had now, he would go. If the play on in London really settled down, and if this new play The Plough and the Stars went well in the Abbey, he would hoist his sail, and go. A short farewell to Ireland; a hasty look round the places he had known so long; a last thought of Irish gods and fighting men, and then he would go."[40]

It is obvious that O'Casey's loyalty to the Abbey did not run deep, and the final break, when it came, was merely the thread of discontent and not the whole cloth. The order of those events will conclude this chapter.

In the rehersals of The Plough and the Stars there was an extreme tension among the cast and a general irritation with some of the actresses because of the question of the gentility of the parts. The irritation and nervousness at the rehersals could have been possibly prophetic of the

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[39] Ibid., p. 235

[40] Ibid., p. 236

plays opening night, a night that almost was identical to the opening night of Synge's The Playboy of the Western World, some fifteen years earlier.

When O'Casey arrived at the Abbey on the opening night February 8, 1926, of the Plough and the Stars, Yeats was waiting for him with the news that the police should be called to prevent the violence indicated by the uproar in the theatre. O'Casey, remembering the police as agents of the British and terrorists themselves, at first would not consent to their being called, but finally reluctantly consented. He gives this eye witness report of the chaos in the theatre that night:

> The police were summoned, and the play began again--two, in fact; one on the stage and the other in the auditorium. Yeats tore down the stairs, and rushed on to the stage to hold the fort until the constables came. The whole place became a mass of moving, roaring people, and Yeats roared louder than any of them. Rowdy, clenching, but well-groomed hands reached up to drag down the fading black and gold front curtain; others snarling curiously, tried to tug up the chairs from their roots in the auditorium; while some, in frenzy, pushed at the stout walls to force them down. Steamy fumes ascended here and there in the theatre, and a sickly stench crept all over the place, turning healthy-looking faces pale. The high, hysterical distorted voices of women kept squealing that Irish girls were noted over the whole world for their modesty, and that Ireland's name was holy; that the Republican flag had never seen the inside of a public-house; that this slander of the Irish race would mean the end of the Abbey Theatre; and that Ireland was Ireland through joy and through tears. Up in the balcony, a section was busily bawling out "The Soldier's Song", while a tall fellow

> frantically beat time on the balcony rail with a walking stick. Barry Fitzgerald became a genuine Fluther Good, and fought as Fluther himself would fight, sending an enemy, who had climbed on to the stage, flying into the stalls with a flutherian punch on the jaw. And in the midst of the fume, the fighting, the stench, the shouting out, Yeats, as mad as the madest there, pranced on the stage shouting out his scorn, his contempt; his anger, making him like unto an aged Cuchullin...as he conjured up a vision for them of O'Casey on a cloud with Fluter on his right hand and Rosie Redmond on his left, rising upwards to Olympus to get from the waiting gods and goddesses a triumphant apotheosis for a work well done in the name of Ireland and of art.[41]

The great furor over the first presentation of The Plough and the Stars was due to several objectional parts of the play. It was the feminine element in the theatre that began the storm over what they called a malignment .....of Irish womanhood in the presentation of the prostitute, Rosie Redmond, and her bawdy song at the end of Act II. Lady Gregory explains that "these disturbers were almost all women who have made demonstrations on Poppy Day, and at election and meetings, have made a habit of it, of the excitement."[42] Another objectionable scene in the play involved the flags of the Republic and the Citizen Army being brought into the pub in the second act.

After the police came and threw the rioters out "shedding them like peas from the pod of the theatre,

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[41] Ibid., pp. 238-39

[42] Journals, p. 99

The play went on halting often, and agitated to its end and for the first time in his life O'Casey felt a surge of hatred for Cathleen ni Houlihan sweeping over him"[43] The play packed houses for a week of matinees and evening performances without any further disturbance. On the second night there was an "immense audience all applauding and Casey (Lady Gregory's pet name for him) was called at the end with the players and cheered."[44] Again O'Casey's honesty, rebellious as it was, did little to shorten his dramatic stature in Dublin.

The last of the three Irish War plays, The Plough and the Stars has the same slum setting as Shadow and Juno but at a different time. This time O'Casey deals with the political ferment that led to the Easter Week Rebellion of 1916 and the bloody violence of the rebellion itself. The first act opens in November, 1915, and we are introduced to the inhabitants of a tenement that is "struggling for its life against the assaults of time, and the more savage assaults of its tenants"[45] We meet Nora Clitheroe, a sensitive young wife; Jack Clitheroe, her husband and an officer in the Citizen Army; The Young Covey, cousin to Jack, and a socialist; Peter Flynn, a fussy man and an uncle to Nora; Fluther Good, a hard-drinking and loud

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[43] Inisfallen, p. 240

[44] Journals, p. 98

[45] Collected Plays, I., p. 161

carpenter; Bessie Burgess, a loyalist whose son is fighting on the side of England in France; Mrs. Gogan, a charwoman; and Mollser, her consumptive daughter.

In the second act leaders of the independence movement hold a meeting outside a pub in which Rosie Redmond, a prostitute, complains of the business slump while the men are at the meeting. Young Covey and Fluther Good enter the pub excited at what they have heard at the meeting. Rosie takes up with the Young Covey who makes fun of the speaker at the meeting and his aims of national liberation. He says, "Freedom! What's the use of freedom, if it's not economic freedom?...Look here, comrade, there's only one freedom for th' workin' man, control o' production, rates of exchange, an' th' means of disthribution.

A heated argument between Bessie Burgess and Mrs. Gogan over Irelands independence and the fighting in Europe degenerates into an argument over their personal virtues. Young Covey calls Rosie a prostitute and Fluther defends her honour while Young Covey dares him to fight for his principles. As Young Covey is thrown out, Rosie rewards Fluther by agreeing to take him home with her. As the act ends, Capitan Brennan, Lieutenant Langon and Commander Clitheroe respectively cry: "Imprisonment for th' Independence of Ireland!" Wounds for the Independence of Ireland!

and "Death for th' Independence of Ireland!" Meanwhile outside Rosie with her arm around Fluther sings:

> I once had a lover, a tailor, but he could do nothing for me,
>
> An' then I fell in love with a sailor as strong and as wild as th' sea.
>
> We cuddled and kissed with devotion, till the night from th' morning had fled;
>
> An' there, to our joy, a bright bouncin' boy Was dancin' a jig in th' bed!

All the frenzied shouting for the independence of Ireland is drowned out in the drinking, fighting and whoring that is to be done before anything can be considered seriously.

Act III takes place during the Easter Week Rebellion. Fluther brings back the frenzied Nora, who has searched through the wild streets of Dublin during the night for her husband Jack. Later Jack appears but leaves again to join his comrades deaf to Nora's pleas for him to give up the struggle.

When those in the tenement hear that there is looting nearby all thought of the ailing Mollser, political differences, and even concern for personal safety are forgotten as they hurry off pushing baby carriages and hand carts to reap the pillaged harvest of non-participation. The act closes on a heroic note as Bessie Burgess volunteers to run the bloody streets to fetch a doctor for the prostrated Nora.

Tragedy swiftly brings the play to a conclusion. Nora is demented with the loss of her baby and husband, who has been killed in action. Mollser, long ill, dies, of consumption and Bessie Burgess is accidently killed by the Tommies, who take Fluther, Young Covey and Peter into custody. At the play's conclusion the rebels sing "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and in the distance can be heard the bursts of machine gun fire and the booming of the artillery.

As it was damned by the audiences that saw it in 1926 The Plough and the Stars has been damned by many of its critics as poor drama. Malone says, "the play...is little better than a series of disconnected scenes with the fighting as a background".[46] Starkie calls it a chronical play with very loose connection between the scenes. He feels also that Act II was of no value toward furthering the action since Jack and Nora are not in the act.[47] John Mason Brown justifies the seeming formlessness of the first three acts with the actors going their own separate ways, by the fact that their paths converge in the last act when the meaning becomes definitely clear.[48]

Whatever the critics feel about the form or structure of the play, one cannot deny that O'Casey has succeeded in

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[46] Irish Drama, p. 218

[47] Irish Theatre, p. 161

[48] John Mason Brown, "The Laughter of the Gods" Theatre Arts, February, 1928.

showing the drab lives and the tragic results of violence. For those Irish who lived in the revolutionary times depicted in the play, it must have been like watching a newsreel of a familiar event. In his plays of the Irish war period O'Casey is not writing to preach, but is merely picturing what he himself saw, letting the chips fall where they may[49] O'Casey gives his own critical appraisal when he says: "No power of influence, no seduction of wealth, no affection for friend, nor would any love for woman draw him away from his own integrity. Let that integrity be right or wrong, it would be a true reflection of what he felt in his nature from the things he saw and the things he heard around him."[50]

In looking back over his plays of the Irish war period, we can see how they resemble each other in that the setting is the same in each, the same tragedy born out of senseless violence with innocent characters as the tragic victims, the same drab slums and reeking poverty, and the same pleas to God for succor. This was O'Casey's life, for he knew these slums, their pathetic hordes jammed together in an impersonal stench, and he knew and understood the labor and political problems first hand. These dramas of his Abbey Theatre era are his personal past, relived by the Abbey. But with

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[49] Irish Theatre, p. 163.

[50] Inishfallen, p. 230.

all the subjectivity of setting and characterization, O'Casey is able to remain impartial to either side. Again his integrity is on his side and his drama is better for it.

It has already been pointed out that O'Casey's goals in his role as an Abbey playwright were not concerned primarily with the Abbey but rather with his own personal conviction that he must have financial success to finance a move to England. Many drama historians and critics have pointed out that the break came with the Abbey's rejection of the Silver Tassie. It is true that O'Casey would have given his plays to the Abbey before this break, but O'Casey had hardly belonged to the Abbey before he sailed for England.

Aside from the Barry Fitzgerald event already described, the biggest break with the Abbey came when O'Casey criticized the Abbey's performance of Shaw's Man and Superman in October 1926. Thinking that the rest of the cast would laugh with him over the "helterskelter performance" Sean ran around the Abbey's backstage telling them all it had been a poor performance. F. J. McCormick, then the Abbey's leading actor, lashed O'Casey for his criticism, saying, "You've got a bit of a name now, and you must not say these things about an Abbey production, if you do we'll have to report it to the Directors; so...try to keep your mouth shut."[51] Not to be deterred from what he considered justifiable criticism,

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[51] Ibid., p. 250

O'Casey went home and wrote a letter to M.J. Dolan, the Abbey manager, saying that "the letter held his views of what had happened, and that he was at liberty, if he wished, to read the letter out loud to the Abbey Directors, have it printed in papers, and show it to the world at large."[52] A few nights later, O'Casey was crossing the stage toward the Green Room to chat with the actors when he was stopped by Sean Barlow, a scene painter, who told him, "there is none but the actors and officials allowed on the stage...and we'd be glad if you came this way no more.[53] O'Casey at this point made the break with the Abbey rather complete when he said:

> No more? Quote the raven, nevermore. Never again. Nevermore. Ordered from the stage he had trod so many years ago and he a kidger, ay, mouthed the part of Father Dolan, in the Shaughraun from its boards, ere ever the Abbey theatre had entered its beginnings; the stage on which his brother, Archie, had played Harvey Duff...he turned away., leaving the other Sean victor on the field, and never after set a foot either on the Abbey stage or in the Abbey Green Room. He'd hoist his sail and go to England.[54]

O'Casey's "glaring" integrity had not made him popular in Dublin literary circles and he seemed to be always at odds with those associated with the Abbey Theatre, with the exception of Lady Gregory. He himself said that "he was a .....voluntary and settled exile from every creed, from

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[52] Ibid., p. 250

[53] Ibid., p. 251

[54] Ibid., p. 251

every party, and from every literary clique...in the press Sean was a slum dramatist, a gutter snipe who could jingle a few words together out of what he had seen and heard."[55]

In 1925, before O'Casey had finished writing The Plough and the Stars, several of the new playwrights and poets that included Liam O'Flaherty and Fred O'Higgins, visited O'Casey in his tenement room to ask him to join a new movement of young writers who were against the "literary arrogance of Yeats". This O'Casey refused to do because he respected Yeat's genius and felt that this kind of movement far surpassed any arrogance that the great Yeats might possess. His refusal to join the group resulted in his being severely and unjustly criticized. A year later when his Plough and the Stars was playing at the Abbey. O'Higgins accused O'Casey of imitating the revue structure and Liam O'Flaherty called him a dramatic Pontius Pilate. Andrew E. Malone, not one of the group that approached him to form the clique against Yeats, but one of the chief critics in Dublin, said this of O'Casey: "His plays are phases of Dublin life as abnormal as they are transient. O'Casey's humour is the humour of the music-hall without the skill of the music-hall or the sharpened point of its wit. Is O'Casey a dramatist, or is he but a combination of the cinema and the dictaphone."[56]

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[55] Ibid., p. 320

[56] Ibid.,

This was in 1926 at a time when O'Casey had never been to a music-hall or a cinema. The same critic, whom this writer has quoted frequently, said in 1929: "Whatever may the future of Sean O'Casey be there is now no doubt that he is a considerable dramatic artist, and a man who is so intimate with the people of his plays that he could not fail to portray them justly"[57] Is it possible that one critic should have such a complete change of heart in so few years?

Disgusted with the critics, his faith lost in A. E. and Lennox Robinson, barred from the Abbey Green Room, and having the necessary money now, O'Casey sailed for England in November, 1926. Of his going he said, "There was nothing to keep him here, he had no part in Cosgrave's party...in De Valera's policy...in the Protestant Church of Ireland... the Roman Catholic Mission...though each and all of them had a part in making his life as it was now...the Easter Rising had pulled down a dark curtain of eternal separation between him and his best friends...it was getting very dark in Ireland...his flight to London would be a leap in the light."[58]

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[57] Ibid., p. 392

[58] Inishfallen

CHAPTER IV

IN EXILE: A SUMMARY

In 1926, the year in which he was awarded the Hawthorne Award for Juno and the Paycock, O'Casey left Ireland never to return and moved to London. Of his leaving he said, "He would leave Yeats on his Island of Inisfree, standing pensively at the door of his small cabin of clay and wattles made...thinking of peace; for Ireland's red rose-bordered hem and muddy now, and ragged. There was no making love to Kathleen, daughter of Houlihan now, untidy termagant, brawling out her prayers. He would leave Lady Gregory...and the lesser writers, too, conceiving little things timidly seen and carefully handled...his Mick with his dream of an endless quere of pints waiting to be swallowed."[1] And as he rode through the familiar streets on his way to the boat he sums up the life he had known in Dublin:

> The outside-car swung along down Dorset Street, where Sean had first seen the peep of day; past George's church, in the pocket of which had lived the Dalton family with whom he had trod, as a youngster, the stage of the old Mechanics Theatre, now known the world over as the Abbey; down Cavendish Row where the Dispensary had been from which the gentle Dr. Oulton had come to cure Sean of a fever; down Sackville-O'Connel Street, catching a good glimpse of the Post Office, where Pardaic Pearse had sounded the horn that roused Ireland

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[1] Inishfallen, p. 394.

> out her sleeping. In this very street, on the top of a horse-drawn tram, when a little boy safe beside his mother, he swept into the galazy of illuminations, lit to honour an English queen; and, years after, had almost been suffocated in this very street by the surging crowd escaping from the batons of the police...down Abbey Street...into Beresford Place, trotting past Liberty Hall once the sweltering, weltering University of the Dublin workers, now a dead tomb held by an enemy, with Ichabod written all over it, for Larkin had gone, and its glory had departed; down Tara Street, surely the drabbest and dirtiest street in Dublin...into Brunswick Street, passing the Queens Theatre, where Sean had seen his first play, The Shaughraun, past the Ancient Concert Rooms, where the National Theatre performed some of its early plays, before it had a habitation or even a name. It was this street that had Sean's via dolorosa, through which he had passed, three times a week, year after year, for fifteen or more of them... to the Ophthalmic Hospital to seek ease for aching eyeballs...Oh God Almighty, the life he was living now had almost all been from what he had felt, had seen, had touched in these few Dublin streets![2]

O'Casey's arrival in London was a tumultous one as he was feted, interviewed, and "shown off, a new oddity an odd wonder; a guttersnipe among the trimly educated and the richly clad; the slum dramatist, who, in the midst of great darkness, had seen a great light."[3]

A year later he married Eileen Carey, a young Irish actress whom he met while she was appearing in a production of Juno and the Paycock. He had also finished his new play

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[2] Ibid., pp. 394-5

[3] Sean O'Casey, Rose and Crown (New York, 1952), p. 5.

The Silver Tassie, but the Abbey Theatre rejected it with suggestions from Yeats that extensive revisions would have to be made. O'Casey had told Yeats prior to the submission of the manuscript that his new play was to be an experiment in a new form, and had even told Yeats the ideas that were to be expressed in the play. Yeats had begged him to submit the play to the Abbey and had spoken at the Irish Literary Society of O'Casey's new approach to the drama that would be hearlded by the theatre.

Yeats rejected The Silver Tassie because he felt that O'Casey had put too much of his own personal feeling into the play. He also stated there was a lack of a dominating character; and that O'Casey, having not been in the war or even interested in it, could not write about something he knew nothing about. O'Casey retorted that Shakespeare had never been at Actium or Phillipi nor had Shaw been in the boats with the French or in the forts with the British when St. Joan and Dunois made the attack that relieved Orleans. He pointed out to Yeats that he had "talked and walked and smoked, and sung with the blue-suited, wounded men, fresh from the front."[4]

The rejection was a bitter blow to O'Casey because he felt that the play was one of his best, and he desperately needed the money to pay the doctor bills for the expected arrival of a baby. But G. B. Shaw gave his critical

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[4] Ibid., p. 26

support to O'Casey and the MacMillan Company decided to go ahead with the publication of the play regardless of Yeat's criticism. A London theatre manager also promised O'Casey that he would go ahead with its production. With the rejection of the play, O'Casey broke completely and finally with the Abbey Theatre and has had nothing more to do with it.

In The Silver Tassie, O'Casey for the first time uses expressionism, but only in the second act. The other three acts are realistic. The play is an attempt to show the effects of war, not on the individual, but on the masses of society. This is his reason for using expressionistic symbols in the second act. He felt that these symbols would better illustrate the total effect upon the masses than would the realistic effects on the individual used in the third and fourth acts. There is no partiality shown as to the rightness or wrongness of the two opposing sides. He was concerned not with international politics but only with "condemnation of the social forces that bring on and defend war."[5] Because of the broad social scope of the play, O'Casey could not have had a dominant character. Koslow says, "O'Casey did not wish the full tragedy of war to be seen only as the physical incapacitation of a Harry Heegan or a Teddy Foran, but as the physical, spiritual and intellectual degradation of the mass itself."[6]

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[5]Green and the Red, p. 56

[6]Ibid., p. 57

O'Casey involved himself in another dispute in 1930. This time it was with A.E. over an article published in A.E.'s journal, The Irish Statesman, about painting with which O'Casey did not agree. A letter from O'Casey to the New York Times Published February 6, 1930 regarding this dispute is indication that O'Casey was still chafing over the rejection of The Silver Tassie. In the letter O'Casey says it is time "to end the arrogant assumption of power and infallibility in things artistic and things literary by this Yeatsian and Russellian hand-picked group in Dublin."

In 1934 O'Casey published a collection of short stories, verses and two one act plays, The End of the Beginning and A Pound on Demand,in a book called Windfalls. His most important contribution that year, however, was a four act play Within the Gates, an attempt to view all of modern life in one expressionistic sweep. The play was produced in New York the same year and banned in Boston in the following year.

The Flying Wasp, a book on dramatic criticism and contemporary English drama, was published in 1937 and two years later the first in a series of autobiographical volumes, I Knock at the Door, was published. The other autobiographical volumes to appear thus far are Pictures in the Hallway, 1942; Drums Under the Windows, 1946; Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well, 1949; and Rose and Crown, 1952.

Turning to comedy next, O'Casey published The Purple Dust in 1940 which has never been produced. The Purple Dust was written while the English were busily fighting the Germans, and because it was highly satirical of the British, it was not produced for fear it might give aid and comfort to the enemy and "strengthen the hands of certain people in America who wished to place England in the most unfavorable possible light."[7] James Agate, his anger aroused at O'Casey's lack of respect and support for the British people when they were fighting for their very existence, calls the play, "a witless lampoon at the expense of the English too busy fighting for freedom to answer back."[8]

In the same year O'Casey turned to the political problems of the world in The Star Turns Red. "The dynamic issues of communism, fascism, trade unionism, the role of the state and religion in politics, and the individual as a political being are presented in a sharp, decisive terms."[9] There are no middle roads in the play; the world must choose between the Right and the Left, with the proletariat emerging as the eventual victor. At this time O'Casey accepted a position on the editorial board of the London Daily Worker. However, there is not in this play nor in any of the later plays, a suggestion

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[7]Barrett Clark and George Freedley, A History of Modern Drama (New York, 1947), p. 229.

[8]Green and the Red, p. 79.

[9]Ibid., p. 87.

that O'Casey is interested in the Communist Party as a militant force. He seems to be interested in the movement only to the extent that it will better the lot of the proletariat, but without sharply defining party concept. IN The Star Turns Red there is none of the pacifistic conviction that was so vehemently expressed in his early plays and in The Silver Tassie. O'Casey reveals that the struggle for political goals might mean death, but death is worth the political victory. Red Roses for Me produced at the Dublin Gate Theatre in 1943 dealt with the same communistic ideas found in The Star Turns Red, but the tone is milder.

Since the appearance of The Star Turns Red and Red Roses for Me with their obvious communistic idealism, O'Casey has been unpopular with critics both here and in England with the result that little has been written about him since 1940. George Jean Nathan, his greatest American champion, is unsympathetic toward O'Casey's communist taint, while Ashley Dukes believes that O'Casey has lost himself politically."[10] But George Fredly believes that there is no reason for critics to become reactionary over what they believe to be "implicit Communism" in the play."[11]

Oak Leaves and Lavender, produced in 1946, contains the same essential communistic idealism found in The Star Turns

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[10]Ashley Dukes, "Social Basis," Theatre Arts, June, 1940.

[11]History of Modern Drama, p. 228.

Red and Red Roses for Me. In this play the scene is the struggle against the Nazi conquest during World War II that brought together classes and countries with differing interests and ideologies which were temporarily set aside in the common goal of beating off fascism. Again in this play, O'Casey reverses his stand on his earlier pacifistic beliefs when he scornfully treats the conscientious objector Pobjoy, who hates war and violence, as a sentimental coward.

O'Casey's final break with Ireland seems to be complete in his latest full length play, Cock-a-doodle Dandy, (1949), produced only once at this date, strangely enough, in Dallas, Texas, in 1950. This play, like The Purple Dust, has a rural Irish setting and one can find a few nostalgic glimpses of the Ireland, where O'Casey spent more than forty uncertain and unhappy years. Now, however, he sees no hope of ever changing the Church-State country that has so narrowed the vision of its citizenry.

The latest dramatic contributions from the "exile from Inishfallen" have been three one act plays, published in 1952, Halls of Healing, Bedtime Story, and Time to Go.

While trying to diagnose O'Casey's stand on Communism, I felt that perhaps Mr. O'Casey himself might be better able to tell me his feelings than could his many critics and

and literary historians. I wrote to him asking for an evaluation of Communism as an idea apart from party line. He Replied:

3 Villa Rosa Flats
40 Trumlands Road
Marychurch, Torquay
Devon, England
4 July 1954

Richard Guthridge of Owosso, Michigan, U.S.A.

Dear Richard Guthridge, thanks very much for your kind letter, and for your strenuous interest in things that are Irish. Don't worry that you don't understand everything about her now. I've lived a lot of my life in her cntre have taken as much interest in all that belongs to her, and, by God, I don't understand her yet! And don't worry either about my "affiliation with Communism." Our unity is our affiliation with life--the first and most important affiliation man experiences. Lots of people see what they call Communism in the inevitable changing of life. We cannot stay change. Lots of things, wide apart, and yet next door to Communism, have brought about inevitable and tremendous changes to life. The change from spore to seed; iron, coal, steam, the spinning jenny, the railway, motor car, aeroplane, and now, nucleur energy, clutch us by the arm, or, if we be backward, by the throat, and have led us, and are leading us into new ways of life; changing, not only the aspect, but the very nature of man. We can no more save ourselves from life than we can save ourselves from death. But there is no death, though death will come to me and to you. But we must live while life lasts; be not afraid of it; yea, rather rejoice in it; for every new birth declares in its first cry, I am the resurrection and the life. What we have to avoid, to fear, to save ourselves from, is death in life. Your McCarthy belongs not to life, but to a scrapbook.

No impoverished mind, my friend, is free to act or think; there is no such thing as "an intellectual robot". Impoverished minds are invariably found in impoverished bodies. Said a famishing French poet once on a visit to a friend, "Give me something to eat and I will recite you some poetry." Communistis, as well as Conservatives, have to face the changes life must inevitably bring to man; and, today, Socialism is the one sensible and indeed possible way of life. No country, civilized today could live a month without it. It's there in plenty in your own country.

It's time the young men realised that they can contribute far less than a song to life by stopping a bullet or two, or by sheltering a hunk of shrapnel in their young and pulsing bodies.

You will see by the new address that we no longer live in Totnes. The landlord after 17 years decided he wanted "Trinright" for his own purposes" and so we had to flit away to Marychurch, Torquay. We've been here but for a few days, and are busily trying to sort our things out: so goodbye, good Cornishman. I give you my warm wishes for success in your thesis. The Abbey produces no plays of mine, save occasional performances of the Ist 3 plays. They've given me the frozen mit.

Yours very sincerely,

Sean O'Casey

It is apparent, if one is to accept the letter at face value, that O'Casey is little less a communist than one imagines him to be. He would perhaps fit Stephen Spender's "Christian Socialist" label better than the Communistic tag that has been affixed to him by so many critics. One feels that he is after all, still a pacifist in his thinking. At least his reference to the contribution of a song does not stir up an image of war violence.

Whatever one thinks politically, artistically, O'Casey still remains, since the death of Shaw, the greatest living playwright that Ireland has produced. The Abbey Theatre that rejected The Silver Tassie has steadily degenerated into what George Jean Nathan calls "A caricature of its former self."

It is generally believed that O'Casey has not achieved the deph of characterization in his later expressionistic or political plays that he attained in his nationalistic plays. However, the expressionistic form through which he worked lent itself, not to characterization or plot, but to the larger scope of the social and political scene. O'Casey has not been a popular playwright in the past decade primarily because he refuses to conform his drama and dramaturgy to the contemporary stage, or to the popular wishes of his audience.

Concerning the difficult staging problems in his later plays, John Gassner says, "We cannot have an O'Casey or anyone of comparable rank among dramatists without

incurring risks, and without understanding what must be transferred to the stage, namely, his prodigal creativity O'Casey's work is conceived in the grand manner. It belongs to the great tradition. O'Casey is true to it. Our contemporary theatre is not...he retains a heroic positive stand among the many nay-saying and the small-voiced yea-saying playwrights of the contemporary scene."[12]

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[12]John Gassner, "The Prodigality of Sean O'Casey," Theatre Arts, August, 1951.

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