



A Shift to the Margins: Sean O'Casey's Role in the Abbey Theatre

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Abstract

An Irish author and dramatist, Sean O'Casey, gained popularity as the fervour of Irish political and social movements progressed in Dublin; various empowering movements and agitations erupted, aligning a socio-political upheaval during the early 20th century. He is particularly renowned for his Dublin Trilogy, a series of three plays that vividly portray life in Dublin, Ireland, during a tremendous social and political upheaval period. He had a complex relationship with the ideological perspectives on Irish marginal communities, particularly during the early 20th century. His works often discovered the lives of the marginalised and working-class people in Ireland, particularly in the Dublin slums. His perspectives evolved over time, and his writings reflected a mixture of social, political, and artistic viewpoints. Here are some critical aspects of his ideological perspectives on Irish marginal communities. The trilogy named "The Shadow of a Gunman" (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* are treated as the testimony to his creative endeavours on the Irish theatrical and literary canvas. The depiction of the lives of the working class led them towards social and political issues of the time. Craftily projected characters often contended with poverty, violence, and the complexities of Irish nationalism, making his works reflect the turbulent period in Irish history.

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"The life-long Larkinite Sean O'Casey stands out as Ireland's greatest playwright of the century. He was who most passionately, most powerfully and most memorably dramatised the traumatic birth of the nation. He was who gave the twentieth-century theatre a greater range of vivid and original characters, male and female, than any other Irish playwright. O'Casey's language, controversial though it may be in some critical circles, colour and vitality, has won for him a lasting place in the international repertory".
(Murray 988)

The above description of Sean O'Casey by Christopher Murray provides an aspect of Sean O'Casey's dramatic adventure in Abbey Theatre in the early twenties. His association with the Abbey Theatre and various theatrical performances displayed the struggles of Irish people in the 1920s. In line with the above observation, John Newsinger rightly observes that the

gentry of O'Casey's creative exercise was a section of Irish society struggling to protect its identity and cultural existence. The characters of O'Casey plays are projected as if they are denied recognition due to their class and social background. Tim Mason is also of the opinion that:

“As a young man, O'Casey was swept up into the stream of Irish separatism and the Gaelic revival. He immersed himself in the myths and romances of Irish history, Gaelicized his name, and in 1908, was initiated into the revolutionary secret society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood. O'Casey's commitment to the Gaelic revival was fierce, and he poured scorn on the activities of the tiny band of Dublin socialists whose dreary economic doctrines left him cold. His first serious doubts as to the sincerity of the middle-class separatists were aroused by their failure to stand up to the Roman Catholic Church. O'Casey's dramatic account in the Dublin trilogy of the revolutionary period that the Easter Rising ushered in is informed by the political standpoint that he resigned over in 1914”.

(Tim Mason, 228)

Being critical of O'Casey's literary and theatrical achievement, literary critics opined that the characters in O'Casey's plays are affiliated with the penury and poverty in the slums of Dublin city. Through his characters, he makes an autopsy on the socio-political history of the people on the margin. It exhibits a tone representing his dramatic intent and design. O'Casey focused on the realistic effects and ineffectiveness of the Rising on the common citizens of Dublin - political and revolutionary ideals impractical to the people on the periphery. In his analysis of the play, Jack Mitchell claims that this work continues O'Casey's general campaign in the Dublin plays to de-heroicise and de-mythologise the Irish working people's view of themselves:

“At a pivotal point in their history, the Easter Rising - a moment surrounded in their minds with a romantic aura - he shows them to be anything but a people of saints, scholars, virtuous women and brave patriots. They are disunited, quarrelsome, childish petty, ignorant, self-centred, self-deluding, self-dramatising, word-worshippers, negligent of their own true state and real needs, squanderers of their splendid energies”. (Mitchell 79)

O'Casey's men substitute Ireland for mothers and wives, leaving them behind, alone, childless, and widowed. The consequences of the war they deliberately opted for were deadly and devastating. Women have no choice in receiving these battle wounds but are sacrificed and forfeited for the love of something deemed greater than them.

The Abbey Theatre has been a crucible of Irish culture and a prominent platform for Irish playwrights. Numerous playwrights have contributed to the theatre's legacy throughout history, but one name stands out prominently. Abbey Theatre was initiated to display a significant shift towards the margins of Irish society and challenged traditional representations of Irish identity. A departure from the romanticised past has also got a space from the romanticised and idyllic portrayals of Irish life that had dominated the theatre's repertoire in its early years. Before O'Casey's emergence, the Abbey often presented plays depicting rural Ireland as an idealised, picturesque landscape filled with charming peasants and quaint traditions. O'Casey, however, brought a stark realism to the stage.

With his theatrical experience, O'Casey delved into the gritty and harsh realities of urban life in Dublin when Dublin was witnessing the trauma of the Irish Civil War, followed by the repercussions of the Easter Rising. He confronted the poverty, violence, and disillusionment that had become everyday experiences for many working-class Irish citizens. O'Casey challenged the prevailing romanticised narratives and brought the marginalised voices of the urban poor to the forefront of Irish theatre.

Herbert Coston, in the article "Sean O'Casey: Prelude to Playwriting", aptly expresses that:

"The course of his life in Dublin during his forty-six years there was filled with terrible difficulties and disillusionment faced each new turning. He was forced to make his own way, and it was one that led him, eventually, out of Ireland. Yet by 1926, when he moved to England, he had achieved a synthesis of his experience that enabled him to go forth, not as a disconsolate exile, but as an older pioneer in search of more promising and congenial surroundings. With a stock-pile of impressions and ideas, the raw material of his later work, he set out to discover better working conditions and more personal happiness than he had found in Dublin. When he sailed that year, he had many reasons for bitterness toward Ireland, but he could not blame her for depriving him of happiness, because from his beginning she had never offered him much anyway". (Herbert Coston, 1)

In his plays, O'Casey triggered challenging traditional Irish identity and its notions at a time when the Abbey Theatre often focused on promoting a narrowly defined version of Irish nationalism; his plays questioned the blind allegiance to tradition and the dogma of nationalism. Notably, in "The Plough and the Stars," he unapologetically critiqued the glorification of the 1916 Easter Rising and exposed the harsh realities faced by those who lived through it. His fictional characters, primarily drawn from the marginalised sections of society, represented a diverse range of Irish experiences, including social class, gender, and political beliefs. This diversity challenged the homogenous image of Irish identity perpetuated for so long. The characters were flawed, complex, and at odds with traditional Irish values, and in doing so, he offered a more nuanced and inclusive vision of what it meant to be Irish.

A voice for the marginalised and oppressed. Through characters like Juno Boyle, a resilient and long-suffering mother, and Nora Clitheroe, a young woman who yearned for a better life, O'Casey showcased the struggles and aspirations of those who had long been ignored in Irish society. He demonstrated that the marginalised were not passive victims but individuals with agency and dreams. Abbey Theatre's role in ushering in a shift towards the margins of Irish society challenged traditional Irish identity and portrayal of the marginalised. O'Casey's contributions to Irish theatre were transformative and continue to resonate today. The Abbey Theatre remains a testament to the power of theatre to reflect and shape the social consciousness of a nation.

His commitment to social realism in his plays has been visible. He depicted the marginalised communities and their social and political oppressions and predicaments in Dublin. His works, such as *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *Juno and the Paycock*, vividly portray the daily lives of these communities. The Sympathy and Compassion for the characters from marginalised communities are being displayed. He humanised them and presented their struggles due to larger societal and political forces.

“I do believe, I will believe That Jesus died for me;
That on th’ cross He shed His blood,
From sin to set me free...”

(O’Casey 216).

O’Casey was politically engaged and sympathetic to the cause of Irish republicanism and the struggle for independence from British rule. This is evident in some of his works, where he depicted the political turmoil and the impact of this upheaval upon the dwellers of Dublin City. However, he also critiqued the violence and extremism that emerged within the republican movement. Despite his support for Irish independence, O’Casey was critical of some aspects of Irish nationalism. He was wary of the potential for the new Irish state to replicate the social injustices and marginalisation faced by the working class under British rule. This is reflected in his play “The Plough and the Stars,” which caused controversy for portraying the 1916 Easter Rising.

O’Casey valued the artistic integrity of his work and resisted being pigeonholed as a propagandist for any political cause. He believed that art should not be subservient to political agendas but should explore the complexities of human existence. This stance sometimes put him at odds with nationalist and political groups. Sean O’Casey’s ideological perspectives on Irish marginal communities were shaped by his commitment to social realism, his sympathy for the working class, his political engagement with Irish nationalism, and his belief in the artistic integrity of his work. His writings provide valuable insights into the lives and struggles of marginalised communities in Ireland during a tumultuous period of its history.

The Plough and the Stars tacitly expose the traumatic longing for liberty and restoration of economic conditions. Looking into the characters’ actions in the play, they put their pain and predicaments through their theatrical articulations.

It explores several themes central to the human condition and the political and social landscape of early 20th-century Ireland. Set during the Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin, the play vividly portrays the impact of war on ordinary people. It shows how the violence and upheaval of conflict disrupt and destroy lives, leaving lasting scars on individuals and communities. The play delves into the fervent nationalism of the time as characters grapple with their commitment to the Irish cause and the sacrifices it demands. It raises questions about the nature of patriotism and the costs of pursuing a nationalist agenda. O’Casey’s work often focuses on the lives of the working class in Ireland.

The play explores the theme of sacrifice, both personal and collective. Characters sacrifice for their political beliefs, loved ones, and communities. These sacrifices often lead to tragic outcomes. O’Casey’s portrayal of women in the play challenges traditional gender roles. Characters like Nora Clitheroe demonstrate resilience, independence, and a willingness to challenge societal norms, highlighting the evolving role of women in early 20th-century Ireland. The play includes religious themes and the role of the Catholic Church in Irish society. Characters grapple with their faith, and religious symbols and rituals are woven throughout the narrative. O’Casey uses irony and satire to comment on the absurdity and contradictions of life during a time of political turmoil. These elements serve to highlight the complexity of the characters and their situations.

Community and solidarity are visible despite the divisions and conflicts within the community; the play also portrays moments of solidarity and support among neighbours and friends. This theme underscores the importance of unity, even in challenging times. However, “The Plough and the Stars” is a rich and multifaceted play that explores the human experience in the context of historical events. It challenges the romanticised notions of nationalism and heroism while highlighting the harsh realities faced by individuals caught up in the tumultuous Irish history.

The Integrity of *Juno and the Paycock* remarks:

“Early in the play, a connection between the Irish nation and the Boyle family is humorously implied when Boyle talks about his rights as a husband and boasts that Juno will have to take “an oath of allegiance” in the “independent Republic” that he is going to proclaim. One of the distinctive characteristics of *Juno* as a tragedy is its modulated movement from the apparently comic to the grievously catastrophic. Perhaps no tragedy provokes as much laughter as *Juno* (Armstrong, 5)

But the laughter gradually diminishes as the tragic implications of the action deepen, and from the outset, O’Casey counterpoints the mirthful with satirical and even starker considerations. It was performed in 1924 and is set in the working-class tenements of Dublin during the Irish Civil War. The play features several significant characters, each representing different aspects of Irish society and the political and social issues of the time. Here are some of the main characters and their significance

Captain Jack Boyle has been presented with disillusionment and escapism but now struggles to find meaning and purpose in post-revolutionary Ireland. Juno symbolises the enduring strength of Irish women and their role as the backbone of the family and the community. Mary Boyle is a young woman who dreams of a better life and is involved in the Irish Republican movement. She represents the idealism and hope of the younger generation and the desire for social and political change. Johnny’s character reflects the trauma and disillusionment experienced by many Irish war veterans. Joxer Daly is a sycophantic and parasitic character who represents the influence of negative and destructive friendships in the lives of the working class.

Juno and the Paycock craftly explore its characters’ social, political, and personal struggles in the context of post-revolutionary Ireland. Each character embodies different facets of Irish society and the challenges the working class faced during political turmoil and economic hardship.

O’Casey’s politics of theatre involved a deep engagement with the political issues of Ireland during his lifetime. He used his plays to explore the complex and often turbulent political landscape. His plays served as a platform for discussing and critiquing these political events. While O’Casey was sympathetic to the cause of Irish republicanism and the quest for independence, he was critical of extremism. He critiqued the idealism and violence of the Easter Rising in 1916.

Politics of theatre involved humanising his characters, regardless of their political or social backgrounds. He believed in presenting complex and multifaceted individuals with their hopes, fears, and contradictions. This approach helped to bridge the gap between the audience and the characters, making the social issues he addressed more relatable and emotionally resonant. He resisted attempts to turn his plays into mere propaganda tools for political

agendas. He believed that while theatre could be a powerful medium for addressing social and political issues, it should not compromise the quality of the art itself. This stance sometimes put him at odds with political groups seeking to co-opt his work for their purposes. Sean O'Casey's politics of theatre in Ireland involved a commitment to social realism, political engagement, and critique of extremism, humanising characters, and a strong emphasis on artistic integrity. His plays continue to be celebrated for their ability to simultaneously engage with political themes and provide compelling and emotionally resonant storytelling.

The complex articulation of the restoration of the identity of marginals in Dublin, he worked for the portrayal of Irish society during a tumultuous period in its history. The cultural method of theatrical intent was a multifaceted approach that aimed to capture the essence of Irish culture and community while critiquing and reflecting upon its complexities and contradictions. His plays remain essential to Irish cultural and theatrical history, offering insights into his era's cultural and social landscape.

The Abbey Theatre extended its role to shape the career of playwrights. Critique of Stereotypes with a social commentary in his plays has added a new dimension to humour and wit in exploring the critique of cultural conservatism. Working-class life in the plays of Sean O'Casey Beautiful demonstrates Irish identity. Plays significantly contribute to Irish literature, engaging with timeless themes while reflecting Ireland's historical and cultural context in the early 20th century. His works continue to be studied and celebrated for their depth and complexity.

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