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THE USE OF SYMBOLISM IN THE LATER  
PLAYS OF SEAN O'CASEY

by

William E. Wengert

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

June

1953

## INTRODUCTION

An exhilarating interest in, and a fascination for, the dramatic aims and activities of the Abbey Theatre prompted the selection of a thesis subject relevant to the dramatic creations of this artistic group. Unlike its Continental counterparts, the Freie Bühne and the Théâtre-Libre, the Abbey did not engage itself with esoteric or controversial "social" ideas, but with poetic revivifications of Gaelic legends and the picturesqueness of the Irish peasant. To attempt any work involving the Irish theatrical complexion and the poetic lyricism of the Abbey's early plays requires a particular sensitivity to Irish provincialisms and Irish idiom, which the writer does not possess. For that reason the selection of a subject was narrowed to the debouchment of Abbey talent and genius into the larger sphere of world literature.

Sean O'Casey's Abbey Theatre dramas (The Shadow of a Gunman, Juno and the Paycock, and The Plough and the Stars), although substantially peasant plays, are in reality pictures of peasant character in the process of urban disintegration. It is this shifting of dramatic interest from country to city

that distinguishes O'Casey's achievements in the Abbey enterprise and places his work in the front rank of modern Irish drama. Because these early plays are well known and have achieved a definite success in world playhouses, the writer has undertaken an evaluation of but one aspect of O'Casey's later plays - that of symbolism. This aspect is perhaps a highly controversial one, and finds its devotees eloquently laudatory<sup>1</sup> and its detractors volubly unimpressed. It is not the object of this paper to pass judgement on the O'Casey dramas except where the symbolism employed demands a consideration of its effective use in achieving clarity, mood, unity, and consummate development.

A play should be examined for its qualities that make for its completeness as a play, and evaluated as such upon its eventual production, bearing in mind, of course, the current tastes in dramatic presentations. To remark that the poetry in a play is aesthetically pure and noble in execution, and to conclude from such observations that the drama in which it is found is necessarily good, is a false presumption. As poetry it may be judged, but not as drama. To find the symbols

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1 The National Arts Foundation of Manhattan, in its selection of the top artists of 1952, announced Sean O'Casey as the "most magnificent prose writer in the modern theatre."

in a successful play inadequate or stultifying, and to subsequently demean the play because of this obvious weakness, is also a false determination of the play's merits. If the play, in spite of its faults, achieves successful tragic or comedic presentation, and if the playgoer has experienced an Aristotelian purgation of the emotions, then it has justified itself as drama and is eligible for commendation as playwriting artistry. Drama, and this does not include so-called "closet" dramas, is primarily a participatory affair, in which both playwright and playgoer find kinship in ideas, moods or emotional experience.

On the other hand, failing the ability to garner and evaluate audience reaction, the critic of the drama must presume these essentials and judge the substance of the drama on its apparent lucidity of interpretation and on its appeal to his own emotions. If his reaction is corroborated by others qualified to make critical deductions, he may presume his judgement pertinent on those points where critical views find agreement. This does not alter the fact that drama must justify its existence as entertainment; for if the playwright indulges in abstract or intellectual maunderings, without providing pleasurable and emotional stimulation, he has not earned the distinction of having written a playworthy drama.

Symbolism, as of this date, has not proven itself

a happy and adequate medium of dramatic expression. This is not to imply that after considerable experimentation, and taking into account the vagaries and vicissitudes of public appeal, it will never be successful. Time and taste may bring about its ultimate use as a sound dramatic technique. If the following evaluation of the use of symbolism in the later plays of Sean O'Casey appears empirical or harshly critical, it is so because this evaluation corresponds in some measure with critical summaries by competent reviewers, and because it lacks, in the estimation of this writer, the necessary exploitation of the themes undertaken by the playwright.

In the preparation of this thesis, my indebtedness to Dr. Patrick J. Casey for guidance and helpfulness, cannot be overestimated.

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## CHAPTER I

### SEAN O'CASEY AND THE ABBEY THEATRE

The years of struggle and terror resulting from Ireland's avid assertion of its nationalistic sentiment was witnessed by a young man of the Dublin slums with a poetic feeling for humanity. This young man, Sean O'Casey, saw this drama of fratricidal fury with the seemingly impartial penetration of a true humanist. Although he had not fully mastered reading and writing until he was fifteen, he glowed from the enchantment of Shakespeare's plays and the virile eloquence of the Elizabethan poets. His haunts were the streets and slums of Dublin and to those who sat in the pit of the Abbey Theatre he was a familiar sight, wearing a bedraggled trench coat and a cap pulled down over his eyes. Here O'Casey discovered a medium by which he could release the vigorous poetry that welled up inside of him; here he tasted and found wonderful the theatrical aura of William Butler Yeats. But the impressive stuff of drama he found not amongst the Irish peasant, but in the wretched, wondrous lives of his fellow Dubliners. He wrote plays about their struggles and about

the terrors of the Black and Tan regime, and he presented these plays to the Abbey Theatre with more persistence than faith in his own dramatic powers. Eight times he laid his manuscripts before the Abbey directorate and eight times they were refused. Then, with The Shadow of a Gunman under his arm, he once more stormed this citadel of Irish drama, and this time, with minor technical revisions, it was produced on the 12th of April 1923.

So vital and so human was this drama of Dublin in the agonies of terror, and so appealing in its wit and warmth of humour, that the production was an immediate success. Its production came about at a time when the Abbey Theatre was suffering heavy financial losses and its very existence depended upon the granting of a subsidy by the Irish state. Encouraged by this favorable reception, Sean O'Casey feverishly set about writing another play and on the 3rd of March 1924, Juno and the Paycock, a three act tragedy, was presented for the first time. Its appeal to the playgoers was instantaneous and his genius was ranked with Yeats and Synge. Juno was followed by The Plough and the Stars which was presented on the 8th of February 1926.

These plays have all a daring blend of unrestrained humour and downright horror, but this ironical contrast is not the result of contrived theatricalities; it is Dublin

life as it impinged itself upon the personality of a sympathetic and acute observer. Formlessness in these dramas has too often been attacked, but this weakness is not without its suggestion of artistic dramatury. Old stage tricks are often apparent, but the vigor and beauty of thought and feeling, as expressed by O'Casey's natural and undisciplined reflection of life, achieves a curious mood with an ironic impact. Although William Butler Yeats hailed the genius of O'Casey, he was at once baffled and fascinated by these devastating satires, for they responded but subtly to the poetic, gentle idealism which he had hoped to foster as a tradition of the Abbey Theatre.

With the exception of the Continental predilections of the Dublin Drama Group<sup>1</sup>, and the presentation of the O'Casey plays, the Abbey Theatre had confined its activities to the presentation of dramas based upon ancient Gaelic legend, on comedies and tragedies of peasant character, and of plays that derived their tone and feeling from a nascent feeling for patriotism. O'Casey, although incorporating in his dramas much of the comic and tragic as it was being expressed in

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1 The Dublin Drama League was founded in 1918 with the express purpose of performing plays of international repute. Performances were given at the Abbey on Sunday and Monday nights. In 1928 the League ceased to exist but many of the plays passed into the Abbey Theatre repertoire.

the Abbey dramas, held humanity and truth above the animosities resulting from political unrest and ferment. His realistic portrayal of humanity easily makes him the forerunner of the Modern Movement as it emerged in the Abbey Theatre.

The critics were not too pleased with the realistic turn the Abbey had taken and the literary disquietude is best expressed by Ivor Brown<sup>2</sup>, correspondent for the London Saturday Review:

To the fact that the Irish literary theatre of Mr. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Mr. Moore, progenitor of the Abbey Theatre, had its origin in the Celtic revival, may be attributed the false standards of criticism that are commonly applied here to our dramatic art and our literature in general. The Celtic revival in letters coincided with the revival of political romanticism based on the myth of a people instinct with lyrical mysticism. Political disillusion came, as was inevitable, our romanticists turned realists, and, pretending to hold up the mirror to nature, discovered the materialism, brutality and cruelty of the peasant.

Sean O'Casey was not unfamiliar with, nor opposed to, the ideals of the Abbey Theatre. He was an ardent Irishman with an impelling feeling for the past, and the songs of yesterday stirred in him the vision of a great and majestic Ireland. He wrote of this feeling in Drunks Under the Window:

And to him, most of the songs were new: songs of an Ireland astir, awake, and eager; an Ireland forging

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<sup>2</sup> Ivor Brown, "Cup of Unkindness," The Saturday Review, London, CXVIII, October, 1929, 315.

fresh thought out of bygone history, and present hopes to create a glowing, passionate, and permanent chapter, from which a great nation would be born. Oh, silver trumpets be ye lifted up, and call to the great race that is to come! cried Yeats, and Sean cried the call with him too.<sup>3</sup>

This undisciplined ardor in the execution of his dramatic works won O'Casey scant praise. A. E. Malone<sup>4</sup>, the leading Dublin dramatic critic, complained that

The Shadow of a Gunman is that parody of tragedy called melodrama...melodrama which must inevitably lose its significance with the passage of time.

Juno and the Paycock had its superficial qualities but it was still "modern tragedy at its best, almost at its greatest."<sup>5</sup>

The linking of O'Casey's name with that of Synge disturbed the critics and when his work was ranked with The Playboy of the Western World, one reviewer remarked:

Mr. O'Casey...has not - could not - yet be expected to have the exquisite unity of tone and style that enchanted us when we first listened to...The Playboy of the Western World.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Sean O'Casey, Drums Under the Window, New York 1946, 8-9.

4 A. E. Malone, The Irish Theatre, London, 1929, 213.

5 Ibid, 213.

6 Richard Jennings, "A New Irish Dramatist," Spectator, CXXXV, November, 1925, 924.

A. E. Malone made the distinction between the two dramatists clearer:

There is really no basis for comparison between O'Casey and Synge; Synge was a poet, with all the attributes of a poet; O'Casey is a photographic artist who retouches his films with an acid pencil to produce an effect of grotesque satire.<sup>7</sup>

According to the critics, it was The Plough and the Stars, that exposed and heightened the playwright's technical deficiencies. Though they might once have been carried away with the first sweep of O'Casey's popularity, they now struck out at weaknesses that were to become even more pronounced in his later plays. The English Review deplored the fact that O'Casey had a tendency to repeat his faults rather than the excellencies of his work

until we grow terribly afraid that his own taste is at fault, and that he cannot distinguish between his own passionate creations and the theatrical tricks which he has picked up from somewhere.<sup>8</sup>

Milton Waldman,<sup>9</sup> in reviewing the play when presented at the Fortune Theatre in London, guesses that "Mr. O'Casey will never construct a play so as to obtain the maximum effect out of its rhythm and movement." Other critics found the

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7 A. E. Malone, "The Shadow of Sean O'Casey," The Bookman, London, LXX, May, 1926, 104.

8 Horace Shipp, "The Art of Sean O'Casey," English Review, London, XLII, June, 1926, 852.

9 Milton Waldman, "The Drama," Mercury, London, XIV, July, 1926, 299.

play "crude stuff"<sup>10</sup>, "horrible"<sup>11</sup>, and "Formless...lacking of an informing purpose."<sup>12</sup> Ivor Brown called the play a "savage Hogarthian portrait" and compared O'Casey's savageness to Houseman's pessimism.<sup>13</sup>

Basking in the extravagant popularity that was accorded him by theatregoers, the impressionable O'Casey allowed the harsh judgements of the critics to penetrate his sensitiveness until, as he wrote in Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well, he saw before him the more cosmopolitan scene of London:

But, soberly, while he was here, he'd have to deal with the critics at home. How? By going his own way. That was the one thing to do, for there wasn't even a hint of guidance in what they said. (Irish critics and English, too)...They were no good. He would have to go a long way from the cliques of Dublin. But how could he escape? By living in the country or by crossing over to England. It was time he saw newer streets than those of Dublin. If he went to the country, he'd still be confined within the ken and den of Cosgravian and DeValerian politics, and well within the sphere of influence set up by Irish rosaries, Anthony's Annals, and all the crowding rolipoli-holiness of the Pope's green island; with Church of Ireland stained-glass windows shining timidly through the mist that does be on the bog. No, not that way.<sup>14</sup>

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10 Shipp, "The Art of Sean O'Casey," Eng Rev, XLII, 904.

11 S. R. Littlewood, "Isles of Drama," The Bookman, London, LXX, May, 1926, 130.

12 Joseph W. Krutch, "Poet Laureate," Nation, CXXV, December, 1927, 718.

13 Ivor Brown, "Stout and Bitter," The Saturday Review of Literature, CXLI, May, 1926, 614.

14 Sean O'Casey, Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well, N.Y., 1949, 249.

This desire for a new environment grew steadily upon him so that it took an almost meaningless incident to propel him into voluntary exile. This incident was provided when Sean O'Casey wrote a letter to the management of the Abbey Theatre stating his critical views regarding a Shaw production. Lennox Robinson, upon reading the letter, contemptuously remarked, "It's just like Sean!" and O'Casey records the resultant incident:

Some nights following, Sean was on his way over the Abbey stage to join the actors in the Green Room for a chat, when he was stopped by Sean Barlow, a scene painter, in an old-fashioned way; a maker of properties, again in another old-fashioned way; who asked what he was doing on the stage. On my way to the Green Room, replied Sean. There's none but the actors and officials allowed on the stage, said the bold Barlow, with a dominant note in his voice; and we'd be glad if you came this way no more.

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...Never again; nevermore. 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...<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 250-1 O'Casey's version of Barlow's talent is somewhat distorted. A more generous and, I think, realistic vignette is offered by Lennox Robinson on page 66 of his historical survey, "Ireland's Abbey Theatre"- "He has been actor, a very good Red Jack Smith in Spreading the News, but it is in all other ways that he has shown his genius for the stage. He knows everything in scene-making and prop-making, but, sullen over his cocoa and his Greek, he states he can do nothing. An hour later, everything is done to perfection."



Some years later, with Sean O'Casey settled in London, Sean O'Faolain,<sup>16</sup> wrote: "Actually, I feel that O'Casey's exile was an error; not of the judgment but the emotions." P. S. Hegarty<sup>17</sup> wrote in the North American Review:

There is no reason why he should not...give us... a very considerable addition to the world's dramatic literature. But if he is to do that he must cut loose from London and go back where he belongs. The cosmopolitan Irishman often makes literature in England and America. But not the Irishman of his sort.

A. E. Malone thought O'Casey's London future doubtful and wondered whether

he can reproduce in terms of London life the effects which he can get from the dwellers of the Dublin slums...about which even his greatest admirers express misgivings. In his Dublin plays he was dealing with a life he knew, which he had himself lived, and with which he sympathized, and the effects which he produced depended to a large extent upon the knowledge and sympathy of his audiences. Can he depend upon all these in London?<sup>18</sup>

These were certainly not propitious benisons to offer a sensitive dramatist taking refuge from his critics. Once in London, O'Casey set about writing his next play. In this play, and in the plays to follow, he was to discard

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<sup>16</sup> Sean O'Faolain, "The Case of Sean O'Casey," Commonweal, London, XXII, October 11, 1935, 577.

<sup>17</sup> P. S. Hegarty, "A Dramatist of New Born Ireland," North American Review, CCXXIV, June, 1927, 322.

<sup>18</sup> A. E. Malone, The Irish Drama, 307.

the Irish scene of strife and turmoil for the expressionistic techniques reminiscent of Toller, and to plunge into the symbolic and pessimistic universality of his mentor, Eugene O'Neill.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SILVER TASSIE:

#### THE EMERGENCE OF SYMBOLISM

The Silver Tassie, Sean O'Casey's first London play, marked the playwright's entry into the field of world literature. It also marked the adoption of Continental playwriting techniques, including the use of startling dramatic effects of expressionistic origin. That Sean O'Casey should experiment with and expand the proscribed limits of realistic drama was not surprising, for his dramatic abilities seemed hardly to have been fully exploited. But in partially casting off the regional and the picturesque of his Abbey Theatre days, and in turning to subjects of universal and dialectical importance, he appeared not to recognize the capacities of symbols and the effectiveness of expressionism in sustaining mood. He did, of course, have knowledge of the inherent dramatic potentiality of these techniques, but he was unable to use them with an artist's introspective study and discrimination. A synthesis and an exploitation of the play element's was lacking. Expressionism was used as a kind of counterpoint or leit-motif to be employed in

the realistic development of his dramatic themes, while symbols merely epitomized moralities and types. The obviously indiscriminate and excessive use of choruses, chanting, songs and ditties, and spectacular staging made for confusion and weak plot progression. It was the perplexing use of these play techniques that made The Silver Tassie one of the most controversial plays of the decade. The plot line of the play is tenuous and the designation of a protagonist a matter of debate. The following synopsis, though lacking any indication of the vigorous poetry and salty humour, will indicate the unifying dramatic idea.

The first act is in the Heegan sitting-room, where old man Heegan, his friend Sylvester and a Bible-quoting Susie, warm themselves before a fire awaiting the return of Heegan's son, Harry. A clamor is heard from the streets and soon the hero, Harry Heegan, is carried into the living-room on the shoulders of his friends. He is a man of heroic proportions, and of considerable athletic prowess, who has just won the Silver Tassie (a loving cup) for kicking in the winning goal at soccer. He boasts of his accomplishments, makes love to his girl, Jessie, and then with his buddies, Barney and Ted, he is pushed out of the house in order not to miss the boat that is to take them to France and to war.

The second act is in the War Zone and the scene reveals crumbled buildings, barbed wire, a destroyed church with a Crucifix, and a statue of the Virgin Mary opposite a huge gunwheel to which Barney is tied as punishment for a company misdemeanor: stealing a fowl. A howitzer points its barrel towards the Front as the Croucher, a death-like figure, weaves an incantatory spell of death as four soldiers warm themselves before a fire. Soon the soldiers are overtaken by sleep. A Visitor, obviously impressed by his daring, is guided by the Corporal as he inspects the Front-lines. He is symbolic of the politician-diplomat and the home-front machinations that propel nations into war and helpless people into fear. When the Visitor has gone, the soldiers awaken and curse their lot. The Staff-Wallah rushes upon the scene and commands the men to their posts for the enemy has broken through.

The third act picks up the realistic portion of the drama from where it was left off at the close of the first act. The scene is a hospital room in which Harry and Teddy are convalescing. Susie is now a nurse and has changed her personality from that of a God-fearing lass to that of a worldly-wise woman. Teddy is blind and Harry suffers paralysis from the waist down. Barney, who has emerged from the war unscathed, enters the ward with flowers for Harry. The

flowers are a gift from Jessie, who is unwilling to see her former boy-friend. It is quite obvious that she has taken up with Barney and the crippled man knows it.

The fourth act is in the ballroom of the Avondale Club. A dance is going on and through the portals we see Barney and Jessie, Susie and the Doctor, dancing intimately while Harry sits fuming in his wheelchair. It is only when the blind Teddy consoles him with, "Our best is all behind us - what's in front we'll face like men...", that Harry mutters, "The Lord hath given and man hath taken away!" The band plays again and the dance begins. Susie prods Jessie into getting a partner, and when Jessie sighs, "Poor Harry," Susie exclaims, "As long as wars are waged, we shall be vexed by woe; strong legs shall be made useless and bright eyes made dark. But we, who have come through the fire unharmed, must go on living...Come along and take your part in life!"

In February 1928, Sean O'Casey wrote the following message to his staunch friend, Gabriel Fallon:

Just finishing off the last few corrections in the new play to send it to be properly typed for publication. I believe it to be the best play I've written - The Silver Tassie. Expect to let the Abbey have it in a fortnight or so.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Fallon, "Pathway of a Dramatist," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXXIV, January, 1950, 37.

On the 20th of April, William Butler Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory, "I have read Casey's play...I am afraid our refusal will be a very great blow to him, but if anybody can soften the blow you can."<sup>2</sup> It was indeed a blow to the O'Casey of the world-famed Abbey Theatre and of the Dublin backwash, who thought when he left Ireland behind that

London would mould him into a more fully-developed mind and man and...the booming of the Big Ben would deafen his new-listening ears to any echo from the bells of Shandon.<sup>3</sup>

Lennox Robinson and Lady Gregory, who with Yeats and Walter Starkie, formed the Directorate of the Abbey, were compelled to agree with Yeats. Starkie, although finding the play "all so huge that it blurs his [O'Casey's] vision," recommended the play be presented at the Abbey "to the audience that has laughed and wept with him."<sup>4</sup> When it was suggested that O'Casey let it be known he was withdrawing the play for 'revisions', the Irish dander was up. The playwright took his pungent pen in hand, and in a letter to Yeats, refused the 'revision' deal and summarily retorted that his play had been unquestionably rejected by the Abbey. In a letter to Lady Gregory he advised the Directorate that he

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2 Letter, W.B.Yeats to Lady Gregory, 20 April 1928.

3 Sean O'Casey, Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well, 391.

4 Letter, Walter Starkie to W.B.Yeats, 30 April 1928.

had "already shown the letters to the London manager who is considering the production of the play here."<sup>5</sup>

The rejection by the Abbey Theatre was indeed a rude blow if not an error of judgment, and the biting correspondence that made its way from London to Dublin did little to assuage the playwright's anguish or change the Abbey's irrevocable decision. Ostensibly in an effort to vindicate himself, and to lay the case before the public, O'Casey forwarded the entire correspondence to the Irish Statesman where it was published, in toto, on the 9th of June 1928.<sup>6</sup> There was little doubt that Dublin sentiment was on the side of the O'Casey who had given so much of his genius to the little theatre on Marlborough Street and of whom Yeats had but recently said, "For I bore in mind that the Abbey owed its recent prosperity to you."<sup>7</sup> The Dublin Opinion, the Irish Punch, in its July 1928 issue carried a full page cartoon showing a dignified, long-haired, monocled chap in the doorway of the Abbey Theatre, booting into the street a shabby fellow carrying The Silver Tassie manuscript under his arm. The caption read:

Of Course, Mr. O'Casey, you must on no account

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5 Letter, Sean O'Casey to Lady Gregory, undated.

6 See Appendix

7 Letter, W.B. Yeats to Sean O'Casey, 20 April 1928.



take this as being in the nature of a rejection. I would suggest that you simply tell the press that my foot slipped.<sup>8</sup>

On the opposite page a series of possible rejection slips to be offered O'Casey was exhibited. The most biting was:

ABBHEY THEATRE

The offering of this play was an insult to us. Its return is an extravagant compliment to you.<sup>9</sup>

When The Silver Tassie was finally produced at the Abbey Theatre on the 12th of August 1935, Dublin reaction was highly critical. Lennox Robinson, who later admitted the rejection of the play as an error of judgment, describes the reaction in his book The Irish Theatre:

The Board were attacked for allowing such a play to be performed in the Irish National Theatre, containing as it did so much that was offensive to certain sections of the audience. The author was even accused of parodying religious ritual, and there were many who were shocked by the war scenes and the blasphemous soldiery.<sup>10</sup>

It is generally believed that the Abbey was short-sighted and dictatorial in its refusal to produce the work from the 'new' O'Casey and the statement by the Irish Statesman that, "until The Silver Tassie is performed or published, the wise will come to no conclusion."<sup>11</sup> was heeded by no one.

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8 Dublin Opinion, July, 1928, 142-3.

9 Ibid, 142.

10 Lennox Robinson, The Irish Theatre, 174.

11 The Irish Statesman, X, June, 9, 1928, 265.

Even George Bernard Shaw was recruited into the O'Casey ranks by the extension of his commendation in the form of a not too revelatory letter:

My dear Sean, what a hell of a play! I wonder how it will hit the public...But the people who knew your uncle when you were a child (so to speak) always want to correct your exercises, and this was what disabled the usually competent Yeats and Lady Gregory. Still it is surprising they fired so very wide, considering their marksmanship...

If Yeats had said, "It's too savage: I can't stand it", he would have been in order...<sup>12</sup>

Yeats had not, of course, remarked about the play's savageness, but he had offered the following advice to O'Casey:

Dramatic action is a fire that must burn up everything but itself; there should be no room in a play for anything that does not belong to it; the whole history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps nothing in Yeats's letter infuriated O'Casey as much as the 'wallpaper' interpretation of drama, for in his bounding retort to Yeats he found in it the "pretentious bigness of a pretentious phrase" and the "building up little worlds of wallpaper and hiding striding life behind it all."<sup>14</sup> Even the title of his 1940 play, Oak Leaves and Lavender, bears the seemingly derisive auxiliary title of "or A World

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12 Sean O'Casey, Rose and Crown, N.Y., 1952, 45.

13 Letter, W.B.Yeats to Sean O'Casey, 20 April 1928.

14 Letter, Sean O'Casey to W.B.Yeats, undated.

on "Wallpaper". It is not difficult, to see why O'Casey was not in rapport with the Yeatsian somnambulism that held the great Irish poet's attention and talents, and it is not with any difficulty that we understand why Yeats could not tolerate the extreme and vigorous dramatic experimentation of O'Casey, whose crudities and blatant choruses were not in accord with the ideals of Yeats nor the traditions of the Abbey Theatre.

The Silver Tassie was finally produced in October 1929 by C. B. Cochran of whom O'Casey has written:

The most cunning hand in the theatre today is the cunning hand of C. B. Cochran. He will conjure up a dazzling sky of limelight, and when the light flashes out, Cochran has vanished, and in his place stands a dancer, a singer, an actress, or a playwright, sunning themselves in the pool of light that Cochran has created. He can gild with no uncommon art the dull, dejected common-places of the stage, and when he gets it, gold holds all its values.<sup>15</sup>

From out of a Cochran-created pool of light sprang forth the new O'Casey, sunning himself and his art in the magnificent settings of Augustus John. If gilding was to be done, Cochran was certainly the man to do it, for he was the foremost theatrical producer of his day. O'Casey, however, knew he had a good play and that it was only to be evaluated in carets. There were many critics who did not believe that Cochran's

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15 Sean O'Casey, The Flying Wasp, London, 1937, 155.

acceptance of the play was proof that The Silver Tassie was a good play and one was Sean O'Faolain<sup>16</sup>, who wrote in Commonweal, "it was accepted only because it had given rise to a cause célèbre, because the name of the author was O'Casey, and because it was at any rate good enough to produce."

The reviews of the play were substantially favorable, though a few mutterings of incomprehensiveness and failure were evident. A. G. MacDonell<sup>17</sup> of the London Mercury found The Silver Tassie "...a great play. It's subject is Humanity suffering in the war and Mr. O'Casey treats his subject bitterly, cruelly and greatly." Horace Shipp<sup>18</sup> called it a work of genius: "The Silver Tassie has faults... but in its enormous sweep it can carry a hundred such blemishes and yet remain a work of genius." Another reviewer found it otherwise:

I wish I could praise this play...in spite of fine isolated touches here and there, I find it a lugubrious blunder, almost incredibly crude in its emotional emphasis...We must not be too hard upon the Abbey Theatre. It had a case.<sup>19</sup>

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16 Sean O'Faolain, "The Case of Sean O'Casey," Commonweal, XXII, October 11, 1935, 578.

17 A. G. MacDonell, "The Drama," Mercury, London, XXI, December, 1929, 166.

18 Horace Shipp, "Invaders," English Review, London, XLIX, November, 1929, 639.

19 Richard Jennings, "The Theatre," Spectator, London, CXLIII, October, 19, 1929, 523.

A reviewer in Theatre Arts Monthly called it a "failure,"<sup>20</sup> while the critic of The New Statesman found it a success:

Mr. O'Casey has proved right, for whatever may be said in criticism of his play it does triumphantly "come off" upon the stage, and holds one's attention firmly from beginning to end...but...there is a serious flaw...which the effectiveness of each scene temporarily masks. It lacks the homogeneity, the essential unity of a really good play.<sup>21</sup>

One reviewer assailed the immaturity of the play and described the genius of the author as "unequal, willful, bold and not always interesting."<sup>22</sup> Another, judging the play by audience response, phrased his reaction somewhat euphemistically:

The play was received in London without enthusiasm by a well-filled house. It is inaccurate to say that the first performance was booed. There was some booing, in fact, from the gallery, but only booing of the type that is invariably heard at a first night in London.<sup>23</sup>

The Dublin reviewer of the Saturday Review of Literature had difficulty in making up her mind:

I saw The Silver Tassie and thought it was a curiously uneven production. At times it was greater than anything O'Casey had ever done and there were moments

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20 Benn Levy, "Mr. Morgan Shudders at the Theatre," Theatre Arts Monthly, XV, September, 1931, 651.

21 J. B. W., "The Silver Tassie," New Statesman, London, XXXIV, October 19, 1929, 52.

22 Stark Young, "Sean O'Casey and Victor Chenklin," New Republic, LXI, November 27, 1929, 18.

23 Michael J. Lennon, "Sean O'Casey and his Plays," Catholic World, CXXX, January, 1930, 459.

when I hoped he would never sink so low again.<sup>24</sup>

Ivor Brown,<sup>25</sup> although finding war-time realism in drama all too common, praised the author's audacity and artistry:

Mr. O'Casey attempts a gunpowder sonata, which shall be both a litany of the damned and an outline of all human agony in silhouetted cartoon...

Mr. O'Casey refusing to exploit his comedic mastery of the breezy blackguardism implement of expression in order to force it to new splendours and new significance.

The production of The Silver Tassie at the Appollo Theatre in October 1929 was, on the whole, a substantial but moderate success. There were those in Dublin who wondered what effect this success was having upon the Abbey Theatre directors. Mary Manning, Dublin reviewer for the Saturday Review of Literature, found that

The Abbey Directors have maintained a sinister calm over The Silver Tassie. They have remained silent even when the London critics foamed over the London production of this amazing play and compared O'Casey very favorably to Shakespeare.<sup>26</sup>

Of the production itself, miss Manning was not at all impressed. The "acting was bad...the production was inaccurate and stupid except in the extraordinary second act."<sup>27</sup>

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24 Mary Manning, "In Dublin Today," Saturday Review of Literature, VI, May 17, 1930, 1050.

25 Ivor Brown, "Cup of Unkindness," Saturday Review, London, CXLVIII, October 19, 1929, 446.

26 Manning, "In Dublin Today," Saturday Review of Literature, VI, 1050.

27 Ibid, 1050.

However one may feel about the play in its entirety, most reviewers found the second act a distinct challenge and freely admitted their bewilderment with the playwright's insertion of an expressionistic act between two realistic ones. Many critics shuddered and refused to commit themselves. Some complained of lack of continuity; of crudities in the actor's lines, and of mishandling of the subject matter; but most critics agreed that the second act, for all its merits or demerits, had flagged up interest and excitement among the playgoers.

We may label the second act expressionistic or, at any rate, unrealistic, but we will find it most difficult to gauge its significance or meaning in the dramatic progression of the play. It is simple to define the act as a dramatization of "the war from the Tommie's point of view,"<sup>28</sup> or that it is "trench life transfigured,"<sup>29</sup> or "it is war as it spiritually was,"<sup>30</sup> but it is equally pertinent to enquire what the dramatist's artistic motive was in interposing this elaborate symbol of the great war at the end of a rousing

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28 Matthew Norgate, "Mr. O'Casey's Experiment," The Nation, London, XLVI, October 26, 1929, 138.

29 Stephen Gwynn, "Ebb and Flow," Fortnightly, London, December 1929, CXXXII, 852.

30 Horace Shipp, "The Invaders," English Review, London, XLIX, November 1929, 639.

realistic first act that had not even begun to shape the problem of the play. Had the second act preceded the first as a kind of prologue, setting the mood and approaching the idea of the play, unity would not have been sacrificed and the expressionistic scene could have been symbolic of the encompassing theme of the play. Barney is the only character in the first act who emerges in the second. Harry - who comes closest to being the play's protagonist - , along with Susie and Jessie, do not appear in the second act nor can they be identified with the types and symbols employed to delineate the action.

The Silver Tassie is not the first play in which O'Casey has employed symbolic types and representations, for one may find symbolic action and idea in his Abbey Theatre plays. But this is the first time that he has directly and consciously used types that have no particular identity as individuals but are recognizable only as representations of attitudes or opinions. One is also aware of the playwright's employment of inanimate objects to suggest the plot line; thus, The Silver Tassie or the silver loving cup, becomes the reward for athletic prowess and one would assume it to be the object of the playwright to arrange and employ his dramatic action so that this symbol exposes its every facet and potentiality. But with O'Casey, neither his human symbols or



his inanimate symbols ever become anything more at the end of the play than they were at the beginning. Neither do they reflect an element of universality by being representative of more than one idea or opinion, or by exposing themselves as one thing to one group or individual and as another thing to a different group or individual. Almost every symbol of O'Casey's is static and is deliberately refined to a point where it can be conceived as nothing more than an opinion or attitude. Since these caricatures or symbols do not reveal or divulge, they are merely one-faceted characterizations and the play's limitations are those of a morality play where a satisfactory denouement is unnecessary, and where just retribution is not only anticipated but conventional.

One London critic thought the controversial second act was

not devoted to saying that war is horrible. It is devoted to showing what War is and leaving the audience to judge for itself...To say that it is dramatically false because it is impossible to identify in it the characters of the other two acts [there are really 3 other acts] is to miss the symbolic representation of the complete obliteration of individuality in the war.<sup>31</sup>

This critic, it seems, has unwittingly exposed O'Casey's most glaring deficiency in the delineation and

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31 A. G. MacDonell, "The Drama," Mercury, London, XXI, December 1929, 166.

employment of symbols. Symbols that are mere representations of commonly recognized ideas, and which are not diagnosed and dissected by the playwright to reveal the core and substance of the idea, have little dramatic value. A play subsists on audience reaction and if every playgoer is left to his own devices in discerning symbolic interpretations, the author's difficulty becomes insurmountable, when at the conclusion of the play, he is required to tie together all the various reactions to the symbol in order to achieve a consummate and conclusive impact. But symbols that have not depth or the capacities to illumine truths are nothing more than morality personifications, and, with the possible exception of Jedermann, have long since proven themselves trite and out of fashion.

If it was in O'Casey's mind to express, in the second act, the complete obliteration of individuality in war, he was at once handicapped by his use of realism to approach the play's theme. moreover, such a thesis is not well grounded, for individuality is not obscured or annihilated by war, as such works as All Quiet on the Western Front, Parade's End and Farewell to Arms, will demonstrate. Young Franz exposes more of the horrors of war at his conceptual level than does Tietjen who was a combatant in the same war, and their experiences are both singularly individualistic. In drama, R. C.

Sherriff's Journey's End, eminently portrays war with realistic pungency, an effect that could not have been achieved without acutely drawn personalities. If a reduction of all peoples to a common denominator epitomizes the exigencies of war, then the play idea cannot be adequately interpreted or delineated by the use of vacuous symbols that are realistically employed.

Toller's Man and the Masses demonstrates effective expressionistic or 'idea' drama, with its pitting of ideas or concepts against antagonistic forces. Masses are delineated and not individuals. Ideas are compelled to action and symbolic groups suffer and struggle for ascendancy. An eyewitness to one of the first performances of Man and the Masses reveals how the effects of adroit dramaturgy and skillfully delineated symbolic masses achieve an effectual impact and conclusiveness:

...mass of people, sculptured with light, swaying, distending, contracting about its two central, gesticulating figures...each cowers further and further back, awaiting the machine gun shots that it seems must come any minute through the curtain... One stiffens in one's seat, bracing oneself helplessly against the invisible bayonet stab. The effect is more overwhelming than if one heard the rattle of musquetry and seen those workers shot down before one's eyes.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Lee Simonson, "Down to the Cellar," Theatre Arts Monthly, VI, February 1922, 127.

Because O'Casey's The Silver Tassie has been quite frequently likened to Toller's play in technique, this liberal quotation has been made. It may also help to substantiate the theory that modern drama is action drama and, whether it undertakes the problems of the masses or the individual, its dramatic purpose must be evident. Highly stylized tableaux, chanting, and songs do not, by themselves, make good drama. The Silver Tassie, however, is essentially not an expressionistic play, although the second act is superficially so, and elements of expressionism are noted in the last two acts. It is a realistic play employing symbols and expressionistic devices, tending to aimlessness because of its lack of a recognizable idea or a sympathetic protagonist.

Walter Starkie,<sup>33</sup> in a review of the O'Casey plays, cited these weaknesses in the construction of The Silver Tassie and was rewarded with a caustic reply by the playwright. Writing of the second act, O'Casey retorts:

The crude realism of the words does not suit the chant. What does he mean? Is not one word as real as another? Is there a different kind of realism in different words?<sup>34</sup>

Poor Harry has not half the personality of poor, pale little Mollser sitting outside the tenement

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Starkie, "The Plays of Sean O'Casey," 19th Century, CIV, August 1928, 400.

<sup>34</sup> Sean O'Casey, "Reply to Walter Starkie," 19th Century, London, CIV, September 1928, 400.

in the Plough and the Stars. Best to tell the Doctor that Harry has not any of the personality of poor, pale little mollser sitting outside the tenement simply because he was not meant to have it.<sup>35</sup>

And when Starkie complained that no perceptible or gradual transformation of the Bible-quoting Susie was evident, O'Casey remarked:

If Dr. Starkie had read the new play as often as he says he read the old ones, he would see that no gradual change is shown because no change takes place. Susie can show a leg in the first act as well as she can in the last.<sup>36</sup>

O'Casey does not reveal his reasons for declining to give the characters of his plays complex, developing personalities, and we are left to conjecture for ourselves as to his motives. A possibility exists that his approach to the play idea was through his own attitudes and opinions and not through the interpretations of his characters. Thus the play idea was not to be explored or analyzed by the characters on stage, but merely expressive of the arbitrary conclusions of the playwright.

Though one may find commendable experimentation in The Silver Tassie, it is difficult to overcome the feeling that was expressed by Curtis Canfield<sup>37</sup> in the forward to

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35 Ibid, 401

36 Ibid, 401

37 Curtis Canfield, Plays of the Irish Renaissance, New York, 1932, 296.

his Plays of the Irish Renaissance:

It may be that O'Casey is in grave danger of making the mistake Eugene O'Neill is guilty of in his last play [Mourning Becomes Electra] the mistake of thinking himself a better philosopher than he is a dramatist or story-teller (the two terms are, of course, synonymous).

We have no quarrel with his obviously sincere attempt to discover new methods and new departures, but we do regret his throwing overboard the type of play he was beginning to master at a time when its usefulness does not seem to be exhausted.

## CHAPTER III

### THE USE OF SYMBOL IN PLOT

Although most playwrights attempt to concentrate the summation of the play idea into its title, O'Casey play titles interpret, through the medium of symbols, the tone and theme of the play. In turn, the tone and theme of the play reveals the substance of the plot and its subsequent use of symbols and personifications. The symbols in these plays do not respond and react to each other in realistic juxtaposition but are activated only by the elaboration of the theme or idea of the play. This elaboration of theme does not reveal the protagonist in a clashing or frustrating milieu, but merely demonstrates the author's predisposition or bias.

To say these symbolic tableaux represent the pith and significance of the play idea is to relax from the definitive meaning of the word plot, and to admit the dramatic potentiality of bloodless morality plays and quixotic pageants. The symbols and the symbolic suggestiveness in the later plays of Sean O'Casey are exceedingly obvious, and this lack of realistic complexity tends to diminish the

significance of the drama and to relegate its effectiveness to that of an elaborate backdrop in front of which actors moralize or sing, or affect the arbitrary attitudes of the playwright.

According to W. M. Urban's<sup>1</sup> classification of symbols, three distinct types and usages are discerned. The first of these is the extrinsic or arbitrary symbol, a mere tag without especial meaning or significance, whose function is primarily operational. It will be the object of this paper to categorize the characters in the later plays of O'Casey as of this kind. The second type of symbol is the intrinsic or descriptive symbol in which the symbol is not identical with the thing symbolized, but in which the coincidence of character and substance is sufficient to make analagous predication possible. This is the type of symbol most often employed in literature and art. The third type of symbol is the insight symbol, a symbol that does not point to or lead to, but actually leads into the idea, thus shunning representation for insight. One of the most cogent illustrations of this kind of symbol is the suggestiveness of the onion in Ibsen's Peer Gynt. The onion, as revealed in this play, when one layer after another has been removed, finally reveals

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<sup>1</sup> Wilbur Marshall Urban, Language and Reality, New York, 1939, 414.



nothing, and as such becomes the symbol of the 'Gyntish I', which is also nothingness at the core. Here it will be seen that insight into the nature of the social self is portrayed in a manner which no amount of conceptual description could attain.

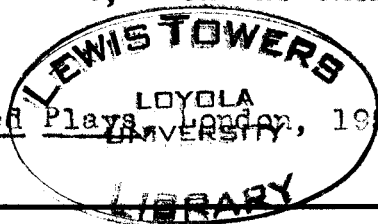
Although O'Casey play plots are not distinctly, nor sufficiently, insight symbols, the plot structure and the employment of 'morality' personifications indicates that the playwright intended his ideas or themes to lead into and expose a particular insight or intelligence. The following summaries of the later plays will reveal the lack of symbol expansion or elaboration and the ignoring of the symbol's function which is to reveal introspective perception or knowledge of certain unknown aspects of reality. Sean O'Casey leads us to the symbol, not into it.

### The Star Turns Red<sup>2</sup>

In this play Sean O'Casey employs the star of Christendom, the symbol of the birth of Christ, and replaces it with the red star of Communism. For three of the four acts a silver, shining star is seen through the windows of the scene settings, but in the final act, when the enemies of

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2 Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays, London, 1960, II, 239.



Communism have been defeated, the star turns a resplendent red. If the playwright had anticipated an element of suspense to add to the emotional potentiality of the play, it was obviously dispelled when the struggle developed in the first act had already been resolved in the play title.

The first scene is in a worker's home during the last few hours of a Christmas eve. The Old Man and Old Woman, who occupy these rooms, have two sons: Kian, a Fascist, and Jack, a Communist. This night has been chosen by both the Fascists and the Communists to storm the factories and take over the city administration. The Lord Mayor and the Purple Priest (priest of the politicians) are in league with the Fascist group and plead with the Old Man and Old Woman to get their son, Jack, to abjure Communism. Jack refuses. The leader of the Fascist group then storms the house with his rabble and when Julia, Jack's girl-friend, and her father, Michael, protest, the former is horsewhipped and the latter murdered by Kian.

Act two is in the headquarters of the General Worker's Union. The Purple Priest demands that the delegates of the Union throw out Red Jim, a Communist, and they consent. But Red Jim's cohort, Brannigan, and the Brown Priest (priest of the poor) upset this coup and the act ends with the delegates being held at bay by Brannigan.

In the third act we are back in the home of the Old Man and Old Woman where the body of Michael is laid out for burial. The mourners arrive and with the urgings of the Purple Priest cry out "Save us from the curse of Communism." A Christian burial is contemplated, but Red Jim interferes, and the body is carried out by the Red Guards. The fourth act shifts to a lounge room in the residence of the Lord Mayor where Christmas festivities are planned for the evening. The Lord Mayor anxiously awaits news that the Fascist coup is successful. But soon the Red Guards storm the Mayor's residence and after a brief skirmish with the Fascists, emerge the victors. In the affray Jack is killed, and Red Jim eulogizes his valiant struggle for the cause of Communism. The star, then, turns red.

The most striking feature of this play is the distinct and uncompromising attitude of the characters in representing either good or evil. With O'Casey there is no such thing as a dual nature, a complex personality, or an individual who may waver or struggle with forces beyond his comprehension. Before the play begins all the O'Casey symbols have been neatly tethered on one side of the fence or the other, and in the course of the play remain fixed and static. It is a play in which the symbol of the star (the demise of Christian morality and the rise of a glorious Communistic economy)

depicts the action of the play, and the action of the play requires only puppets who have nothing to do but conform to an exceedingly simple, cut and dried, denouement.

When the play was produced in 1940, Stephen Spender<sup>3</sup> found the acting quite disappointing; what he failed to perceive was that no acting was required in the unfolding of this dramatic idea. Although admitting it contained some of the qualities of his Abbey plays, he found it

poor stuff...all the characters are 'types' in the sense that they are labelled and numbered and fit into the Communist scheme of morality which - whatever one may think of it - grades people only according to their usefulness to a cause.

When characters have no identity as individuals they have in them no more dramatic potentiality than a stage property that merely amplifies the localizing of atmosphere. That the play was involved with a Communistic theme should not detract from its dramatic potentiality, nor from the artistry involved in its completion. Unfortunately, however, the Communistic theme, with its pitting of the church against an economic ideology, was not within the intellectual quotient of the playwright. Ashley Dukes<sup>4</sup> in Theatre Arts Monthly remarks

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Spender, "A Morality Play with No Morals," New Statesman, London, XIX, March 16, 1940, 363.

<sup>4</sup> Ashley Dukes, "Social Basis," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXIV, June 1940, 413.

that O'Casey has lost himself politically and suggests "he should study facts before presenting the Church as an instigator of belted totalitarian saffron-shirts." It is not likely that the shining star of Christendom could be easily destroyed or replaced, dramatically or otherwise, by a symbol of such flimsy stuff.

#### Within The Gates<sup>5</sup>

The idea of this play is dramatized against a cyclical backdrop encompassing the four seasons, beginning with spring and ending with winter. A dejected and despairing Young Woman is struggling against the encroachment of the Down and Out group. She is a prostitute, the illegitimate daughter of the Bishop. The action of the play is concentrated in that part of a park 'just within the gates' where various symbolic characters and groups congregate to argue and vilify, while the Young Woman accompanies their dialectics with an oft-expressed desire to find 'peace'. At the end of the first scene, the Young Woman is taken to jail for soliciting in the park.

Scene two is a summer noon. The Young Woman begs the Bishop to help her, neither recognizing the other as father or daughter. Because she is a dissolute person, the

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<sup>5</sup> Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays, London, 1950, II, 112.

Bishop refuses to help her, but later, when he learns her identity, he gives the Dreamer - a poet and writer of magazine articles - several pounds to give to her. When the Dreamer gives the money to the Young Woman he pleads with her to find happiness with him, but she declines. Instead, she accepts the offer to discover "the peace that is perfect" from a Salvation Army officer who slyly fondles her knee.

In the autumn scene the Young Woman is unsteady from too much wine. The Bishop offers her hope if she will spend a year or two in the Sisterhood. She refuses his offer as the Down and Out chorus passes by, chanting, "We challenge life no more, no more, with our dead faith and our dead hope". Frightened, the Young Woman, runs to the open arms of the Dreamer.

In the fourth scene, the winter scene, the Bishop has a change of heart and is searching for his daughter in the park. The Young Woman returns from a debauch with the Dreamer and throws herself at the Bishop's feet while the Down and Out group press close about her, chanting, "She must be merry no more, she must be set in the midst of the mournful". The Dreamer exhorts the Young Woman to "Sing them silent, dance them still, and laugh them into an open shame". She dances with the Dreamer until her steps falter and she knows she is going to die. With death close about her, she asks the

Bishop to guide her hand in making the sign of the cross.

This play has been called many things, among them being, "a synthesis of poetry, music and dance...a singularly muzzy and muddle-headed play,"<sup>6</sup> "a charade,"<sup>7</sup> and "the using of musical comedy technique to express philosophic tragedy."<sup>8</sup> The symbolism is indeed obvious and elementary; it is only the universal significance of the symbol that is lacking and its relation to the theme of the play.

Once the drama unfolds we find ourselves within the park gates faced with a horde of diverse, exotic personalities ranting ideological tidbits, mocking and scorning with typical O'Casey abandon. The Dreamer is a blatant hedonist who symbolically represents the poet-thinker; the Young Woman is an unashamed prostitute; the Bishop is clearly a frightful person, and the Salvation Army officer evangelistically saves souls but has an eye for a pretty leg; an Athiest argues with a Man with the Trilby Hat, while other symbols enliven the scene. This melange, colorful and disputatious, achieves no more harmony or understanding at the end of the play than was evident at the beginning. Throughout four scenes the only

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6 Grenville Vernon, "Within the Gates," Commonweal, XXI, November 9, 1934, 66.

7 Joseph Wood Krutch, "Mr. O'Casey's Charade," Nation, CXXXIX, November 7, 1934, 546.

8 Desmond MacCarthy, "Hyde Park," New Statesman, VII, February 17, 1934, 226.

discernible and sympathetic action in the play is the striving of the Young Woman to find 'peace' and her unwillingness to become one of that vast, amorphous, religion-ridden group of the Down and Out, who are ostensibly under the misguided wing of the Bishop. Throughout the play the Young Woman plays the harlot and persists in her "dance to the death" attitude, and at no time expresses a desire to give up her waywardness even though that might conceivably be the first step to obtain happiness for her.

It is not easy to grasp the feeling or the sentiment of the prostitute since her personality is not adequately or proficiently handled. It would be simple to say she is a symbol of a very wretched person in a complex world of political ideologies and conflicting moralities, but the onus of her profession does not make it likely that she could be much troubled by either. In her search for "peace" she is confronted with the salvation of the evangelists and the Bishop's severe piety, but the omnipresent Down and Out group have already foreshadowed the climax of the play, while the belated gesture of the sign of the cross is merely anti-climactic and without significance.

Lennox Robinson<sup>9</sup> remarked that "much that was still

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<sup>9</sup> Lennox Robinson, The Irish Theatre, London 1939, 174.



nebulous and tentative in The Silver Tassie, became clarified in his next play, Within the Gates." Although Mr. Robinson failed to reveal what had been clarified, he found the play deserving of posterity, for he continued:

If any play of recent years deserves to last as a monument of dramatic art in these restless years, it is this moving drama of O'Casey. Here the author has worked out his dramatic motive as if it were the noble theme of a symphony...

Critical evaluations of the symbolism employed in Within the Gates varied. John Gassner<sup>10</sup> found that "the author's own explanations of his allegory are abstruse and the precise meaning of his symbolism is open to discussion." Morten D. Zabel<sup>11</sup> recognizes the play as an experiment to

liberate the creative spirit of the dramatist from the shackles and tedium of naturalism; he wants to arouse the elan of a ranging imagination, the vital force of an ideal symbolism.

Another critic found the symbolism merely well-intentioned and

for the most part, in reasonably good taste. But Within the Gates did not really seem to earn the title of either poetic drama or genuinely illuminating allegory.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Gassner, Masters of the Drama, New York 1940, 571.

<sup>11</sup> Morten D. Zabel, "Poetry for the Theatre," Poetry, XLV, December 1934, 152.

<sup>12</sup> Krutch, "Mr. O'Casey's Charade," Nation, CXXXIX, 546.

To Edith J. R. Isaacs<sup>13</sup> it is "an obvious play, the elaborate symbolism quite elementary, and even old-fashioned...", while to another writer the symbols appeared to be adequately delineated:

Poets with a sense of humor are rare, dramatists who are poets also are even rarer, symbolists who make their symbols weep and laugh, and talk like humans, are the rarest of all...<sup>14</sup>

The reviewers, for the most part, failed to grasp the significance of the play's theme. One called it "a symbolic vision of modern city life,"<sup>15</sup> another a "raising of the moral and social problems of the individual and group on to a universal, almost a mythological plane,"<sup>16</sup> another a "statement of man's relationship to man and woman and nature and religion,"<sup>17</sup> another a "pageant of tormented souls... exposing the cheap shoddy of modern society,"<sup>18</sup> and still another a "stirring drama of humanitarian fantasy."<sup>19</sup> For-

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13 Edith J.R. Isaacs, "Playhouse Gates," Theatre Arts, XVIII, December 1934, 897.

14 "An Irishman Looks at England and Beyond," Editorial, Saturday Review of Literature, XI, Nov. 1934, 256.

15 Homer E. Woodbridge, "Sean O'Casey," South Atlantic Quarterly, XI, January 1941, 57.

16 Derek Verschoyle, "Within the Gates," Spec-tator, CLII, February 16, 1934, 235.

17 Isaacs, "Playhouse Gates," Theatre Arts, 897.

18 "Not Good Enough for Ireland," Literary Digest, XXVI, October 27, 1934, 26.

19 Saturday Review of Literature, XI, 256.

tunately, we have Sean O'Casey's revelatory explanation that the theme of the play is not a "cry for restful death, but a cry for vigorous and effective life."<sup>20</sup>

### Purple Dust<sup>21</sup>

To Sean O'Casey the color purple is most often symbolic of the ancient, the regal and the pompous; other applications of this color are obvious and include its employment, as in A Star Turns Red, to portray the unfeeling, imperious domination of the clergy. In Purple Dust it is a color that betokens the past, a past that recalls no doubt to O'Casey the great Georgian mansions of Dublin, which have long since degenerated from their former luster. In the drawing-room of such a mansion, O'Casey - using one of the workmen employed to refurbish the mansion as a mouthpiece - apostrophizes, "It's meself is sayin' ourselves came late, but soon enough to see the finery fade to purple dust, an' the flow of the quality turn to murmurin' ashes." The symbolic foil to this line of thought is the Englishman owner of the house, Poges, who refers to the restoration of the house when he exclaims, "We must lengthen our arms back to

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20 Sean O'Casey, The Flying Wasp, London, 1937, 47.

21 Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays, London, 1950, III, 1.

the past and pluck back some of the good things that haven't gone away as far from us as the dead who knew them."

The selection of Irish workmen to restore the old Tudor mansion to its former elegance is a good example of O'Casey's symbolic suggestiveness carried to an ironic degree and when coupled with the suggestiveness of a simpering Englishman, the theme becomes absurd. The appearance of the play at a time when the English people were enduring the Blitz has been called "the best example of poor timing."<sup>22</sup>

Purple Dust opens with two English gentlemen attempting the reconstruction of a mansion in Ireland and demonstrating their obvious unsuitability for this kind of endeavor. The tone of the play is set at the beginning when one of the Irish workmen describes the English people to another worker: "They'd plunge through any hardship to make themselves believe they are what they never can become." The hero of the play then emerges and with typical Irish astuteness, sets things aright and derides the efforts of the Englishmen. Before the last act is over he has stolen the Englishman's mistress and cries out:

You have had your day, like every dog. Your Tudors have had their day, and they are gone; and

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<sup>22</sup> John Gassner, "The Prodigality of Sean O'Casey," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXXV, June 1951, 102.

the little heap o purple dust they left behind  
 them will vanish away in the flow of the river...

And so it is that the grandeur and the illumination of the inexorable English past must be swept away by the onrushing waters, and the Englishman is left to utter these contrite and humiliating lines as the final curtain falls: "My comfort's gone, and my house of pride is straining towards a fall."

### Red Roses for Me<sup>23</sup>

In Red Roses for Me we are exposed to an oft-used symbol which currently is found in O'Casey's latest autobiographical work, The Rose and Crown.<sup>24</sup> In this play the title's symbolic relationship to the theme may be drawn from the mouths of the dramatis personae. Ayamonn, the protagonist, accuses his sweetheart of being a timid little girl because she insists upon attending a retreat begun by the daughters of St. Frigid. He remarks:

Soon enough to browse with wisdom when Time's  
 grey finger puts a warning speck on the crimson  
 rose of youth...Let the timid tiptoe through the  
 way where the paler blossoms grow; my feet shall  
 be where the redder roses grow.

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23 Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays, London, 1950, III, 123.

24 Sean O'Casey, The Rose and Crown, New York, 1952.

This personification of the red rose as the lustiness of youth is amplified in the song that is sung throughout the play:

Her petticoat's simple, her feet are but bare,  
 An' all that she has is but neat an' scantie;  
 But stars in th' deeps of her eyes are exclaiming  
 I carry a rich bunch of red roses for thee!

When someone asks if the song is not a trifle indecent, the answer is:

Are you catalogued, too, with the Catholic Young  
 Men going about with noses long as a snipe's  
 bill, sthripping the gayest rose of its petals  
 in search of a beetle..?

Beauty and youth despoiled by piety and Christian morality is carried to an absurd degree when the protagonist exhorts the artless Shiela, his girl-friend, to, "Change, if you want to, the burning kiss falling on the upturned, begging mouth for the chill carress of a bony, bearded saint." And then, in a more quiescent tone, "With red roses in your hand, you'd look beautiful." When, in the last act, the hero has died in the struggle of the common people, Shiela stands near the churchdoor holding a bunch of crimson roses in her hand and muses, "roses red were never meant for me." It is indeed difficult to materialize one cogent idea into the significance of the rose, unless it be a hedonistic appraisal of life, such as, garner the pleasures of today for tomorrow may never come. And yet there are weightier ideas in the play, ideas that are

actually the motivating stimuli for action and plot.

The first act discloses a dilapidated room in a poor workingman's house. Mrs. Breydon, a counterpart of O'Casey's mother as revealed in his autobiographies, watches her son, Ayamonn, practising a Shakespearean role when three neighbors, bearing an image of the Blessed Virgin, beg a piece of soap with which to wash the statue. As they leave, Shiela arrives and informs Ayamonn of the Retreat, and when he is angered, their engagement is broken off. Before the fall of the first act curtain, the three neighbors rush in to tell of the disappearance of the statue of the Virgin. The second act scene is the same as Act one except that it is ten at night. Brennan, a mocker and an iconoclast, enters bearing a newly gilded statue, and he relates to mother and son that he has had it brightened because a sick child was attached to it, and her health depended upon its return. A discussion of religion and evolution takes place until the Rector and Two Railwaymen appear to tell Ayamonn that the authorities will use everything in their power to break up a meeting to be held by the Union, where a strike vote will be taken. Against the pleadings of his mother and Shiela, Ayamonn, accepts the invitation to speak at the meeting. The third act, like the second act in The Silver Tassie, is entirely expressionistic in technique, the scene representing the gloom and seediness

of Dublin life. Most of the characters of the previous two acts are lounging about the bridge crossing the Liffey, and they tell and sing a story of Dublin's miserable conditions.

Ayamonn cries out:

Your Kaithleen ni Houlihan has the bent back of an owl woman as well as the walk of a queen. We love the ideal Kaithleen ni houlihan, not because she is true, but because she is ugly.

The scene brightens and the people become stirred, some singing, while on the bridge, Ayamonn dances with one of the women. When the sound of marching feet is heard, the stage darkens and Ayamonn breaks away from the dancer to attend the union meeting, while the chorus intones:

We swear to release thee from hunger and hardship,  
From things that are ugly and common and mean;  
The people together shall build a great city,  
The finest and fairest that ever was seen.

The fourth act scene is the grounds surrounding the Protestant Church of St. Burnopus. The expressionistic pattern continues in a few episodes, especially when the chorus begs Ayamonn to leave the safety of the churchyard and fight with them. Ayamonn is persuaded, and shortly after his departure, the news is brought that he has been killed in action. When the chorus chants that Ayamonn died for them, the Inspector says, "It wasn't a very noble thing to die for a single shilling." Shiela answers, "Maybe he saw the shilling in the shape of a new world."



The inanimate symbols employed in this play are well outlined in the rubrics that detail the setting of the first act and include, "dilapidated rooms...upper shelf filled with a row of books...a small coloured reproduction of Constable's Cornfield," and three biscuit tins in which grow specified flowers. As ordinary objects they are almost meaningless, but when it is remembered that these same objects were markedly described in Pictures in the Hallway,<sup>25</sup> one is compelled to find in the play something of the autobiographical. This interpretation is further substantiated by the protagonist, Aymonn, whose personality is extraordinarily similar to what the author ascribes to himself in his recollections. Even the aspirations of the hero are not dissimilar to those of the young man who wrote The Story of the Irish Citizen Army<sup>26</sup> and the third act scene revivifies, no doubt, the dismal, dreary Dublin against which he revolted.

When the play was staged, one reviewer thought O'Casey had fallen well below the standard he had once set,<sup>27</sup> but due to magnificent staging and direction, most critics agreed that the moving spectacle of the third act compensated

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25 Sean O'Casey, Pictures in the Hallway, New York, 1942.

26 Sean O'Casey, The Story of the Irish Citizen Army,

27 Sewell Stokes, "New Plays at Last," Theatre Arts, XXX, June 1946, 355.

in some small way for the lack of emotional depth.

### Oak Leaves and Lavender<sup>28</sup>

In the prelude to Oak Leaves and Lavender three sets of dancing couples flit through the shadows of a darkened drawing-room, symbols of the lavender and useless past. When the flare of bursting bombs is seen above the silhouette of St. Paul's, one of the dancers cries out:

Oh, Maurice, is England and the world to lose the glow from a thousand tapers, the colour-shining vestments of the bishops, the jewels in altar and gems in cross, the chorus of sacred song, and the blessed peace of public absolution!

And when there is a cry from the dancers for Wolfe and Well- esley, Marlborough and Clive, the Young Son of Time, who is leaning gracefully upon a huge clock, answers, "England's orphaned of her greatest men. She is alone at last, and she is lost." In this aura of gloom the play begins.

The first act scene is the same as that of the prelude except that the shadows have been removed. Feelim, the Irish butler to Dame Hatherleigh, is helping Monica, a farmer's daughter, blackout windows, and while he does this he descrys the helplessness of the better classes in the war effort. Jennie and Joy, two Land Girls, enter and Jennie remarks that she smells lavender. Feelim smells it too, and

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28 Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays, London, 1950, IV, 1.

Monica tells him of "the old wife's tale that whenever death is near, the scent of lavender spreads over the house." The dark cloth on the wireless set lights up to show a flaming swastika, and the first bars of Deutschland über Alles are heard, but not by the characters on stage. The Dame informs Feelim that her son and his have received their "wings" and soon will be in combat. When the globe over the clock lights up into a vivid purple, and the wireless set is again momentarily illumined, the Dame warns everyone of the purple light and sends them off to their posts.

It is early morning when the second act begins. Feelim's son, Drishogue, and Monica have spent the night together. The bursting of a bomb in the near vicinity brings Monica's father, Feelim and Dame Hatherleigh upon the scene. The parents admonish the children for their loose conduct while the Dame informs Drishogue that she has cabled forty dollars to a bishop for a symbol guaranteeing instant admission to heaven should the bearer fall in flight. The symbol is for her son, Edgar, who, with Drishogue, will soon be piloting planes over enemy territory. A chorus of frightened townspeople chant, "Oh, give us shelters deep and lonely," and Feelim again asserts his authority and dominance by crying, "To Arms, to arms, to arms." The Dame receives a telegram informing her of her husband's death and while Feelim

leads the townspeople to the recently bombed town, the Dame stands alone, looking at the "rising tongues of crimson and yellow," in the distance.

The scene is the same in act three, except that the interior resembles a great workshop. The capacious fireplace now resembles a great drop-hammer, the columns flanking the doorway appear as machinery shafts, and the bureau is now a lathe. A factory adjoins the mansion and the drawing-room is now being used as a rest-center for the homeless. A foreman tells Feelim that a pilot, crash-landing on the airstrip, wore a "little image of an angel with outspread wings... musta been a Catholic." It is Edgar. The wireless sounds Deutschland über Alles and reveals crossed flags: the Union Jack and the Soviet flag. Monica reveals to Feelim that his son and Edgar were killed when crash-landing, and that Jennie, Edgar's lover, had flung herself upon the burning pyre in an effort to reach him. A burial scene follows, for the two boys are to be buried together; the rich with the poor, the worker and the nobleman. Monica reveals that she is pregnant as she and Feelim fall in behind the coffin, singing a lament. The Dame stands alone by the window, when suddenly the foreman enters and blows a whistle. Instantly the room comes alive with pounding machinery and busy workmen. Then the room darkens and the shadowy dancers appear, while the Dame assumes

the position held by Young Son of Time in the prelude. In a sad voice, she intones, "We must all go soon. Our end makes but a beginning for others." Then she sinks down upon the clock.

This play is so heavily larded with symbolic matter that it is difficult to determine its pertinency to the dramatic action. The wireless set is repeatedly warning the group of the Nazi menace, and though it is unheard by the group on stage, it would appear that the bombing which goes on just outside the windows of the mansion would be warning enough. It is reasonable to assume that the central room of the manorial house, in which all this action transpires, is the objectified symbol from which all action should emanate. In the first act, the room has "broad and beaded panelling... simple lines and ovals...so that a dreamy engineer might see in them the rods and motionless shafts of machinery," and "the windows...might become, in the far-away future, the head of a great machine, everlastingly turning out fantastic weapons of war." At the beginning of the third act, which in the element of time is the following day, the "broad and pleasing panelling has become like the ties, the belts, and bars connecting various parts of machinery together..." and before the act is over "the belts travel, the wheels turn, and the drop-hammer rises and falls." This transition, from

drawing-room to workshop, is not accomplished in a period of time such as the "far-away future," but in a period of twenty-four hours. The darkening of the room at the close of the third act, and the reappearance of the dancers, is even more confusing since the three gentlemen dancers now speak out sadly, "The people need our swords no longer," and are answered mockingly by the lady dancers, "Well-a-day! that ye had no swords to offer!" One can only deduce from this dramatic pot-pourri of symbols that the theme of the play can be best described as a symbolic representation of a changing economic order, and that this new way of life must start afresh without the aid or recollection of the past.

### Cock-a-Doodle Dandy<sup>29</sup>

The most abstruse and seemingly absurd symbol in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy is the cock that becomes in turn, a woman, a tophat, and again a cock. It would appear that the cock is made to serve more as a vehicle for sustaining the action of the play, than as a scoffing personification of sham and hypocrisy. In the opening scene the cock dances about a "dignified urn" and disappears. When Loraleen, an attractive and fun-loving creature, first appears upon the stage the cock

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<sup>29</sup> Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays, London, 1950, IV, 117.

crows, and when she disappears, we are told that she has suddenly turned into a cock "openin' its beak as big as a bayonet." A short time later, the cock is heard cackling inside the house "with a note of satisfaction in the cackle." In the second scene the cock is in bad grace with the more dignified members of the group, and since it is known that a bullet would go clean through him, and leave him untouched, we are told to "Look through him, past him, over him, but never at him," because of its sinister enchantment. Shortly afterwards the cock is reported to have changed into a top-hat, back again into a fowl, and again into a woman. In the third act, Loraleen appears on the stage, only to be turned into a cock for the third time. Out of context, the symbol of the cock is most bewildering and it will be necessary to give a more detailed synopsis of the play in order to approach the personification's true light and meaning.

The setting and the theme for this play are almost identical with that of O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms. The scene is the exterior of a farmhouse with a porch and a gate; but where O'Neill designates two elms, O'Casey uses two twisted pillars of wood, looking like snakes. The theme is highly suggestive of O'Neill's preoccupation with New England puritanism.

Michael Marthraun, owner of a lucrative bog, and

Sailor Mahan, who owns the concession carrying turf from the bog to the town, sit on the porch and argue about the price to be paid for carting turf. Michael tells Sailor Mahan about "whispers ebbin' and flowin' about the house, with an edge of evil on them, since that painted one, that godless an' laughin' little bitch left London to come here for a long and leering holiday." The evil one is his daughter, Loreleen, by his first wife. When Loreleen appears in the doorway the cock crows and frightens the superstitious men. The men ignore Loreleen and continue to argue about what should be paid the peasant bog-workers, and when Marthraun refuses the demands of Mahan, the sailor accuses him of "using" his old father-in-law, who unwittingly sold him the bog without knowing its true value. Michael insists that the money he paid for the bog was enough to take his present wife's crippled sister to Lourdes for a cure. Both men are Catholics, "Knights of Columbanus."

Shanaar, a "very wise old crawthumper, really a dangerous cod," arouses the superstitious natures of the two disputants when a commotion inside the house is heard. Marion, the maid, excitedly asks one of the men to go inside and catch the thing "before it ruins the house." To the consternation of all, the cock thrusts its head, complete with "handsome crimson comb" through the window above the porch and crows



violently. When the excitement has subsided, Michael and Mahan beg a kiss from the maid, and when it is proffered, horns instantly rise from out of the girl's forehead. At the close of the scene, the crippled sister is carried past the house on her way to Lourdes for a miraculous cure.

At the beginning of the second scene the cock runs amuck and a Messenger goes after it. A Porter delivers a tophat to Michael which has been pierced by stray bullets intended for the cock. A Sergeant appears on the scene and informs the men that he saw the cock change itself into a tophat. The stage darkens and the tophat once again becomes the cock; then both hat and cock disappear. A Bellman frightens the men by telling them that the cock, now in the shape of a woman, is coming their way. A golden shaft of light falls upon the stage with Loreleen in the center of it. Lorna, Michael's present wife, and the maid, appear on stage in fancy dress. The three women drink from a bewitched bottle of liquor and toast the good things that life can give. The three women take partners and dance and when the Priest arrives on the scene, he demands that Sailor Mahan discharge his best lorry driver for living with a sinful woman. When the lorry driver appears and refuses to give up living with the woman, the Priest strikes him in anger and kills him.

In the third scene the Priest returns to exorcise

the house of evil demons. The house sways and the flagpole, bearing the Irish flag, collapses. The cock swaggers on stage and the Sergeant takes aim, shoots, but the cock escapes. The Priest, prey of the cock, escapes the cock's fury on the back of a duck. It is a "miracle". The Priest now appears as the advance guard for decency. The first miscreant brought before him is Loraleen, who explains to the priest that her relationship with Sailor Mahan included only the loan of five pounds in order to "get away". As she is being manhandled, the Messenger comes in and wards off her tormentors. Then she is cast from the place by the Priest; her stepmother and the maid, in sympathy with her plight, accompany her. The Priest tells Michael the demon has now been conquered and he may now be happy. The procession returning from Lourdes reveals that the crippled sister is no better than before and no miracle has taken place. The messenger, in response to Michael's question as to what he should now do, is told to die, for "There's little else left usefull for the likes of you to do."

If one deplored the indiscriminate use of symbols in Oak Leaves and Lavender, it is certain that this play with its massive agglomeration of symbols will be exceedingly nonsensical. So heavy and diffuse is the use of symbol that quite frequently the proposition or thesis of the drama is confounded and made inobvious.

Jules Koslow<sup>30</sup> maintains the play is an attempt to depict the internicine struggle of present-day Ireland, but we have only the peat-bog and the Irish flag to indicate that his symbols, or personifications, are not universal but national types. If Mr. Koslow is correct, and he was abetted in his work by the guidance of O'Casey, there is something lacking in the play. With the exception of the tottering flag-pole, there is nothing in the play to indicate that this drama of a seemingly prudish father and a somewhat licentious girl, is representative of internal turmoil in the Irish state. The cock, it appears, is nothing more than an exotic instrument by which the playwright measures out his scorn. In the rubrics, the cock is described as having the look "of a cynical jester." Since the cock merely struts or dances, becomes a tophat or a girl without uttering one word and without one appropriate or meaningful action, it can be classified only as a stage prop, and one might as well read meaning and significance in the peculiar headgear worn by Loraleen that identifies her with the cock.

O'Casey's employment of symbols in this play is chaotic and bewildering. The symbolic personifications neither heighten the drama nor disclose the theme of the play,

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<sup>30</sup> Jules Koslow, The Green and the Red, New York, 1950, 115.

which, for all one can make of it, is ostensibly concerned with religious prudery. The parallel between O'Neill's thesis in Desire Under the Elms and O'Casey's symbolism is indeed apparent, the former losing the thesis in involved Freudian interpretations and the latter working with arbitrary symbols that are relevant only to the playwright. But there is drama in O'Neill and there is only confusion and absurdity in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy.

## CHAPTER IV

### SCORN AND THE HERO AS SYMBOL

A study of the dramatis personae in the later plays of Sean O'Casey reveals a repetitious reworking of similar types and symbolic personifications. These symbols play almost identical roles in plots or themes of familiar origin. The two most obvious personifications are found in the symbols that most vividly express the playwright's scorn, and in the foil symbols that portray the hero or the Irish superman. The lesser personifications rarely add more than color to the dramaturgical effect, and quite frequently they serve as mouthpieces for the author's opinions and attitudes. In addition, there exists the symbolic groups: the haranguing mob and the chanting and expressionistic chorus that threads the dramatic theme with lugubrious chants. The inclusion of the mob groupings is often picturesque but obtrusive, and its consequent retarding of the dramatic action by vehement dialectics dispels the mood and tone of the drama. While the choruses may reassert the play's theme or idea, their unrealistic chanting is episodic and lacks tragic urgency, and in the end tends to negate the realistic impact of the play idea.

## Symbols of Scorn

The symbols of scorn in the later plays of O'Casey are easily identifiable because their personalities and performances remain static and indomitable throughout the action of the play. They are of the same stature and disposition at the final curtain as they were at the beginning of the play. They are endowed with all the failings, vices and ineptitudes that may at times be attributed to these symbols of scorn and it is the obvious intention of the playwright to heighten and to make prominent his feeling of contempt. Walter Starkie,<sup>1</sup> in commenting upon the tone of O'Casey's plays remarked:

...there is always a little demon at his elbow who prompts him to turn it [his poetry] into ridicule - that bitter ridicule which seems to come naturally to the Irishman...

As a foil to this hapless group of symbols, the O'Casey hero emerges to illustrate and instruct, while the resultant drama comprises the pith and substance of the plot. At the end of the play these impious personifications have not wavered from their ignorant attitudes, nor are they perceptibly moved by the arguments and persuasions of the hero symbols, thus the drama retains to the end the propelling force of the author's odium.

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1 Walter Starkie, "Sean O'Casey," The Irish Theatre, ed. by Lennox Robinson, London, 1939, 155.

In The Star Turns Red the first of the corrupt and pompous clergymen emerges as the Purple Priest, a villainous character indeed when contrasted with the patient humbleness of the Brown Priest who is his obvious foil. It is not surprising that O'Casey was unable to combine the essentials of corruption and the qualities of humanitarianism in one symbol, for in none of his later plays does he personify his symbols with many-faceted implications or with realistic clarity. The Purple Priest, the priest of the politicians, is not permitted the sensitive, modest perceptions of the humble Brown Priest, although a skillful dramatist might have combined the two dominant traits in one symbol and then employed that symbol in a highly dramatic struggle of humanity versus social or economic ideology. It may be argued that the two symbols were necessary to convey the message of the thesis, but no synopsis of the plot will indicate their inclusion in the cast as a determining factor in the play's outcome. At any rate, the two priests, taken as a whole, do not disclose a true and consummate picture of the Catholic clergy. The theme of the play is concerned with the overthrow of one order of society for another. Inside this basic plot framework the dramatic action is involved with the struggle to achieve this end. It is clear at the start of the play that the actions of either priest will not have much to do with the determin-

ation of the play ending. Jules Koslow<sup>2</sup> in his interpretation of the play's plot does not even mention the Catholic clergy. He states that the plot idea is a reversal from the idea expounded in The Silver Tassie, wherein it was shown that one life may be too much to forfeit in the advance of a political ideology. In The Star Turns Red

...the struggle must bring on sacrifice, sacrifice may result in death and death of one or a thousand and one is a necessary, though undesirable, step toward the realization of political goals...

Since Mr. Koslow had the assistance of the playwright, it becomes clear that the object of scorn in this play serves not at all the expansion of the play idea. The Brown Priest is a barely credible person and the Purple Priest could have been replaced by a brilliant demagogue, and the exigencies of plot and theme not at all violated.

It appears as if the Purple Priest was to be damned throughout the play, for the author assumes or suggests no arguments that might tend to convert the corrupt priest to the 'light' of the red star. It was certainly easier to have the good priest always pliant to the tenets of Communism and the Purple Priest always pompous and cruel, than to have one symbol of the Catholic clergy - combining a feeling for humanity and a predisposition to changing social order -

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<sup>2</sup> Jules Koslow, The Green and the Red, New York, 1950, 88.



compelled to the winning side by relevant argument and pertinent action. Stephen Spender's<sup>3</sup> view that O'Casey

...seems to have but a faltering hold on the implications of social ideas - sympathises most with the Communist and understands best the Catholic...

is difficult to reconcile with fact, unless his perception of the Irish priest transcends that of centuries of Catholics. It is, of course, the intrusion of O'Casey into the idea of the play that compels the author to this attitude. His delineation of the priesthood is personal, introverted and without perspective.<sup>4</sup> It is this lack of universality and dramatic dissection that makes of his symbols ineffectual images without objective expansion and intellectual integrity.

This kind of attitude delineation is carried to an extreme perversity when the Bishop in Within The Gates is represented as the father of an illegitimate child, and has few redeeming features that might admit him to be honestly called a servant of God. When James Agate, drama critic of the Sunday Times, called the Bishop an "oily scoundrel," O'Casey retorted:

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Spender, "A Morality Play with No Morals," New Statesman, XIX, March 16, 1940, 363.

<sup>4</sup> An explanation of Sean O'Casey's religious views and attitudes may be found in his article, "Agate Clangs Shut," in Irish Writing, Number 13, December 1950.

The Bishop was never contemplated by me as either oily or as a scoundrel. He is a good-natured, well-intentioned, religious, and sincere; but he is timid, mistaking good-nature for the fire of the Holy Ghost and life has passed him by. And he is not a character, but simply a symbol.<sup>5</sup>

The highlights of the Bishop's characterization do not tally with O'Casey's explanation. The Bishop speaks of the people 'within the gates' as common people; he lies several times throughout the play; he refuses charity to an indigent; calls himself a "perfect stranger" when the Young Woman begs him for advice and then fondles her knees. In one scene he roughly pushes a man and exclaims, "Oh, Go to Hell!"

Even if irreverence is intended toward the clergy and not the Catholic church, the delineation of the Bishop is wholly inadequate and exceedingly myopic, and at best explains a childhood wound received at the hands of an unsympathetic priest or perhaps a misguided assimilation of facts. Grenville Vernon<sup>6</sup> found the play not the "religious function" that O'Casey implied in the thesis:

It is rather a hedonistic farrago, beautifully written in spots, formless and pretentious, a symbol which its author never intended - a symbol of the confusion at once moral and esthetic which permeates so much of modern writing.

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5 Sean O'Casey, The Flying Wasp, 48.

6 Grenville Vernon, "Within the Gates," Commonweal, XXI, 1934, 66.

Jules Koslow does not attempt to justify the personification of the Bishop and instead remarks that the play gives

us a picture of life, and if that picture shows intellectual, moral and social confusion, the fault lies not with the writer but with society.<sup>7</sup>

A prostitute and a dissolute bishop cannot provide the principal subject-matter for so broad a canvas. Koslow's synthesis of the idea of this play is tendered in so defensive a tone that one is inclined to answer that a baker cannot always blame the ingredients for the unpalatableness of his wares.

In Red Roses for Me, scorn and ridicule are meted out to a verger of the church, the Rector's churchwarden, and members of the Protestant church's Select Vestry. Although the hero's sweetheart is humiliated throughout the play because of her Catholicism, the final scene of the play is resolved against a backdrop wherein members of the Protestant church react without even ordinary compassion for the dramatic exigencies of the plot. This is perhaps O'Casey's only play in which all the venom of his scorn is not concentrated in one or two symbols of religious-minded people. It is probably the most unrealistic too, since the contrived utterances are so impalpable as to suggest not a play but a

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7 Jules Koslow, The Green and the Red, 69.

pageant of dialectics. It should be noted that these personifications are all religious types and are not directly instrumental in furthering the action of the play.

The religious symbolism running amuck in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy is as trenchantly unsympathetic and scornful as in the previous plays mentioned. The theme of the play is ostensibly involved with the idea that Christian morals are incompatible with the natural propensities of the Irish people. In this play, O'Casey's latest, the corruptive power of religion is more sharply defined and more devastatingly ridiculed. Father Domineer personifies the authority of the church and in that capacity he destroys books by Voltaire and James Joyce, and as the authority above nations, he cries out

We're above all nations. Nationality is mystical, maunders nonsense! It's a heresy! I'm the custodian of higher interests.

This evil priest, when his commands are disobeyed, strikes a Lorry Driver and kills him; then the priest murmurs an act of contrition into the dead man's ear. Throughout the play Father Domineer speaks less like a priest than a Fascist dictator, and it is not surprising to have those banished by him, saying as they leave, "...we go not towards an evil, but leave an evil behind us!"

Religious morality is symbolically interpreted by having the chairs collapse under two superstitious, religious old men. The O'Casey hero, the Messenger, hastens upon the scene to astutely appraise the mishap:

Well, you have settled down now, anyhow! Will I get your chairs sturdy enough to uphold th' wisdom of your talkin'?

Even the women of the household, whose indiscreet and loose conduct accounts for most of the action in the play, remark of the chairs:

Oh, they've brought the unsteady chairs out, and now they've broken them up! (to the men) You knew well th' chairs in the hall were there only to present an appearance.

A "miracle" trip to Lourdes leaves one of the characters without hope while the genuine miracle turns out to be the invulnerability of the cock, who remains unscathed when bullets pierce it. We must again rely on Mr. Koslow for a definition of the cock as symbol:

...the cock is a symbol of proud, vibrant living, the dawn of a new day, the very rhythm of universal life, a cynical mocker of those human beings who would shy away from life and busy themselves in the dark and gloomy recesses of ignorance and superstition.<sup>8</sup>

The deprecatory attitude in this drama is so

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8 Ibid, 115.

heightened that to list the predispositions and prejudices of the playwright would be a formidable task. Evaluations of the play, however, are not all negative. John Gassner<sup>9</sup> in Theatre Arts found that

there is much comfort in the realization that his last play, Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, published in 1949, had more dramatic sinew and vitality than anything written by him since The Plough and the Stars a quarter of a century ago.

Purple Dust, "A Wayward Comedy in Three Acts," turns to the Englishman as an object befitting scorn. The symbols employed are presumed to be the essence of English life and aspirations. Cyril, an elderly Englishman, is the untutored but successful business man, while Basil Stoke is a young and scholarly Oxonian. Both symbols are inadequately handled and the descriptive tone is insensitively keyed. When the playwright has finished with these ridiculous characters, they deserve nothing more than annihilation by deluge and certain removal from the face of this earth. This deus ex machina resolution of the play's problem is far from being farcical - the play has often been called a farce - and, most certainly, impossible of realistic staging.

Poges describes himself as having been "reared any old how" and

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<sup>9</sup> John Gassner, "The Prodigality of Sean O'Casey," Theatre Arts, XXXV, June 1951, 52.

...here I am today, a money'd man, able to say to almost any man, come, and he cometh, and to almost any other man, go, and he goeth - and quick, too; able to shake hands with lords and earls, and call them by their Christian names.

Basil Stokes has this to say of himself:

Considering that I have read every word written by Hume, Spinoza, Aristolte, Locke, Bacon, Plato, Socrates, and Kant, among others, I think my views ought to recieve some respect from an ignorant man.

This is certainly not the tone of force where foibles are ingeniously exposed by humorous ironies. The exaggeration is there, but the artfully comedic is lacking. Though the two men are at odds as to the particular merits of their background and ability, they are both staunch advocates of tradition.

Other symbolic features of the play include the personification of the immensity of the British Commonwealth as an unwieldy lawn-roller being pulled across the mansion floors. When difficulty is encountered in getting it through the doors, someone asks if it is not too big. Poges answers, "No, it isn't too big. The man who sold it to me said that the bigger it was, the more effective it would be." Later in the play a huge desk is being eased through a narrow doorway, presumably a symbolic representation of the India question, which at the time of the play's conception was a major English problem. India was an unwilling Protectorate in the

British Empire until given Dominion status in 1947.

In Purple Dust the object of scorn was the proud but dubious ambitions of two Englishmen, and in Oak Leaves and Lavender an attempt is made to satirize the English reluctance to cast off tradition for a newer and more progressive order. Dame Hatherleigh, a personification of English tradition, is confronted in this play with English derelicts and misfits, prudish provincials and farmers, a Nazi-loving Englishwoman and an English coward. She expresses, according to O'Casey, the soul of England when she says:

Isn't it thrilling to feel that we are soul of the soul of the lost Ten Tribes of Israel, and are being held firm in the hands of Deity for a special purpose.

Although the soul is a distinctly Irish one, the Dame soon turns against the hero, Feelim, whose Irish astuteness fails him in comforting her upon the death of her son. When, in the last act, the new social order emerges and a factory is attached to her home, she exclaims:

House here? Not here: this house can never change; never change. Per ardua ad astra. A hard climb to the stars...

Where the deus ex machina was an engulfing wave of water in Purple Dust, the resolvment of this play is provided by an unrealistic transformation of her country home into an arsenal. The cry of "Worker's Arise" will be heard by all perceiving playgoers.



## The Hero

No difficulty will be encountered in detecting the hero in the later plays of Sean O'Casey. A man-of-action with youthful exuberance, a pleasant personality, overwhelming astuteness, devotion to the cause of the common people, and occasional abandonment to the lure of women; these are the ingredients of which his heroes are made. The hero in these plays cannot always lay claim to being the protagonist for the reduplication of his 'type' in play after play affirms his raison d'etre as merely providing contrast to the objectified symbols of scorn. One can trace throughout all these plays the demi-god stature of these heroic personifications, heightened by the prevailing attitudes of the playwright.

In Within the Gates the hero emerges as The Dreamer, a young man who

carries himself buoyantly. His features are rugged, his eyes bright, sometimes flashing in an imaginative mood, but usually quiet and dreamy-looking...

As a foil to the wicked Bishop, he seeks to save the tormented Bishop's daughter from the hateful oppresiveness of the Down and Out Group. He calls himself the "Quick and Lively" and philosophises that "wine is the mirror of the heart" and calls the Young Woman to the "deep kiss and clutch of love." When he has enviegled her into sinning with him, he learns

she is soon to die, and he cries out against himself and the social order:

Not you, fair lass: not you!.. A few smiles bestowed on the unworthy is all that you have to answer for. It is those who disordered your life with their damned whims; those who have left a lovely thing lonely and insecure; who have neglected to nurture the rare; it is we, dear lass, who will have to answer for all these things.

His gallantry to womenkind is unbounded. Wine is a panacea for the wretched in heart and it succeeds in exposing the reality of the soul and the reality that is genuine humanity. O'Casey's thesis may well be that society degenerates us by its religious and moral fetters, and by the seemingly stringent exactitudes of social decorum. The Dreamer blatantly assumes the determination of right and wrong, and though he may blame society for disordering the Young Woman's life, he himself does little to bring the girl to happiness in the complexities of urban society. Once the Dreamer has sated his lust, he assumes a Rousseauistic pose and points the accusing finger at a rather disordered picture of society.

In The Star Turns Red, the O'Casey hero emerges swathed in formidable candor and insight, fighting for the rights of the proletariat. He is an Irishman and a Communist. He is

tall and strongly built. His eyes are grey and brilliant. His hair is raven black... He smiles when the Brown Priest sees him - it is a smile of welcome and affection.

It is Red Jim, however, and not the protagonist of the play, who runs into the cruel opposition of the Fascist politicians and successfully stens their rise to power. That Red Jim is Jim Larkin, the famous union leader during the Transport Workers Strike of 1913, there can be little doubt. To the singing of the Internationale, Red Jim stands over the body of the protagonist and cries out: "He fought for life, for life is all; and death is nothing..." His chivalry borders on saintliness and, like an evangelist at a revival meeting, he grasps the hand of a comrade who has just sworn off drinking, and cries, "My comrade was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found!" Red Jim passionately espouses atheistic thoughts when pitted against the admonitions of the Purple Priest:

If your God declares that one child shall dwell in the glory of knowledge and another shall die in the poverty of ignorance, then we declare against Him; once and for all and for ever we declare against your God, who hath filled the wealthy with good things and hath sent the poor empty away!

His superhuman ability to reform blackguards, and to make respectable men of them, may be drawn from his tirades against the union officials:

(to 1st Official) ...Who lifted you, you hearseman's get from the job of worrying the poor...I did!

(to 2nd Official) To whom did you run when...your boss found you dipping too deep into the money satchel? Who saved you from jail and, for a time, turned you from a picaroon into a man? I did!

(to 3rd Official) Who found you with hardly a boot on your foot... Who took you up because he thought he saw a glimmer of a man in you... I did!

Not only has Red Jim made real and honest men of these villains, he claims more:

The union chose you, did it? The men elected you, did they? Who made the union? Who made the men men? Who gave you the powers you have? I did, you gang of daws!

This magnificent specimen of a man, whose clear perception and unblemished personality remains just so throughout the play, converts the players, but not the audience to a sympathetic view of Communism.

O'Killigan epitomizes the O'Casey hero in Purple Dust. He is an Irish labor foreman and is described by one of the stonemasons employed in the rebuilding of the Tudor mansion, as

A handsome, hefty young sthripling, with a big seam in his arm that he got from a bullet fired in Spain.

O'Casey describes him as

tall, fair young man of twenty-five or twenty-six years old. He has a rough, clearly-cut face; dogged-looking when he is roused, and handsome when he is in good humour, which is often enough.

Like Red Jim this hero possesses an excellent sense of humour and an abundance of common sense. He, too, has struggled and fought for the oppressed, and he does not hesitate to vilify the English veneration of tradition.

O'Killigan has this to say of the English:

Because they think it has what they call a history.  
 Everything old is sacred...Give a house a history...  
 let some titled tomfool live or die in it - and  
 some fool mind will see loveliness in rottenness  
 and ruin.

He retorts with considerable vehemence when it is suspected that he is ignorant enough to to be acquainted with Wordsworth:

A tired-out oul' blatherer; a tumble-down thinker...  
 a shadow parading about as the sun; a poet, sensitive to everything but man...

And as a precursor of what the English peoples have in store for them, he remarks, "...in a generation or so the English Empire will be remembered only as a half-forgotten nursery rhyme!" He has the same sentimental, passionate regard for womankind as did the Dreamer in Within The Gates, for he exhorts the mistress of the bumbling aristocrat to fly away with him:

graft yourself on to the living, and don't stay  
 hidden any longer here...listen to me, an' let  
 longin' flood into your heart for the call of  
 life...Spit out what's here, an' come where love  
 is fierce an' fond an' fruitful. Come, lass,  
 where there's things to say an' things to do an'  
 love at the endings!

Everything O'Killigan predicts and warns of eventually transpires and only an ignominious end can remain for the two Englishmen.

Red Roses for Me provides Ayamonn with almost the

identical personality of the heroes previously discussed. That he is stamped from the same mould as O'Killigain and Red Jim will be easily seen, for he is described as

tall, well built, twenty-two or so, with deep brown eyes, fair hair...his face would remind an interested observer of a rather handsome, firm-minded, thoughtful, and good-humoured bulldog.

Ayamonn is a laborer and also an intellectual with aspirations of popularizing Shakespeare. His mother worries about his intellectual activities and tells him to rest. "You're overdoing it," she says. "Less than two hours sleep today, and a long night's work before you. Sketchin', readin', makin' songs an' learnin' Shakespeare; if you had a piano you'd be thryin' to learn music." As noted before, O'Casey has drawn the characteristics of Ayamonn from the stuff of his autobiography. That he was, as a boy, interested in drama and Shakespeare, is attested to by a statement in The Flying Wasp concerning a school-boy production of Midsummer Nights Dream:

...the papers might have given the venture a more generous piece of space, for the production of this play was of more importance to the greatness of the English nation than the breaking of a poor horse's neck in the Grand National. So capitalistic England judges the importance of things. Communism could never fall so low.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Sean O'Casey, The Flying Wasp, 166.

O'Casey's youthful ambitions and the loving reverence in which he held his mother are well utilized, while in speeches such as Ayamonn makes, his concern for the plight of the common people emerges:

Friend, we would that you should live a greater life; we will that all of us shall live a greater life. Our strike is yours. A step ahead for us today; another one for you tomorrow. We who have known, and know, the emptiness of life shall know its fullness. All men and women quick with life shall know its fullness. All men and women quick with life are fain to venture forward. The apple grows for you to eat. The violet grows for you to wear. Young maiden, another world is in your womb.

A certain poetic chivalry possesses Ayamonn's soul when he plots an assignation with his betrothed:

Tomorrow night, in the old place, near the bridge, the bridge of vision where we first saw Aengus and his coloured birds of passion flying.

Although Ayamonn proves himself an extraordinary hero, his immolation in the fourth act seems hardly to have heightened his stature, since his struggle for a better world was an undertaking of which he was not always conscious and for which he was not adequately prepared.

An Irish butler in the home of an English noblewoman is the hero in Oak Leaves and Lavender. He is not as young a man as our previous heroes have been, but where Ayamonn reminds us of a bull-dog, Feelim O'Morrigan resembles a fox. He is described as:

...a man of forty-five years, wiry, slender, and as cunning as a fox (except when he is in a temper), which he somewhat resembles with his thin, protruding nose and reddish hair.

That he is an O'Casey hero cannot be denied, for it is not long after the play opens that this Irish butler asserts his superiority over everyone and begins to complain of their helplessness. When the characters begin to fumble when blacking out windows because of the air-raids, he says, "It's the people...not able to do anything without breakin' back, arm, leg or something. Oh, amn't I sorry I came [from Ireland to England]." Feelim performs all duties promptly with exacting cleverness, and continually jibes the unfortunate English people who surround him, because of their clumsiness. He says, "Fuss and Fury. God must ha' had a rare laugh when He made a serious Englishman." Even the Dame of the house must admit the butler's preeminence in the war effort, for she remarks to Feelim, "Sit down, Feelim; sit down. You're more important now than I am." And Feelim sits down and proceeds to tell the Dame that "There was always somethin' strange, somethin', somethin' tremendous about th' Irish people!" When the problems of war-time living have been shifted upon the broad shoulders of the Irish butler, and someone presumes to interject a bit of advice, Feelim retorts:

We're not concerned with sound Christian doctrine, good people, but with secular instruments ticking



out problems it takes concentration to solve.

That the butler is definitely a man of the people will be noted in the battle-cry he so eloquently expresses as bursting bombs press everyone to action:

To arms, to arms, to arms!  
 To arms, your ranks advance!  
 March on, march on, serfdom is past,  
 Set free th' world at last!

He is also gallant and sympathetically aware of the unfortunate plight of women, for when he observes two Land Girls preparing for manual labor, he tells them

...it's not diggin' the land yous would be, but sportin' about in the whitest o' linen an' gayest of silks, with young an' handsome gallants festooned with ordhers, an' swords danglin' from their hips, cravin' a dance in a lighted hall, or a long kiss outside, under a three, an' the twilight fallin'!

And he rises to heroic, albeit Churchillian heights, when news is brought to the Dame that London is aflame:

Two things we have to do - fight the raids and fight invasion. Fight it on the beaches, among the meadows, in the streets.

The hero in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy is The Messenger who, like O'Killigain in Purple Dust, whisks away tormented womankind from an unhappy environment. We do not have a description of the Messenger, but that he is a young man there can be little doubt, for his sole interests appear to be love-making and the denial of the hard-bitten morality of

Father Domineer. His detestation of the priest will be observed in the following lines:

Now, Father, so full of pity an' loving-kindness,  
jet out your bitther blessin', an' let th' girl  
go. An' thry to mingle undherstandin' with your  
pride, so as to ease th' tangle God has suffered to be  
flung around us all.

His attitude to women is similar to that of the other heroes, but he is less gallant and more sensual. Throughout the play he sympathises with Marion's dilemma, and he cannot resist telling her how much he wants her:

Oh, Marion, Marion, sweet Marion, come down till  
I give you a kiss havin' in it all the life an'  
longin' of the greater lovers of th' past.

The pinnacle of his intellectual superiority is reached in the closing line of the play, when the embittered and confused old man asks what he is to do, now that his wife and daughter have left him. The Messenger, smug in his assumed omniscience, retorts: "Die! There is little else left useful for the likes of you to do."

## CHAPTER V

### SYMBOLISM AND SEAN O'CASEY

#### Colors

In the previous two chapters Sean O'Casey's more dominant and persistent symbolic personifications are analyzed and categorized; there remains, however, a vast agglomeration of symbolic matter that is difficult to evaluate. This prodigal use of multifarious symbols and personifications in dramas that have not the substance to materialize their potentiality, is the most obvious weakness of the later plays of Sean O'Casey. Many of these symbols are recognized for what they represent, but many have only a lucid and instinctive meaning to the playwright. His most prolific and indiscriminate use of symbol reference is embodied in the use and selection of colors. These colors may denote moralities, moods, political dispositions and even an individual's personality. The titles of five of the seven plays covered in this paper will illustrate the adjectival use of color in symbol delineation: The Silver Tassie, The Star Turns Red, Oak Leaves and Lavender, Purple Dust, and Red Roses for Me.

It is possible this predisposition to color stems from his impressionable years in Dublin, for I Knock at the Door discloses a particularly marked interest in colors and flowers:

-Does God like red, mother?

-Oh yes, yes, He likes red: there are quite a lot of flowers and things in the world that are coloured red.

-Does God like the colour red the best, mother?

-Oh, I couldn't right say, Johnny O'Casey designates himself as Johnny Casside in the early autobiographies; I think he likes all the colours, really.

-And yellow, too: for look at the buttercups, the primroses, the cowslips, the daffodils, and, and the dandelions; He must be very fond of yellow, too, mustn't he, mother?

-Yes, He must be very fond of yellow, too, Johnny.

-But I don't think He cares a lot for blue, Mother, for there's only the violets and the bluebells - But I forgot about the sky, the blue part of the sky, that's everywhere on a fine day...<sup>1</sup>

Earlier in the book, flowers are personified through color:

-I don't know, I don't rightly know, answered the soft voice; to me, red geraniums or geraniums of any other colour seem to have a stand-offish look, always, while daffodils seem to welcome you to come in and walk about in the midst of them.<sup>2</sup>

The color green is revealed with Transcendental overtones:

-I was just thinking, mother, he said, that green must be a great favourite of God's, for look at the green grass, and the leaves of bushes and trees; and teacher said that green stands for life, and God loves life.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Sean O'Casey, I Knock at the Door, London, 1939, 76.

2 Ibid, 32.

3 Ibid, 82.

In O'Casey's more or less autobiographical Red Roses for Me, the scene of the first act designates a symbolic significance to the arrangement and selection of flowers:

Under this window, on a roughly made bench, stand three biscuit tins. In the first grows a geranium, in the second musk, and in the third, a fuchsia... These crimson, gold and purple flowers give a regal tint to the poor room.<sup>4</sup>

The almost identical minutia may be found in I Knock at the Door:

...and on the window ledge the two geraniums, one white, the other red, and the purple-cloaked fuchsia blossoming blithely amid the wrack of the common things around them.<sup>5</sup>

Aside from the fact that these flowers would barely be observed by playgoers, it is doubtful that if observed, the audience would discern significance in the use of colors or of the flowers themselves. In Purple Dust, this sort of thing is carried to a farcical degree when the Irish girls enter carrying two vases: "(Souhan)...is carrying a black vase, striped with blue...(Avril) carries a blue bowl striped with black." In the rubrics of his later plays all the characters are best described by the color of their garments and not by the salient features of their personality.

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4 Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays, III, 127-8.

5 Sean O'Casey, I Knock at the Door, 211.

Colored walls, colored lights and highly-colored properties abound in the substance of his plays, and to discern a definitive meaning in this reckless, parochial use of color would be a hazardous task at best. It is as if the use of color as symbol was the playwright's most expedient method of elaboration and insight. Because this use of color is not systemized, and because color itself is a doubtful conveyor of emotion, its use appears without cegency.

### Women

Women, to O'Casey, are the symbolic personifications of suffering and mistreatment. In all the later plays, even in his Abbey Theatre plays, women are delineated as quixotic heroines or long-suffering creatures under the ignoble thumb of man and his hapless morality. In Juno and the Paycock, it is Juno Boyle who cries out:

...what was the pain I suffered, Johnny,  
 bringin' you into the world to carry you to  
 your cradle, to the pains I'll suffer carryin'  
 you out o' the world to bring you to your  
 grave!<sup>6</sup>

In The Shadow of a Gunman it is Minnie Powell who immolates herself by sneaking the bombs up to her room, and in The Plough and the Stars it is Nora Clitheroe and Bessie Burgess who suffer because of man's inhumanity. Bessie Burgess, who

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6 Sean O'Casey, Collected Plays, I, 87.

inadvertently dies a heroine, comes to life again as the whore in Within the Gates, only to die again with heroic and melodramatic colorings. In The Star Turns Red, Julia is killed by Fascist bullets at the end of the first act. In Red Roses for Me, Sheila personifies woman suffering at the hands of religious morality, and the two Irish lasses in Purple Dust, along with Loraleen of Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, are rescued from a wretched, ignominious fate by the O'Casey hero. Walter Starkie<sup>7</sup> was the first of the critics to observe O'Casey's sentimental predisposition toward women, for he observed, "O'Casey is always on the side of women," and Jules Koslow<sup>8</sup> found "O'Casey ...an admirer and defender of women. Throughout his plays it is the women who emerge as the noble, brave and sturdy ones, not the men."

#### Play Ideas

If we mean by play ideas the intellectual perception of the playwright's dramatic substance, then the inclusion of ideas in modern drama should not be detrimental. But if this intellectual perception is preeminent, shadowing the emotional elements of the drama, then the play has failed

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Starkie, "The Plays of Sean O'Casey," 19th Century, CIV, August 1928, 231.

<sup>8</sup> Jules Koslow, The Red and the Green, 43.

of its primary purpose - emotional rapport with the playgoer. George Jean Nathan<sup>9</sup> once wrote that "...the stage is not the place for ideas or for intelligence," but "...for a deft and sagaciously deceptive simulacrum of intelligence," and this simulacrum of intelligence consists in fooling the public in the matter of platitudes. It is difficult to interpret Mr. Nathan's remark about fooling the public, but he has had to renege on his 'idea' concept and admit that drama must at least have a substantial motive for its existence. Eric Bentley<sup>10</sup> finds idea a vague concept:

Moliere uses accepted ideas, lets his characters fight, the ideas lie still and unmolested. In a drama of ideas, on the other hand, the ideas are questioned, and it is by questioning... that the ideas become dramatic, for seldom or never is there drama without conflict.

What Mr. Bentley is saying, is that Moliere does not expand or amplify the fundamental ideas or truths in his drama, but builds his play entirely from the actions of his characters. The drama of ideas, on the other hand, is insight drama with its consequent psychological introspection and delineation of the play idea. The latter type of play is precisely the kind of drama that offers symbolism distinct interpretative

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<sup>9</sup> Constance Frick, The Dramatic Criticism of George Jean Nathan, Ithica, New York, 1943, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Bentley, The Modern Theatre, London 1948, 43.



advantages, for though the symbols personify, they are not static or arbitrary, and may contain in themselves the seed of insight which may be developed through conflict and action. There can be little doubt that O'Casey employed his symbols as one manipulates a marionette - by whim and predisposition. But O'Casey was not unaware of this need for the externalizing of symbols, for he wrote in The Flying Wasp:

I suppose the critics will be shocked to hear that no real character can be put in a play unless some of the reality is taken out of him through the heightening, widening, and deepening of the character by the dramatist who creates him.<sup>11</sup>

If O'Casey believed this, we must assume that the mood and tone of his plays, and not the symbolic elements, were to reveal the moral significance of his dramas. Thus each symbol and personification is, to him, not a single, complex entity, but is instead merely a facet or highlight that is reflected from a single idea or prejudice. Instead of the audience being compelled to the significance of the dramatic idea through the revelatory interaction of symbols, they are asked to accept the playwright's thesis from the rise of the first act curtain. This kind of drama may have its devotees and be welcomed by intellectuals who are not

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11 Sean O'Casey, The Flying Wasp, 119.

unwilling to be spectators at the dissection of the playwright's mind, but it is hardly the stuff that genuine theatre lovers will relish.

Although Yeats's later plays were trenchant with symbols and often obscure, his definition of a play in 1902, when the Abbey Theatre was just getting on its own two legs, is indeed sound:

The play that is to give them a quite natural pleasure should tell them either of their own life, or of that life of poetry where every man can see his own image, because there alone does human nature escape from arbitrary conditions.<sup>12</sup>

It has already been noted that the symbols or personifications used in the later plays of Sean O'Casey are not capable of exposing the play idea but are rather arbitrary figures lacking complexity and definition. They are vacuous, exceedingly simple types that have no motivation or existence except as they reveal the author's mood or preoccupation. In scrutinizing the uninspired predicament of the present-day theatre, Robert F. Jones<sup>13</sup>, found a lack of dramatic nourishment, and the following statement appears to condemn not only the symbolists, but O'Casey himself:

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted from A. E. Malone's, "The Coming of Age of the Irish Drama," Dublin Review, CLXXXI, July 1927, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Edmond Jones, The Dramatic Imagination, New York, 1941, 39.

We are hungry, and we are given a cook-book to eat instead of a meal. We expect to go on a journey, and we have to be satisfied with a map and a timetable.

In corroboration, George Jean Nathan, adds:

The measure of a good dramatist is to be found in the manner and means by which he delineates flux in character. The good dramatist maneuvers it internally; the bad dramatist, externally.<sup>14</sup>

It may be argued that symbolic representations in modern drama forms need not be expanded or amplified to show character and conflict so long as they dramatize the play theme or idea. This is no doubt true of certain genres, more particularly the expressionistic approach, but in the hands of playwrights less talented than Shaw or Toller, it has made for more obscure and more banal drama. A. Desmond Hawkins<sup>15</sup> believes that O'Casey's dramatic talents neither added to nor subtracted from the present status of expressionism:

His impulse is to conflict with the 'natural' tradition, but he appears to lack the requisite instruments at present. He is also in danger of collapsing into a pretentious pseudo-poetic drama based on a crude use of symbolism...

The expressionistic technique has declined until it reveals scarcely a murmur upon the present-day stage.

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14 George Jean Nathan, "Drama as a War Atrocity," American Mercury, VIII, November 1941, 618.

15 A. Desmond Hawkins, "The Poet in the Theatre," The Criterion, XIV, October 1934, 32.

When a play using elaborate symbolism does appear on the Broadway horizon, it is not surprising that a critic like George Jean Nathan calls it "symbolic delicatessen...which, unfortunately for the aspiring author, nobody could clearly decipher."<sup>16</sup> Realism is not yet outmoded, as the offerings of the present-day dramatic bills will attest. The dramatist of today as well as those of the future, will still find Goethe's appraisal of Kotzebue and his anti-romantic sentiment, pertinent:

...they are incapable of an easy, living representation; they strive after something beyond their powers, and for that reason I might call them forced talents.<sup>17</sup>

Sean O'Casey's entry into the expressionistic and symbolic was not an accident, but was the result of fomenting ambition: In The Flying Wasp, he wrote:

This rage for real, real life on the stage has taken all the life out of the drama. If everything is to be a fake exact imitation (for fake realism it can only be) where is the chance for the original and imaginative artist?...let us have the make-believe of the artist and the child in the theatre. Less of what the critics call 'life' and more of symbolism: for even in the most commonplace of realistic plays the symbol can never be absent...<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> George Jean Nathan, "Footnotes," Theatre Arts, XXXVII, February 1953, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret, translated by John Oxenford, Bohn ed., London, 1913.

<sup>18</sup> Sean O'Casey, The Flying Wasp, 123.

One can find no fault with O'Casey's attempts to expand the imaginative tether of modern drama; but to seize spurious dramatic themes of doubtful significance, and to plunge into the deceptively dramatic form of expressionism, has brought him only the blatant stripping of his own soul. In his later plays he abounds with attitudes and prejudices that can never achieve an emotional experience that perturbs the emotions of the playgoer, and though he may open the windows of his soul, he cannot dramatically communicate. Like the post World War I expressionists, O'Casey is in revolt against things as they are, but he appears to have no clear idea of what they should be replaced with. It is doubtful that if he possessed the ability to select appropriate insight symbols, he could properly objectify them.

The general principle that a drama should be objective cannot be denied. The dramatist, more than any other creator, must portray his characters as individuals in their own right, undisturbed by his personal feelings, passions and prejudices. Elder Alson<sup>19</sup> provides a simple but comprehensive rule for the delineation of symbols:

Anyone who wishes to invent true and powerful symbols will have, therefore, to study that

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<sup>19</sup> Elder Alson, "A Dialogue on Symbolism," Critics and Criticism, edited by R. S. Crane, Chicago, 1952, 586.

concept which he wishes to symbolize and determine its most striking and important attributes, that is, those which determine the conception and our emotions toward it; next, he will have to invent something which incorporates these attributes...

Inventiveness is clearly not the greatest of O'Casey's talents. Although his poetry has about it a robustness and vitality that invites comparison with the best of the Elizabethans, and though his ability to realistically depict a milieu cannot be denied, the powerful, realistic dramas of the Abbey Theatre days have seemingly encompassed the gamut of his playwrighting talents. Away from his material and working with strange tools, he cannot dig deep enough into the alien soil to find the core and substance of the material he wishes to dramatize. Of all the men of dramatic genius, William Butler Yeats, best understood the dramatic limitations of Sean O'Casey, and though he recognized the playwright's genius and extraordinary talent, he was clairvoyant enough to foresee the future of the Dublin-fleeing dramatist. In a letter to Lady Gregory, in which he gave the decision not to accept The Silver Tassie, he included this remark, which subsequent events have proven cogent:

I did not think it tactful to say in my letter that he has left his material here in Dublin

and will in all likelihood never find it anywhere else, because he cannot become a child again and grow up there.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Letter, William Butler Yeats to Lady Gregory, April 20, 1928.

## APPENDIX

LETTERS PUBLISHED IN THE IRISH STATESMAN,

9 JUNE 1928, CONCERNING

THE SILVER TASSIE

CONTROVERSY.

9 June 1928

The correspondence between Mr. Sean O'Casey and the directors of the Abbey Theatre will provide a topic for conversation, like to the widow's cruise of oil, in this, that it is not likely to give out. We print elsewhere the letters sent to us by Mr. O'Casey and by Dr. W. B. Yeats. The directorate of the Abbey Theatre did not think Mr. O'Casey's new play, The Silver Tassie, ought to be produced by them. Mr. O'Casey thinks it contains his best work. Whether the directors of the Abbey Theatre or the dramatist are right can only be determined by the production of the play at some theatre, or by its publication in book form. Until The Silver Tassie is performed or published, the wise will come to no conclusion. The directors of the Abbey have made their theatre one of the most famous in the world. Sean O'Casey has written two of the most moving and remarkable of contemporary plays. Who is to judge between them before the play is available for reference? But this will not prevent the most prodigious controversy before the play is known. The most exciting conversation often arises when there is complete ignorance. The talkers do not abhor a vacuum as nature does.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial, The Irish Statesman, Volume 10, June 9, 1928, 265.



CORRESPONDENCE

The Abbey Directors and Mr. Sean O'Casey

To the Editor of the Irish Statesman.

Dear Sir, -Questions are beginning to fall on top of me about the Abbey's production of The Silver Tassie which I find impossible to answer in toto absolutum questionarii, and to place before all who may be interested, the full circumstances surrounding the rejection of the play by the Abbey directorate. I shall be glad if you would kindly publish the enclosed correspondence.

If the material should take up too much space in one, then the letters could be spread over two issues of your journal.

The publication would, I'm sure, save me a lot of toil and trouble, fire-burn and cauldron bubble.

If they can't be published in full, then do not publish them at all, for no bread is as good as half a loaf. It will deliver the Abbey Theatre directorate, too, from pity pain which might make them reluctant to declare publicly their assurance of the poverty of my latest play, when they are affronted with my assurance that it is a fine one. -Yours sincerely,

Sean O'Casey

19 Woronzow Road, St. John's Wood,  
London, N.W. 8, May 30, 1928.

Dear Lady Gregory, -I enclose the O'Casey play, which I have read again - in fact, three times in all. The first act is typical O'Casey and very good, I think. The second act in the modern Russo-German manner is very fine, I think, difficult to do and get right, but not impossible, and should be very effective. I like the third and fourth acts much less; I don't think the mixture of the two manners - the realism of the first act and the unrealism of the second - succeeds, and the characters who were Dublin slum in the beginning of the play end by being nowhere. The last acts remind me very much of those first O'Casey's, "The Frost on the Flower," etc. I wonder will you agree at all with me. I'm glad that he is groping towards a new manner - he couldn't go on writing slum plays for ever and ever - but I wish the second half of his play was better. -

Yours,

Abbey Theatre, Dublin

L. R.

Dear Lady Gregory, - I have read Casey's play, and I did so without reading your opinion or Lennox's, and without knowing whether your verdict was favourable or otherwise. I dictated to George my opinion on it in the form of a letter to O'Casey which I enclose. I had meant to keep it until Lennox returned, and let Lennox send it on to O'Casey with a covering letter from myself. I hear now that Lennox may not return for another fortnight, and that seems to be too long to put the matter off, especially as O'Casey has told various journalists that he has sent the play to us and may go on doing so; it seems wrong to allow him to deceive himself. I wonder would you think it well to write a covering letter, enclosing mine, if you agree with it. I am afraid our refusal will be a very great blow to him, but if anybody can soften the blow you can. I did not think it tactful to say in my letter that he has left his material here in Dublin and will in all likelihood never find it anywhere else, because he cannot become a child again and grow up there. I did not say that to him, because I thought he might suspect me of exaggerating some of his faults in order to lure him back.

W. B. Yeats.

82 Merrion Square, Dublin, April 20th, 1928.

My dear Casey, -Your play was sent to me at Rapallo by some mistake of the Theatre's. It arrived just after I had left, and was returned from there to Dublin. I found it when I myself reached Dublin four days ago. Enclosed with it were the opinions of my fellow-directors but those opinions I shall not read until I have finished this letter; the letter, however, will not be posted unless their opinion concurs with mine. I had looked forward with great hope and excitement to reading your play, and not merely because of my admiration for your work, for I bore in mind that the Abbey owed its recent prosperity to you. If you had not brought us your plays just at that moment I doubt if it would now exist. I read the first act with admiration; I thought it was the best first act you had written, and told a friend that you had surpassed yourself. The next night I read the second and third acts, and to-night I have read the fourth. I am sad and discouraged. You have no subject. You were interested in the Irish civil war, and at every moment of those plays wrote out of your own amusement with life or your sense of its tragedy; you were excited, and we all caught your excitement; you were exasperated almost beyond endurance by what you had seen or heard as a man is by what happens under his window, and you

moved us as Swift moved his contemporaries. But you are not interested in the Great War; you never stood on its battlefields or walked its hospitals, and so write out of your opinions. You illustrate these opinions by a series of almost unrelated scenes as you might in a leading article; there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action, and your great power of the past has been the creation of some unique character who dominated all about him and was himself a main impulse in some action that filled the play from beginning to end. The mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you; it has refused to become mere background, and obtrudes itself upon the stage as so much dead wood that will not burn with the dramatic fire. Dramatic action is a fire that must burn up everything but itself; there should be no room in a play for anything that does not belong to it; the whole history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak. Among the things that dramatic action must burn up are the author's opinions; while he is writing he has no business to know anything that is not a portion of that action. Do you suppose for one moment that Shakespeare educated Hamlet and King Lear by telling them what he thought and believed: As I see it, Hamlet and Lear educated Shakespeare, and I have no doubt that in the process of that education he found out that he was an altogether different man to what he thought himself, and had altogether different beliefs. A dramatist can help his characters to educate him by thinking and studying everything that gives them the language they are groping for through his hands and eyes, but the control must be theirs, and that is what the ancient philosophers thought a poet or dramatist Daimon-possessed.

This is a hateful letter to write, or rather to dictate - I am dictating to my wife - and all the more so because I cannot advise you to amend the play. It is all too abstract, after the first act; the second act is an interesting technical experiment, but it is too long for the material; and after that there is nothing. I can imagine how you have toiled over this play. A good scenario writes itself; it puts words into the mouths of all the characters while we sleep, but in a bad scenario only miserable toil is exacted. I see nothing for it but a new theme, something you have found and no newspaper writer has found. What business have we with anything but the unique?

Put the dogmatism of this letter down to splenetic age and forgive it.

W. B. Yeats.  
82 Merrion Square, Dublin, April 20, 1928.

Saturday, April 28th. This just arrived this morning. I thought it best to put it in for you to see. - A.G.

Dear Lady Gregory, -It has just occurred to me that if you agree that we have no choice but to reject Casey's play, if Casey leaves the play in our hands, the most considerate thing for us to do is to suggest that he withdraws it. My letter gives an opinion, but does not absolutely reject. He could withdraw the play "for revisions," and let that be known to the press. He should say that he himself had become dissatisfied and had written to ask it back. If he disagrees with our opinion as to its merits he can wait a little and offer it to some London manager. If the London manager accepts, then our opinion of the play won't matter to him at all. On the other hand, if no London manager accepts it, or if he doesn't offer it there, he can keep it by him, revising or not revising as he pleases. I want to get out of the difficulty of the paragraphs saying that the play has been offered to us. I have not told anybody what I think of the play, and I will get Lennox not to give his opinion. You have perhaps already written to Casey, but even if you have I would like you to write making this suggestion.

W. B. Y.

82 Merrion Square, Dublin, April 25th, 1928.

Lennox Robinson, Esq.

Dear Mr. Robinson, -Lady Gregory has written in her kind way and has given me full, perfect and sufficient account of the Abbey Theatre Directorate's dislike of "The Silver Tassie".

The rejection of the play was not unexpected - I have said many times to some friends - had a bet about it, in fact - to my wife (curious word that for me to be using), and even to Barry Fitzgerald when he was here, that I thought that the play wouldn't be fondled by the Abbey.

Lady Gregory, in her kind way again, enclosed portions of a letter from W.B.Yeats which unfolds the suggestion that the directorate would be willing to allow me to "withdraw for revision, and let that be known to the Press, saying that he himself has become dissatisfied and had written to ask it back". This to save my dignity and

to deliver me from the curse of the Abbey's rejection when dealing with an English manager.

If W. B. Yeats had known me faintly as he thinks he knows me well, he wouldn't have wasted his time - and mine - making such a suggestion; I am too big for this sort of mean and petty shuffling, this lousy perversion of the truth. There is going to be no damned secrecy with me surrounding the Abbey's rejection of the play. Does he think that I would practice in my life the prevarication and wretchedness that I laugh at in my plays?

Since the play hasn't been accepted, it has been rejected, and let the middle course be cut for those to whom the world is a crawling Limbo.

Any journalist, Irish or English, who asks me about the Abbey production will be told the play has been refused by the Abbey because they thought the play a bad one, supplemented by me saying that I believe the play was refused because it was a good one.

A well-known English manager, who thinks the play a great one, has been considering a London production, and, hearing of a business meeting to arrange preliminary matters, I went along and not only told him of the Abbey's rejection, but showed him the entire correspondence received from the Abbey, for if the work be what I believe it to be, his rejection or the Abbey's rejection, couldn't take a gasp out of a single line of a fine play (he still thinks it a great play).

I shall be glad if you would return the typescript of the play to me as soon as possible. -Sincerely yours,

Sean O'Casey

19 Woronzow Road, St. John's Wood, N.W. 8.

Dear Lady Gregory, -Recent circumstances prevented me from writing before this. Thank you for your thoughtful telegram and very kind wishes.

I have, of course, received your own, the one from Mr. Yeats, and the copy of letter sent by Mr. Robinson to you. Of your criticism I can only say that I cannot agree with it, and I think you are mistaken.

I have written to Mr. Yeats telling him what I think of his, and of the criticism given by Mr. Robinson I can only say that the opinion of a critic that would give the Tailteann Festival first prize for drama to "The Passing" evokes no more than a passing hurried thought and - pass along, pass along.

I have read, too, Mr. Yeats' suggestion that I should ask to withdraw the play, telling the Press that I am dissatisfied with it (I am proud of it), and that I want to revise, etc., and I do not thank him for it. Does he take me to be such a dish of skimmed milk that I would do such a shuffling, lying thing as that?

I have already shown the letters to the London manager who is considering the production of the play here. When time permits - a few days - I am bringing them to Macmillan's, who can stop the publishing of the book if they think the criticism more important than the play. If they decide to go on, I shall ask them to publish the letters, with my reply, as a preface to the book.

There's no more to be said at present, except to send you my warm regards. -Yours as ever,

S. O'Casey.

19 Woronzow Road, St. John's Wood, N.W. 8.

Dear Mr. Yeats, -There seems to me to be no reason to comment upon whether you read my play in Rapallo or Dublin, or whether you read my play before or after reading your fellow-director's opinions, or whether the Abbey owed or did not owe its prosperity to me - these things do not matter, and so we'll hang them up on the stars.

And we'll send into exile for the present the "dogmatism and splenetic age", and have a look at the brood of opinions these have left behind them.

You say - and this is the motif throughout the intonation of your whole song - that "I am not interested in the Great War". Now, how do you know that I am not interested in the Great War? Perhaps because I never mentioned it to you. Your statement is to me an impudently ignorant one to make, for it happens that I was and am passionately and intensely interested in the Great War. Throughout its duration I felt and talked of nothing else; brooded, wondered, and was amazed. In Dublin I talked of the Great War with friends that came to see me, and with friends when I went to see them. I talked of the Great War and of its terrible consequences with Lady Gregory when I stayed in Coole. I have talked of the Great War with Doctor Pilger, now the cancer expert in Dublin who served as surgeon at the front. Only a week before I got your letter I talked of the Great War to a surgeon here. And yet you say I am not interested in the Great War. And now you will

tell me the name and give me the age and send me the address of the human being who having eyes to see, ears to hear, and hands to handle, was not interested in the Great War?

I'm afraid your statement (as far as I am concerned) is not only an ignorant one, but it is a silly statement, too.

You say "you never stood on its battlefields," Do you really mean that no one should or could write about or speak about a war because one has not stood on the battlefields? Were you serious when you dictated that - really serious, now? Was Shakespeare at Actium or Phillipi? Was G. B. Shaw in the boats with the French, or in the forts with the British when St. Joan and Dunois made the attack that relieved Orleans? And someone, I think, wrote a poem about Tir na nog who never took a header into the Land of Youth. And does war consist only of battlefields?

But I have walked some of the hospital wards. I have talked and walked and smoked and sung with the blue-suited wounded men fresh from the front. I've been with the armless, the legless, the blind, the gassed and the shell-shocked; one with a head bored by shrapnel who had to tack east and tack west when before he could reach the point he wished to get to; with one whose head rocked like a frantic moving pendulum. Did you know "Pantosser", and did you ever speak to him? Or watch his funny, terrible antics, or listen to the gurgle of his foolish thoughts? No? Ah, it's a pity you never saw or never spoke to "Pantosser". Or did you know Barney Fay, who got field punishment No. 1 for stealin' poulthry (an Estaminay cock, maybe) behind the trenches, in the rest camps, out in France? And does war consist only of hospital wards and battlefields?

You say: "You illustrate these opinions by a series of almost unrelated scenes as you might a leading article". I don't know very much about leading articles, though I may possibly have read them when I had the mind of a kid, so I don't quite get your meaning here. And do you know what you are thinking about when you talk of leading articles, or do you know what you are talking about when you think of leading articles? Surely to God, Mr. Yeats, you don't read leading articles!

I have pondered in my heart your expression that "the history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper," and I can find in it only the pretentious bigness of a pretentious phrase. I thank you, out of mere politeness, but I must refuse even to try to do it. That is exactly, in my opinion (there goes a cursed opinion again), what most of the Abbey dramatists are trying to do - building up, building up little worlds of wallpaper, and hiding striding life behind it all.

I'm afraid I can't make my mind mix with the sense of importance you give to "a dominating character". God forgive me, but it does sound as if you peeked and pined for a hero in the play. Now, is a dominating character more important than a play, or is a play more important than a dominating character? You say that "my power in the past has been the creation of a unique character that dominated all around him, and was a main impulse in some action that filled the play from beginning to end." In *The Silver Tassie* you have a unique work that dominates all the characters in the play. I remember talking to Lady Gregory about *The Plough and the Stars* before it was produced, and I remember her saying that *The Plough* mightn't be so popular as *Juno*, because there wasn't in the play a character so dominating and all-pervading as *Juno*, yet *The Plough* is a better work than *Juno*, and, in my opinion - an important one -. *The Silver Tassie*, because of, or in spite of, the lack of a dominating character, is a greater work than *The Plough and the Stars*. And so when I have created the very, very thing you are looking for - something unique - you shout out: "Take, oh, take this wine away, and, for God's sake, bring me a pot of small beer."

It is all very well and very easy to say that "dramatic action must burn up the author's opinions". The best way, and the only way, to do that is to burn up the author himself. What's the use of writing a play that's just as like a camel as a whale? And was there ever a play, worthy of the name of play, that did not contain one or two or three opinions of the author that wrote it? And the Abbey Theatre has produced plays that were packed skin-tight with the author's opinions - the plays of Shaw, for instance.

Whether Hamlet and Lear educated Shakespeare, or Shakespeare educated Hamlet and Lear, I don't know the hell, and I don't think you know either.

Your statement about "...psychological unity and unity of action...Dramatic action is a fire that must burn up everything but itself...the history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak...while an author is writing he has no business to know anything that isn't a part of the action..." are, to me, glib glib ghosts. It seems to me they have been made, and will continue to be spoken forever and ever by professors in schools for the culture and propagation of the drama. (I was nearly saying the Gospel) I have held these infants in my arms a thousand times and they are all the same - fat, lifeless, wrinkled things that give one a pain in his belly looking at them.



You say that after the first and second acts of "The Silver Tassie" there is...nothing. Really nothing? Nothing, nothing at all? Well, where there is nothing, where there is nothing - there is God.

Turning to your advice that I should ask for the play back; that I should tell the Press that I want to revise it, and so slip aside from the admonition of the Abbey Directorate, I refer you to what I have written already to Mr. Robinson.

I shall be glad for the return of the script of the play, and a formal note of its rejection. - Best personal wishes,

S. O'Casey.

19 Woronzow Road, St. John's Wood.

To the Editor of the Irish Statesman.

Dear Sir, -The letters of the Abbey Directors to Mr. Sean O'Casey and about Mr. Sean O'Casey were obviously private and should never have been published. However, The Observer, has decided otherwise, and I prefer a complete to an incomplete publication. I send you some additional passages and letters, including Dr. Starkie's opinion, which Mr. Sean O'Casey has not yet seen. - Yours faithfully,

W. B. Yeats

82 Merrion Square, Dublin.

June 4, 1928.

Copy of letter from W. B. Yeats to Sean O'Casey.

Dear O'Casey, -I have just had your letter. I write from the Abbey. Lady Gregory, Lennox Robinson, my wife and I are here for The Plough and the Stars - a packed enthusiastic house. Had my admiration for your genius been less my criticism had been less severe. I think that is true of Lady Gregory and Lennox Robinson also. -Yours,

May 4, 1928.

W. B. Yeats.

Copy of letter No. 2 from Sean O'Casey to W. B. Yeats.  
Dated November 5th 1928.

You seem, Mr. Yeats, to be getting beautifully worse; you astonish me more and more. There seem to be shallows in

you of which no one ever dreamed.

What have packed houses, enthusiastic (cheering, says Mr. Robinson) audiences for 'The Plough' got to do with your contention that 'The Silver Tassie' is a bad play?

Perhaps this thought is due, as a journalist might say, to your delightful sense of Irish humour. -

Farewell,

Sean O'Casey.

Dear W.B. - I have been in Spain for the past two months and when I returned I found Sean O'Casey's play waiting for me. I have read it several times very carefully, and I want to give you my opinion. In order to prepare my mind for 'The Silver Tassie' I read over again the three published plays of Sean O'Casey. The present play is a new departure: it is written around a great and noble idea. In 'The Plough' and 'The Stars', when we penetrate beneath the tragedy of Nora Clitheroe, Bessie and Fluther Good, we discover that the play is a pacifist one written against war. It is the poor who really suffer and are sacrificed in war. But this moral is dramatically compelling only because we have been cited and moved by the sufferings of those characters who came upon the stage and impressed their reality upon us. In 'The Silver Tassie' the characters seem to come from a shadow world; they are not beings of flesh and blood. I know Bessie Burgess and Mollser and I shall always remember their faces and their actions. I do not remember the characters of 'The Silver Tassie'. I feel that the author had a great idea at the back of his mind and fugitive symbols presented themselves to him, but he was not able to create, as he did before, living men and women. The play seems to me to decline act by act from the beginning. The first act is masterly because the author seemed still to be attached to the roofs of his native city. I visualize the scene of that first act in Dublin. The second act struck me as resembling the dream play in Toller's 'Masses and Men' [sic]. By means of original effects of production I can imagine such a scene with its weird verse-chanting making an appeal. The last acts seemed to me lacking in depth. The characters are fainter, and I feel as if the author was already tired of his creations. I feel that he has seen those hospitals of war and has suffered, but it is all so huge that it blurs his vision. Many visions, many ideas crowd into his mind, but

he is unable to make the synthesis and enclose them within the framework of drama. In spite of all this, I feel that the author is experimenting in a new world of drama; for this reason I feel strongly that the Abbey Theatre should produce the play. Sean O'Casey has given us so many fine works that we ought to leave the final decision with the audience that has laughed and wept with him. He is groping after a new drama outside the conventional stage; at any moment he may make a great discovery. -Yours sincerely,

Walter Starkie.

Botanic House, Lansdowne Road, 30th April 1928.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by William E. Wengert has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

June 8 '53  
Date

Patrick J. Casey  
Signature of Adviser