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Expressionism in Sean O' Casey's *The Silver Tassie*

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Abstract:

This article is concerned with Sean O' Casey's play *The Silver Tassie* as Expressionism and how far the backgrounds and the characters are expressionistically depicted in the play. O' Casey's work has a consistent unity, and his early drama signals a move beyond the limits of Naturalism, which further leads to his later more obviously experimental works. In this play O' Casey shows the Dublin characters have hardly more personalities than the openly expressionistic figures on the battlefield. The dominant male characters are defined purely in terms of physical vitality to provide the maximum contrast to the war-cripples. The women this play have concern in sending their men off to the slaughter of the First World War, and the maintenance money they will be paid by the government as dependents of soldiers on Active service.

Keywords: Working Class, Anti-War, Football, Soldiers, Dublin Tenement.

Introduction

Modern drama has belonged continuously to a period of radical experimentation in the arts. Modern plays echo not only dramatic and literary precursors, but also Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Friedrich Nietzsche. Ibsen, in giving his views on drama, did not go much beyond "obiter dicta" (Brandt xv). Chekhov's opinions about his drama can only be gathered in snippets. Beckett was a tight lipped in terms of theory as his lucky was loquacious in spouting his philosophy. The empirical tradition of English-speaking play wrights and thinkers has in general made them less theoretically articulate than their philosophically schooled French confreres, which is not to say that English-language drama has been consistently less rich and interesting than that of France. There are times when the output of theory outweighs the production of the material to be theorized about the second half of the twentieth century may well in retrospect be seen as such a time. In the modern period, playwrights like Henrik Ibsen and Strindberg discussed in their plays complex social issues. Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' reveals the playwright's social concern, especially the status of women in a patriarchal society. Bernard Shaw was the advocate of the problem play in England. He employed drama as a medium for social betterment. In the hands of John Galsworthy, drama became a powerful instrument for social criticism. The early decades of the 20th century witnessed the rise of poetic drama. This form was

experimented by Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, Sean O' Casey, T.S. Eliot, etc. Eliot's play *'Murder in the Cathedral'* showed the spirit of Greek Drama.

An important movement in early 20th-century drama was expressionism. Expressionist playwrights tried to convey the dehumanizing aspects of 20th-century technological society through such devices as minimal scenery, telegraphic dialogue, talking machines, and characters portrayed as types rather than individuals. Notable playwrights who wrote expressionist dramas include Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser (German), Karel Čapek (Czech), and Elmer Rice and Eugene O'Neill (American).

Expressionism is a German movement in literature and the other arts which was at its height between 1910 and 1925 that is in the period just before, during, and after World War I. It began under the influence of the Swedish dramatist Strindberg. Its chief precursors were artists and writers who had in various ways departed from realistic depictions of life and the world, by incorporating in their art visionary or powerfully emotional states of mind that are expressed and transmitted by means of distorted representations of the outer world. Expressionism itself was never "a concerted or well defined movement" (Abrams and Harpham 117). It can be said, however, that its central feature is a revolt against the artistic and literary tradition of realism, both in subject matter and in style. Drama was prominent and widely influential form of expressionist writers. Expressionism is allied to "surrealism and has influenced the theatre of the absurd" (Abrams and Harpham 117). According to Richard Samuel Expressionism is "to break through the narrowing limits of finite reality, as represented by a world in which even before the war they had begun to lose faith, led them to a craving for death, which they visualised as the gateway to the transcendental life" (132). German drama had an important influence on the American theatre. Eugene O' Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) projected, in a sequence of symbolic episodes. English playwrights failed to respond but some Irish writers took it more seriously. Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* (1929) was expressionistic in style. Sean O' Casey made the third act of *The Silver Tassie* (1929) one of the peak achievements of expressionist writing. *Within the Gates* (1933) was still inspired by expressionism. Even some of his later plays – the third act of *Red Roses for Me* (1942), or *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949) were touched by elements of expressionism.

Life and work of Sean O' Casey

Sean O' Casey, child of poverty and misery, was born in 1884. His birthplace and school was the slums and streets of Dublin. As a young child he sold newspapers, and at the age of twelve years taught himself to read. When he reached manhood he became one of those thousands in every city known as "general laborer" (Green 32). He welcomed whatever work came to hand, from breaking rocks on the roads to carrying great hods of brick and mortar on his strong shoulders. For a while he was a dock-worker, and later rose to be a builder's assistant. As a laborer he was ever anxious to improve the lot of his fellows.

O' Casey has had a hard life after the death of his father his mother found very difficult to bring the family up. His family life is in terms of "grand myth" (Atkinsonxx), like Joyce's "Ulysses" and, in some elusive manner, the old Testaments, as if his own life were a footnote to the mythology of mankind, part of the "sad, sweet silent music of humanity" (Atkinsonxx). To say that he was fortunate to his family life would be to imply that he was not primarily responsible for it. Family came first in his order of values.

His family life did not turn out to be as bountiful as they probably expected. They had hardly married before the angry controversy over *The Silver Tassie* broke out, and O' Casey was in serious financial trouble almost at once. But Eileen, an attractive woman with great strength and force of character, was equal to every crisis the family had to cope with for the rest of their lives. His characters are less interested in the political scene than busy with their own lives their love making, their money making, their health and their livelihood and the political upheavals, culminating often in machine gun fire, come only as an interruption to lives which are hard enough already without such an added burden. The women are at their "best in striving to keep their homes and menfolk safe in the midst of disaster; but the men are at their best when fighting for their ideals" (Boas 82). In 1913, as a member of the Irish Transport Workers' Union he helped lead them through a strike, wearing shoes that were frequently re-soled with ordinary cardboard. And three years later he fought with the Irish Citizens Army in the streets of Dublin. In connection with these disturbances he wrote two booklets, one *A History of the Irish Citizens Army*, and the other a pamphlet entitled *The Story of Thomas Ashe*. Thomas Ashe was a patriot in the revolt. Whenever he had a little free time he would go around to the Abbey Theatre and watches the production of their plays. Here it must have been that the desire to write for the stage was born, and no doubt his knowledge of what constitutes a play was obtained here. Henceforth his leisure hours were devoted to writing. It is said that the Abbey Theatre rejected eight of his dramas before finally accepting *The Shadow of a Gunman* for production. These refusals, however, were made always with encouraging criticisms, and O' Casey accepted them with profit. He continues to be best known for his early Dublin plays: *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923); *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). The successes of these works were of great benefit to the precarious finances of the National Theatre. These plays are called 'The Dublin Trilogy'.

The Silver Tassie

According to Raymond William *The Silver Tassie* (1928) is a serious experiment in a new form: "an extension of naturalism to what is presented as an expressionist crisis" (Christopher 257). In *The Silver Tassie*, O' Casey employs the same type characters-working-class Irish as he did in the Dublin trilogy but with an eye to introducing much neighborhood, with the other act (the second) set in France during the war the play as a whole attempts to show impact of the great war from this point of view the play focuses primarily on the character of Harry Heegan a young athletic man who is at least at the beginning of the play well known and respected for his physical prowess. As play opens Harry's parents (Mrs. Heegan and Sylvester),

family friends (Susie, who is in love with Harry and Sylvester's friend Simon), and neighbor (Mrs. Foran who is married to Teddy) are waiting for Harry to come back from a football match. So that he can go back to the front with Teddy and Harry friend Barney while they, wait Susie espouses the virtuous of religion (with Sylvester noting that Susie espouses such things because Harry does not return her love), and then Teddy comes in and threatens to break apart much of the Foran home he believes his wife is cheating on him in fact he his wife and breaks their wedding bowl (which is among Mrs. Foran's most prized possessions). Harry then comes back triumphantly with a crowd of people he has just scored the winning goal to win the cup (otherwise known as the Silver Tassies). He is an open hearted primitive, an instinctive hero who glories in the joy of his uninhibited emotions and the vigour of his powerful limbs. His girlfriend Jessie and his best friend Barney are part of the crowd Harry talks about the game with all the pride and exuberance of youth, they sing the traditional song 'The Silver Tassie' and then Harry, Barney and Teddy go back to join their outfit, with many of the towns people accompanying them triumphantly.

The second act takes place in France into the no-man's land of the war zone. There is a violence change of technique to parallel the violent change of mood from comic reality to tragic surrealist. O' Casey creates the shock of the war in a horrible transfiguration scene. In the second act of *The Plough and the Stars* she had been confronted with a somewhat similar problem but he solved by using off-stage devices, a huge shadowy figure and a loudspeaker voice to blare out exhortations of bloodshed and later in that plays he had a number of characters rush in from the barricades to described the gory street-fighting. But these methods were now too limited for his new play. Instead of telling the audience through exposition that war is hell, he had found in the techniques of expression a way of showing then a symbolic night mare of that hell, a new method of developing the tortured figure that the once herculean Harry has become in the last two acts. Barney is tied to a gun wheel opposite a crucifix by a broken-down monastery now used as a red cross station while the couches stands in the middle of the scene raised up by a ramp and near a larger cannon, the rest of the characters enter after the couches gives his first oration. The soldiers describe their life, they are cold miserable and tired, and they wonder why they are there. They seem to see no reason for why they are fighting this war, as Barney says, "We're here because we're here because we're here, because we're here" (ST200). While a civilian visitor enters he is excited by the war and says he will be giving a lecture later on he appears to many as a pompous idiot a Staff-Wallah comes occasionally to give general orders the group. Just before the energy break through at the end of all the soldiers sing their songs to God and the Gun, "we believe in God and we believe in thee" (ST215) and it is the wounded on the stretchers, the mutilated and dying, who remind us that, "the image God hath made" (215) and the war is destroying is the image power and joy which Harry Hengan symbolized in the first act.

In the third act, the action return to Ireland where the scene is now a local hospital Simon and Sylvester are there as patients, but most of the patients are soldiers. Harry was wounded in the spine and it's confined to a wheel chair paralyzed from the waist down. Teddy was blinded.

Susie Monica has become a nurse but her patients are little more than bed numbers to her and she releases her repression in love games with the young doctor. The fickle Jessie Taite has abandoned the invalid Harry for the healthy Barney who has now won Harry's girl as well as the Victoria Cross for carrying him out of the line of fire. Harry's mother now finds great comfort in the knowledge that she will get the maximum disability allowance. Harry calls out Jessie but she refuses to see him. Barney only comes in after everybody leaves nothing flatly that he's bringing Harry's ukulele and "flowers from Jessie's" (ST238). The act III ends with the catholic sisters of the convent related to the hospital singing the salve Regina and Harry praying to God to "give a poor devil chance" (ST 239).

The fourth act is set at the Avondale football club (for which Harry won the trophy) at a class's celebration the winning of *The Silver Tessie*. Harry has not gained the use of his legs and will now spend the rest of his life in a wheel chair. All the people from the first act are there at the dance. Harry has been following Jessie and Barney around dance and Jessie and Barney have been trying in vain to get rid of him. Harry is open in his bitterness about his life and the way other treat him the others treat him. The others feel distinctly uncomfortable around Harry and feel he shouldn't be at the dance. Most of them treat Harry with pity. Jessie is torn between pity and irritation. While Barney is just tired of dealing with Harry, Harry starts play when the balloons are released and ever body else goes to watch them, leaving Harry to finish song by himself. Jessie and Barney go off to find a secluded place to make love. Barney has stripped off the top half of Jessie's dress when Harry finds them. Harry reminds Barney that he came back only because Barney told him to think of Jessie and then Harry call Jessie a whore. Barney then starts a fight with Harry at which point Jessie gets other to help stop the fight. Surgeon Maxwell tells Harry to go home, which Mrs. Heegan suggests that Harry had spent all the money she should have received (which in reality Harry's money) on Jessie. Teddy who has taken his plight on one calmly notes that they cannot do anything about the past and that they should take the future as best as they know now. Harry then agrees with Teddy and they leave. The group agrees that war is horrible, and the people will be hurt and killed, but suggest that everyone else must go on with life. The play is an aggressive mixture of the symbolic and the realistic makes the authors plea for peace both uncomfortably moralistic and warmly human. As an expressionistic experiment "it is more than interesting; as a work of dramatic art it is a questionable success" (Styan123).

Expressionistic technique in *The Silver Tassie*

In *Silver Tassie*, the Croucher's mangled version of Ezekiel connects religion to war very directly. Also God is mentioned seven times "God of the miracle, give a poor devil a chance!" and in the end of the play "Oh God" (ST 95). It shows the scandalous collusion of many Christians in such a destructive enterprise. In act II the wounded soldiers repeated verse shows the reality attack of the Christian officials, "And we show man's wonderful work, well done, To image God hath made, made, made" (ST48), which shows the proclamation for Christianity and cause such suffering. The spirit of fighting in God's name has not changed in the twentieth

century, man has just become capable of slaying greater numbers with less physical effort. Religion seems to permeate the entire work. Susie talks about religion through chant-like statements while she is polishing Harry's bayonet will to and she tends to enfeeble the will to live. We also hear religion groups singing a Kyrie behind the Croucher at beginning of Act II and a Salve Regina behind Harry at the end of Act IV. O' Casey's most stylized character Croucher's prophecy shows the connection between religious ritual and War. Croucher's appearance and his hands those of a skeleton and his dry bones shows the metaphor in his opening lines. Through his appearance and the rhythm of the Biblical chant turns religion back upon itself. The church too asking pardon for taking part in the War and Croucher's prophecy is not instigated by the prophet himself but by the vengeful as well as omnipotent Old Testament God. Later Harry and Teddy are lamenting their injuries and invoke the name of the lord, "oh God, who took away my strength give me back my strength" and Teddy say "oh God, who took way my sight, give me back sight" (ST 94). There is a religious cry at both the end of the spectrum. Though He is both creator and destroyer and therefore ambiguous in his nature. Because the injuries were sustained in battle, God will not heal their injuries.

But Harry seems to believe that, although God is a benevolent being. He has turned his back him because of his war injuries. Harry is truly imploring God to heal his legs to what they were like before the battle, so that he can have the sort of life he had before the war. Harry remains injured and Harry feels the need to remind God that, just because he is crippled does not mean that he should be ignored or avoided, "Dear God this crippled form is still your child. Dear mother, this helpless thing is still your son" (ST 101). Winifred Smith aptly comments, "O' Casey, like Werfel, though less romantically, has expressed the feelings of many of his generation that the cosmic rhythm of destruction and creation is not only external but essentially amoral" (272-3).

God has seen both the good and evil role in war, at least from the point of view of people. One may believe that God, after having seen mankind start the war, decided that he wanted nothing to do with it and therefore forswore any part of it. Therefore religion had a part in the war. O' Casey's use of Harry's character gets its dramatic importance and mystification of Harry. His speech seems to be unreal, when he converse with Teddy in the linguistic rhythm of King James Bible. But when he pleads it shows him at his most real. Though every character fails to understand his need to be treated as simply a wounded man, he objectively prays. O' Casey sees nothing heroic in war, and wishes to emphasis that "one who in civil life was on individual is in a war of such magnitude reduced to a number" (Covasjee 51). He is away from all pain and hardship later he is a man full of vitality and hope is suddenly reduced to raging. His prays echoes the pathos a wounded War veteran's situation. It has been part of Harry Heegan's image in the play shows, "even in his wheel chair, an exultation over the miseries of life , a defiance of the oppressive elements in modern society, an assertion of the individual spirit bigotry in all its shapes. To represent this spirit as movement and dance was just permissible in fantasy but it was wholly out of keeping with realism"(Styan 126). Sylvester and Simon accuse

Susie of trying to mangle religion into their emotions. She is further attacked for her persecuting, tambourine theology. She is further accused of trying to “batter religion into a man”, to claw people into the kingdom of heaven, also pushing the kingdom of God into a reservation of a few yards. But she is enforcing scorching gospel to people Mrs. Foran reinforces this attitude in referring to Susie “the gospel gunner” (ST 17), this means the gospel and the gun are symbolic of emotional and physical violence inflicted on ordinary people by organized religion. Later in the end of the play Susie is pronounced because she has not only managed to disintensify her soul hunting. She has become less neurotic; instead she flings herself with reckless abandon into the arms of Sergeant Maxwell for a task of life.

The abrupt shift in stage technique from the bitter comic realism of the first act to the surrealistic expressionism of the second act parallels, in allegorical form, the abrupt annihilation of familiar values demanded by war. War negates the affirmation of individual life that the fundamental assumption of religion faith, it glorifies the reduction of life to death. The religion implication of this theme were recognized by Robert Speight are of the few reviewers to defend the play at the time of its Dublin production “O’Casey had seen into the heart of the horror of war, and wrenched out its dreadful secret that the co-heirs with Christ destroy are another in the sight of the son of man” (276). The expression of life and exuberance through dance is a characteristic of O’ Casey’s subsequent writing, stresses the exclusion of wounded from the spontaneous rhythms of the living, who uncaringly celebrate their own vigour. In the second act of the *Tassie*, O’ Casey shows the crucified Christ, half detached from his cross and leaning in supplication towards the figure of the virgin, emerges that the Christianity is beleaguered by the War and who seeks comfort in soldiers returns for their twelve hour, and they immediately surrounded by the real fire, and their physical necessity is more important than the spiritual fire. But when the rain falls, the soldiers complain of discomfort and fatigue, and nobody appears to comfort them or to give any real aid or shelter. O’ Casey reintroduces expressionistic chanting into this largely realistic act by means of Harry’s symbolic drinking of wine. His toast echoes the consecration of the mars, “Red wine, red wine like the faint remembrance of the fires in France... the blood that was shed for you and for many for the commission of sin!” (ST 234) .

According to George Walter Bishop remarks that “he still feel he has not yet met these characters which he says are ‘artificial’ which, to you and me are so distressingly real” (38). The reality of the play we could see in the last act, when Susie account of their tragedy, “Teddy Foran and Harry Heegan have gone to live their own way in another world [...]. It is the misfortune of the war” (ST 248) because war or injustice constitutes part of the unchanging nature of reality. This understanding of misfortune had been anticipated in Barney’s garbled recollection of the ending of a prayer in the old Latin mass. “Per omnia saecula Saeculorum” which has been translated to read something like, “from century to century, or for ever and ever” (ST 212). On a larger cosmic space, the benign and malign forces, tragedy and comedy exist side by side.

Also we could see Barney’s “lusty lordship” Over Jessie, “mid sounds of merriment and excitement” erupts and is exacted in his ripping of her “shoulder strap so that her dress leaves her

shoulders and bosom base” (ST 245). A careful and close shifting of character, object and perspectives, enlarges their vision and deepens their knowledge of reality. Charles Morgan states that the play takes “wings from naturalistic earth succeed” (89). *The Silver Tassie* shows the psychological impact of the War on the Dubliners, Mrs. Foran’s liberation, Mrs. Heegan’s greed, and Teddy’s suspicion and rage. O’ Casey’s realism in the second is transformed in to expressionism on War and man as archetypes rather than on the suffering of the individual characters. The themes where O’ Casey uses remains consistent, and the combination of theatrical techniques, he uses to illuminate and shows the evolution of his unique stylistic contribution to world drama. Also the dramatic technique in the *The Silver Tassie* resembles like that of his early plays. Sylvester and Simon argue, where Mrs. Foran runs quickly in and then comes to the fire, pushing so as to disturb the two men. The same kind of activity we could see in *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Star* of the tenement community of both privacy and interdependency in the play. Hence, the fire is symbolic value which extends the significance of the action. The two men are pushed from their idle complacency by sudden and mildly violent activity. O’ Casey states visually that the order and certainty of their world is ephemeral. The comic telephone scene of Sylvester and Simons shows that the older generation’s world has been shattered by the intrusion of War and by the inevitable progress of civilization. Hogan points, “it is certainly one of O’ Casey’s finest touches” (68). In O Casey’s career he declared in the *New York Times* 1958 that a play should be “a part of life” and that it had to “live in its own right” (Styan 128). So it appears that the end of his life he was still justifying his decision to write the play as he did, and justify the endless rear guard action of the expressionist against the establishment.

Conclusion

We could see in second act of *The Silver Tassie* there is abrupt leap in to expressionistic statement. Denis Johnson noted that “Expressionism in the basically realistic early plays” (Hogan 76-95). The expressionistic patterns of dialogue serve the purpose of keeping the audience off balance so that it cannot fully sympathize with the characters as it had been able to do in the tenement plays. In Harry’s case, the inability to control his own image and fate are partly because of the myth-making community and partly because of the authorities that dictate his actions. Harry’s lamentation echoes man’s manipulation of religion is indicted, not the actual precepts of the faith. O’ Casey has produced the image of modern men as puppet. O’ Casey vision of life is that it is ongoing, and while the politicians, the Church and the gunman continuously excess in the plays. According to him we must find and Cherish those moment of merriments, a lament in one ear. Perhaps, he once said, but always a song in the other. The plays denounce the hypocrisy of nationalism, religion and realism to expressionism.

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