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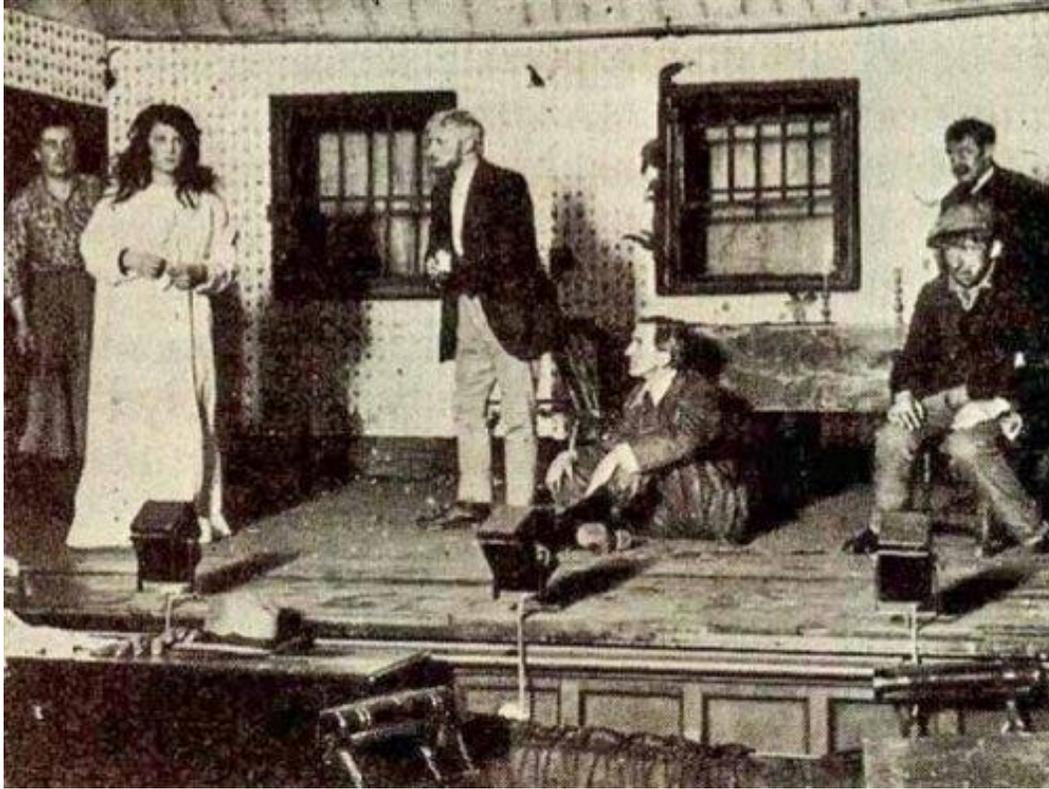
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The Plough and the Stars, Abbey Theatre, 1926

## **“O’Casey vs. Sheehy-Skeffington: Tragicomedy in *The Plough and the Stars* and the Feminist Protest”**

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The art of Sean O’Casey is neither tragedy nor comedy, but combines these two genres in a “reconciliation of opposing forms.” Scenes of “bawdy comedy precede or follow, or even merge with, scenes of deeply moving tragedy,” while the “ordinary rituals of life are presented through an extraordinary metaphorical language,” and “realistic, historical themes are reinforced through non-realistic modes such as farce, melodrama, satire, and song” (Krause 47-48). So wrote O’Casey’s biographer, David Krause, in 1960, and it remains an apt description of the generic tensions that make O’Casey’s drama so compelling. O’Casey’s plays have been termed naturalistic because they portray in uncompromisingly realistic terms lower-class Dublin tenement-dwellers, their poverty, alcoholism, brutality, and sexuality. Naturalist writers, however, tend to be short on humor, and O’Casey, like his countryman James Joyce, did not regard life through the glasses of either tragic angst or high-flown idealism. Rather, O’Casey interpolated the drama of human suffering with the irrepressible endurance of laughter and song – and in the Irish War of Independence and Civil War, ignited by the Easter Rising, he found plenty of tragedy worthy of his satiric muse. While O’Casey’s undermining of the sacrificial heroism and blood rhetoric which characterized the Irish bid for independence outraged many

Dubliners who knew the martyrs personally, and had risked their own lives and lost loved ones, its purpose was to direct attention away from an ideal to the real social ills left behind by war.

Dark humor and anti-heroic characterization mark much of the literature following World War I, challenging the values and perceptions of readers or audience by conflating “the horrifying and the humorous” (Colletta 2). Dark humor shares the moral scourge of social satire but lacks its ameliorating purpose, because, representing a fractured society without any clear moral norms, it “abandons any hope of understanding the world” (6). Increasingly dark tragicomic techniques link O’Casey’s three plays known as the “Dublin trilogy,” performed at the Abbey Theatre: *The Shadow of a Gunman* in 1923, *Juno and the Paycock* in 1925, and the *Plough and the Stars* in 1926. These three plays are all essentially pacifist, portraying ironically the historical times when war and personal sacrifice were necessarily glorified. The main characters of these plays are not the “National heroes actually engaged in fighting but the non-combatants in a city under military siege, a tragic experience which ha[d] by mid-twentieth century become terrifyingly familiar to too many people in all parts of the world” (Krause 66).

O’Casey’s urban iconography portrays Dublin during the crucial years 1915-1924, from *The Shadow of a Gunman*, set in 1920 during the guerilla warfare between the insurgent Irish Republican Army and the British “Black and Tans,” to *Juno and the Paycock* set in 1922 during the Civil War between the Pro-Treaty group supporting the Free State and the die-hard Anti-Treatiers, and concluding with *The Plough and the Stars* which provides a backward glance to 1916, ironizing the ideals of Patrick Pearse’s “blood rhetoric” that helped inspire the iconic insurrection. In the first play the “conflict arises when a poet and a pedlar inadvertently become involved in the war”; in the second play “a whole family is caught in the cross-fire” of a divided people, and the third play ends with the poor trapped in their tenements by a war that engulfs the city in destruction (Krause 66).

The pedlar in *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Seumas Shields, understands the fractured world in which the people are trapped. A “blustering, amiable coward” who resorts to the safety of his bed whenever trouble comes, Seumas nevertheless has good reasons for not becoming involved in the war, since he abandoned the Irish Republican movement when he saw “fanatical nationalism and the terror of indiscriminate bloodshed” begin to destroy the very people it was intended to save (Krause 67). Seumas makes this point in a speech that expresses O’Casey’s intolerance for the heroic rhetoric of war, and links all three plays of the Dublin trilogy:

Seumas: It’s the civilians who suffer; when there’s an ambush they don’t know where to run. Shot in the back to save the British empire, an’ shot in the breast to save the soul of Ireland. I’m a Nationalist meself, right enough . . . I believe in the freedom of Ireland, an’ that England has no right to be here, but I draw the line when I hear the gunmen blowin’ about dyin’ for the people, when it’s the people who are dyin’ for the gunmen! (39-40)

For Seumas, as for the women in O’Casey’s next two plays, Juno Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* and Nora Clitheroe in *The Plough and the Stars*, “life is more sacred than patriotic slogans,” and human realities are more meaningful than ideological abstractions, particularly when “in the name of national honour the revolution devours its own children” (Krause 68). When Juno Boyle’s son, Johnny, who was crippled in the Easter Rising and lost an arm in the

War of Independence, boasts, "I'd do it agen, ma, I'd do it agen; for a principle's a principle," Juno counters by responding: "Ah, you lost your best principle, me boy, when you lost your arm; them's the only sort of principles that's any good to a workin' man" (214). Juno has already taken this same uncompromising stance against her daughter, Mary, who has joined a strike to support a fellow worker with the justification that "a principle's a principle," to which Juno responds: "Yis; and when I go into oul' Murphy's tomorrow, an' he gets to know that, instead o' payin' all, I'm goin' to borry more, what'll he say when I tell him a principle's a principle?" (200). This is more complex than the mere representation of a housewife's material cares. Juno sees life in terms of nurturance over conflict – "bread on the table and love in the heart are the only realities that have any meaning for her," as Krause puts it (69). When Johnny cries, "I wish to God a bullet or a bomb had whipped me ou' o' this long ago!" his mother responds in words similar to Seumus Shield's claim in the earlier play: "If you don't whisht, Johnny, you'll drive me mad. Who has kep' th' home together for the past few years – only me? An' who'll have to bear the biggest part o' this throuble but me?" (240).

Six decades later in the 1980s feminists would call this "Maternal Thinking," from Sara Ruddick's analysis of how the practice of mothering culturally assigned to women over millennia has engendered a nurturing ethos that is fundamentally opposed to war. The mother, for whom the preservation and growth of the child is the paramount concern, develops an attitude of what Ruddick called "holding," an essentially preservative attitude of "keeping" rather than questing, of "conserving the fragile, of maintaining whatever is at hand and necessary to the child's life" (Donovan 103). Following the French philosopher Simone Weil and the Anglo-Irish philosophical writer Iris Murdoch, Ruddick calls this an "ethic of humility" that "accepts not only the facts of damage and death, but also the facts of the independent and uncontrollable, developing . . . lives it seeks to preserve," which is exemplified by Juno Boyle's lament for her dead son as well as her stand against her husband in order to support her daughter, who is pregnant out of wedlock at the end of the play (qtd. in Donovan 103).

Seeming again to exemplify this maternal ethos, O'Casey's third play, *The Plough and the Stars*, was dedicated, as he wrote, "To the gay laugh of my mother at the gate of the grave" (149). Subtitled "A Tragedy in Four Acts," it is the darkest of the three plays, ironically, since it was written about the initial inspirational event, the Easter Rising – but it was written from the hindsight of the War of Independence, the Civil War, and the social and economic shambles in which Ireland was left in 1924. Ironic also is the fact that the play commemorating the Easter Rising was sharply critical of it, so much so that it engendered public protests as vehement as those caused by Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* in 1907. However, the protesters this time were predominantly women, ironic again because the play was being lauded as "a woman's play," the "tragedy of the women" by the *Irish Times* (Lowry 21-23). In a final layer of irony, the protesters being mostly women was Lady Gregory's primary reason for dismissing and deriding them, as she wrote in her journal: "In *Playboy* time our opponents were men. They had a definite objective . . . These disturbers were almost all women who have made . . . a habit of . . . the excitement" (Lowry 54).

Act 1 starkly presents the gender conflict at the heart of the ideology of blood sacrifice through the disintegrating marriage of Nora and Jack Clitheroe. Nora makes it clear that her chief rival for her husband's attention is the Citizens Army: "When we were courtin' . . . you'd say,

‘Oh, to hell with meetin’s, an; that you felt lonely in cheerin’ crowds when I was absent. An’ we weren’t a month married when you . . . couldn’t keep away from them” (172). She finally woos Jack into singing a love song for her, wrapping her arms around him and kissing him, when Captain Brennan shows up at the door with “a message from General Jim Connolly” (176). Jack’s dream has come true: he has been promoted to Commandant and is ordered to “take command of the eighth battalion of the ICA” (176). Nora has to admit to burning the General’s earlier letter, and she sets herself defiantly against the call to war: “Is General Connolly an’ th’ Citizen Army goin’ to be your only care? Is your home goin’ to be only a place to rest in? Am I goin’ to be only somethin’ to provide merry-makin’ at night for you? . . .” As Act 1 ends she is left behind with Mollser, a girl dying of consumption, who asks plaintively, reinforcing the point: “Is there anybody goin’, Mrs. Clitheroe, with a titther o’ sense?” (180).

Thus O’Casey ironizes Yeats’s 1902 play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, reflecting it in a mirror very darkly. Set in a cottage at the time of the 1798 rebellion, this play, co-written with Lady Gregory, was immediately “enshrined as the exemplary nationalist play.” It “stages two conflicting narratives of Irish womanhood,” personifying as female both the call to fight for Ireland’s freedom and the familial ties that bind men (Quinn 429). The young hero, Micheal Gillane, about to marry Delia, a well-dowered bride, is lured away from hearth and home by the mythical image of Ireland, the “The Poor Old Woman” (originally played with magnificent haunting presence by Maud Gonne). She beckons Micheal with “the hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house” (9). It is clear that this is a sacrificial paradigm, not only because the 1798 rebellion was a debacle resulting in 20 to 50,000 dead and the martyrdom of Wolfe Tone, but also because as she repeatedly states, “They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid” by being immortalized in public memory (10). “Two forms of continuity are opposed,” writes critic Antoinette Quinn, “continuity in the corporeal dimension expressed through reproduction and inheritance; [and] continuity at the ideological level” of the nation-state, which wins out, leaving Micheal’s mother and childless bride-to-be unfulfilled when he breaks away from Delia’s arms to follow the old woman’s call (429). “*Cathleen ni Houlihan*, subordinated the interests of women to a sacrificial paradigm of male patriotism” (430), so much so that Yeats worried at the end of his life about the effect of the play on the martyrs of the Rising in his 1939 poem, “The Man and the Echo”: “I lie awake night after night / And never get the answers right. / Did that play of mine / Send out certain men the English shot?”

O’Casey challenges this powerful nationalistic archetype of Ireland as vampiric woman calling men to save their nation at the expense of their lives through Juno Boyle, who defies her husband at the end of *Juno and the Paycock* to ensure “continuity in the corporeal dimension” through supporting her daughter and unborn grandchild. As critic Ronan McDonald writes, “While there are significant differences between these three plays, each seems to indict political rhetoric as the enemy of pity, kindness and common sense, the totem of which is ‘motherhood’.” O’Casey debunks the mythology of Mother Ireland, who sends her sons out to die for the recovery of her four green fields, replacing it with images of real suffering mothers, of families torn apart by men drunk on ineffable dreams of political utopia” (137).

However, *The Plough and the Stars* is a much darker play than *Juno and the Paycock*, and Nora Clitheroe, despite her opposition to war, is no heroic mother. Her cloying, highly

sexualized clinging to her husband shames him as she seeks for him at the barricades, crying hysterically, "My Jack will be killed; my Jack will be killed . . . he is to be butchered as a sacrifice to the dead!" (207). Ultimately her gender mandate is pitted hopelessly against his: she cannot be a wife or mother without him, but he cannot be a man without dying for his country. In Act 3 he breaks Nora's hold on him and pushes her away to return to battle, just as in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* Michael abandons Delia in order to follow the image of Ireland into the failed rising of 1798. Act 3 ends in a chilling tragicomic conflation of the "horrific and the humorous" as O'Casey splices the offstage screams of Nora enduring a miscarriage with the wild, drunken singing of the carpenter, Fluther Good, returning from looting a pub, with a jug of whiskey and dressed in a "woman's vivid blue hat" (223). Instead of exemplifying the protective, nurturing ethos of maternal thinking like Juno, Nora herself becomes a vampirish madwoman, ultimately dragging even Bessie Burgess, a well-meaning neighbor who is trying to protect her, to her death (209).

Throughout *The Plough and the Stars*, the main characters – all neighbors in a tenement building – are constantly bickering, arguing, fighting: man vs. woman; youth vs. age; Protestant vs. Catholic; Socialist vs. Nationalist. They represent a fractured, fractious society as O'Casey predicts the civil strife to come. Comedy comes into play through the burlesque battling of these clownish characters, such as bantam-weight old Uncle Peter, duded up in the frilled shirt and gold braid of his Foresters' uniform, going head-to-head against The Covey, a pretentious young Marxist full of "th' Relation 'o Value to th' Cost o' Production" (165). In Act 2 the Protestant Bessie Burgess, aka "th' right oul' Orange bitch!" (206), accuses Catholics of abandoning "all th' poor Tommies, an' with them me own son, dhrenched in water an' soaked in blood, gropin' their way to a shatterin' death, in a shower of shells!" (189), while Mrs. Grogan dumps her baby on Peter, in order to "plunge out into the centre of the floor in a wild tempest of hysterical rage" to fight with Bessie (193). The fate of this baby, abandoned by Peter on the barroom floor, foreshadows the tragic deaths of children to come, Nora's baby and the little girl Mollser, in O'Casey's condemnation of Irish society's abandonment of the maternal ethos.

Into this melee, in an expressionist use of setting and sound, O'Casey shows a silhouetted figure through the window of the pub speaking to the crowd outside in direct quotations taken from three speeches or articles by Patrick Pearse, the first from 1913 entitled, "The Coming Revolution," in which Pearse criticizes the Gaelic League as "a spent force." Cultural nationalism, he argues, has served its purpose, but now "nationhood is not achieved otherwise than in arms," so "We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing" . . . For two other "Voice of the Man" speeches O'Casey quotes from a 1915 article, "Peace and the Gael," in which Pearse glorifies World War I, again in the language of blood-sacrifice: "It is good for the world that such things should be done. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields . . ." And finally O'Casey quotes from Pearse's graveside panegyric for O'Donovan Rossa on August 1, 1915, commemorating the "Fenian dead." With each speech O'Casey shows in his characters' passionate reactions how such powerful rhetoric galvanizes people to fight for a cause, but he also ironizes the causes and effects of war in the characters' buffoonish battling. Furthermore, he has the temerity to counter Pearse's rhetoric with that of the lowest of the low: a prostitute, Rosie

Redmond, and her plight – for how can she make a living when “They’re all thinkin’ of higher things than a girl’s garters” (228).

No wonder it was Act 2 that raised, as O’Casey put it, “a whirlwind in Dublin” of protesting women. However, it would be incorrect to equate O’Casey’s elevation of an anti-war maternal ethos with a feminist point of view, because he was still defining woman solely by her physical functions of sexuality and maternity. He was still working within the patriarchal binary of bodily mothers of Ireland vs. idealized Mother Ireland. His work represents a transgressive discourse more in relation to class than to gender. It is instructive in that regard to note that the loudest voice protesting O’Casey’s play was that of Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, Ireland’s greatest feminist activist.

Hannah exemplified the turn-of-the-century “New Woman” by becoming college educated and receiving an MA in French and German in 1902. She worked as a teacher and married Francis Skeffington in 1903, also a feminist, and immortalized in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as MacCann, a zealous college student soliciting signatures for his petition “*Per pax universalis*” (211). In 1908, Hannah and Francis founded the Irish Women’s Franchise League, a militant suffrage organization. Like O’Casey, a friend of James Connolly, Hannah founded the Irish Women’s Worker’s Union. During the 1913 Lockout, she ran a soup kitchen which fed the strikers. Encouraged by the Proclamation of the Irish Republic’s guarantee of “equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens” she supported the rebels during the Easter Rising, bringing food and supplies to the GPO. Then, on Monday night Francis Sheehy Skeffington was out on the streets of Dublin quixotically trying to control the looting when he was arrested with two journalists and held without charge by the British army. On Wednesday morning, all three were shot.

One can only imagine Hannah’s feelings as she sat in the Abbey Theatre watching O’Casey’s dramatization in Act 3 of the very looting that had led to her husband’s murder, portrayed in his ironic, irreverent tragicomic mode. British gunboats are shelling the city and the streets are a battlefield: “th’ Tommies is sthretched in heaps around Nelson’s Pillar . . . an’ O’Connell Street is nearly covered by pools o’ blood” (205). Peter’s report that Pearse has read the Proclamation “Declarin’ an Irish Republic,” meets with no more enthusiasm than Mrs. Grogan’s, “God bless us, what’s goin’ to be th’ end of it all!” while the characters are braving bullets only to grab whatever goods they can. Bessie and Mrs. Grogan are soon battling over who has the right to use the pram for carrying loot, and the absurdity of this catfight between two harridans over the jurisdiction of the pram, again deflates the heroism of war. Although Hannah didn’t stay long enough in the theatre to see it, Act 4 ends with an even darker image: Bessie has been shot; Nora is mad; Fluther and the other remaining men have been taken into custody, and two British soldiers sit in the empty tenement room drinking tea.

The play had opened on Monday, 28 February 1926, to a packed house and a generally positive reception. For three nights it was a sold-out success, when suddenly on Thursday, “the Abbey exploded. During Act II, the audience began to hiss, boo, and heckle, drowning out much of the dialogue. By Act III there was pandemonium” (Lowry 30). Women were rushing the stage and exchanging blows with the actors. In a panic, the audience dashed for exits, adding to the confusion. Yeats came out, as he had done in 1907, to lecture the audience, but his words, which began with “I thought you were tired of this,” were drowned out by “a torrent of boos and

hisses.” The demonstrators began to sing the “Soldier’s Song” which was quickly taken up by the gallery. Finally, “a party of detectives and uniformed police arrived” and began dispersing the protestors. “Mrs. [Hannah] Sheehy-Skeffington announced: ‘We are now leaving the hall under police protection. I am one of the widows of Easter Week. It is no wonder that you do not remember the men of Easter Week because none of you fought on either side. The play is going to London soon to be advertised there because it belies Ireland. All you need do now is to sing ‘God Save the King’” (qtd. in Lowry 31). And she left the theatre.

Hannah’s and O’Casey’s debate then took to the newspapers, as she wrote in *The Irish Independent*, “The demonstration was not directed against any individual actor, nor was it directed to the moral aspect of the play. It was on national grounds solely, voicing a passionate indignation against the outrage of a drama staged in a supposedly national theatre, which held up to derision . . . the men and women of Easter Week. . . The Ireland that remembers with tear-dimmed eyes all that Easter Week stands for, will not, and cannot be silent in face of such a challenge” (Lowry 57). To which O’Casey replied, advocating his maternal ethos: “Nora voices not only the feeling of Ireland’s women, but the women of the human race. The safety of her brood is the true morality of every woman . . . The heavy-hearted expression by Mrs. Sheehy Skeffington about ‘the Ireland that remembers with tear-dimmed eyes all that Easter Week stands for,’ makes me sick. Some of the men cannot even get a job. Mrs. Skeffington . . . appears to be both blind and deaf to all the things that are happening around her” (Lowry 59-61).

To which Hannah responded, reiterating the Irish ideal of blood sacrifice for both men and women: “May I suggest that when Mr. O’Casey proceeds to lecture us on ‘the true morality of every woman’ he is somewhat beyond his depth. Nora Clitheroe is no more ‘typical of Irish womanhood’ than her futile, sniveling husband is of Irish manhood. The women of Easter Week, as we know them, are typified in the mother of Padraic Pearse, that valiant woman who gave both her sons for freedom” (Lowry 80). To which the socialist O’Casey replied: “The people who go to football matches are just as much a part of Ireland as those who go to Bodenstown [the site of Wolfe Tone’s grave], and it would be wise for the Republican Party to recognize this fact, unless they are determined to make of Ireland the terrible place of a land fit only for heroes to live in” (Lowry 82).

Thus the idealist and the naturalist debated the twentieth-century Irish struggle for independence – but, in spirit, how far apart were they? While Hannah Sheehy Skeffington recalls the sacrifice of individuals – sons, wives, husbands, and mothers – Sean O’Casey undercuts any sentimentalizing of the past with the reality of the poor of Ireland, and particularly of Dublin, who sacrifice and endure under any regime, colonialist or nationalist.

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