



# Exuberance and Enchantment in Sean O'Casey's Later Plays

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**Abstract**— O'Casey as a playwright worked arduously to bring novelty and new insight into the theatre. He rose to both fame and controversy with his anti-heroic themes in his Dublin trilogy- a series of plays limning the poignant effects of the revolution on the Dublin's poor. All of his plays have a meld of comic, serious themes dipped with poetic imagination. In his expressionistic plays he seeks to expand his aesthetic vision by including songs, chants, ritualistic scenes, allegorized characters and stylized sets. In his later plays, he dramatizes the conflict between youth and senility, between sexual expression and repression, between zest for life and lust for money, between revelry and misery, between freedom and servitude. These plays are unique as there is a judicious blend of "farce, satire, fantasy and symbolism. He has made use of all the possible visual and aural theatrical effects to make his plays worth reading and performing.

**Keywords**— Assiduous, Vivacity, Vitality, Experiment, Realism, Expressionism, Fantasy, Spell, Incantation, Humanity, Love, Music, Instinct, Vision, Redemption.

"Man must be his own, man must be his own god. Man must learn, not by prayer but by experience. Advice from God was within ourselves, and nowhere else. Sound sense and social development was the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. A happy people made happy by themselves. There is no name given among men by which we can be saved, but by the mighty name of man".<sup>1</sup>

Sean o' Casey as a dramatist is renowned for his dexterity to make his plays vivacious and distinct with his character's actions and witty dialogues. His plays are like fresh breeze and a feast to eyes because they are never the same. He asserts,

"Dramatists cannot go on imitating themselves and when they get tired of that, imitating others. They must change, must experiment ,must develop their power or try to, if the drama is to live."<sup>2</sup>

In his Dublin trilogy comprising 'The Shadow Of Gunman', 'Juno and the Paycock', and 'The Plough and the Stars' he expressed his disgruntlement about the way in which the Irish Independence Movement vitiated into

fratricidal carnage. Minnie Powell in 'The Shadow of Gunman' loses her life because of the menacing glorification of war between IRA and Black and Tans. Juno in 'Juno and the Paycock' is devastated due to her family's dysfunction. Her

son is shot dead and daughter is ditched and ruined by her boyfriend under the backdrop of civil war. In 'The Plough and the Stars' Nora, her husband Jim, her unborn child, and her neighbour Bessie Burgess lose their lives due to the revolution. Her husband's jingoism plays a key role in destroying their simple lives.

In his next play, 'The Silver Tassie' he blends realism and expressionism to talk about the Great War. The Second Act exhibits a shift in the stage technique to delineate metaphorically the annihilation of human values demanded by the War. For instance, 'he shows the Crucified Christ half detached from His Cross and leaning in supplication towards the figure of the Virgin.' It symbolises the fact that the Christian religion is beleaguered by the War. He also includes songs, chants,

ritualistic scenes, allegorized characters and stylized sets. The war zone has been painted effectively through the use of stagecraft, poetic speeches of the Croucher, soldiers, juxtaposition, montage etc. The play presents the gory sights and crippled humans pointing to the senselessness of the War.

In the subsequent play 'Within the Gates', he wishes to accentuate the fact that his plays are not confined to any particular locale i.e. with either Dublin or London but to the world as a whole. The Park is the microcosm of the world. The life painted is not just of dejection or discontentment but of serenity, simplicity and universality. Championing his cause for giving up realism in this play, he wrote,

"The closer we approach to actual life the further we move away from the drama. There is a deeper life than the life we see and hear with the open ear and the open eye, and this is the life important and the life everlasting."<sup>3</sup>

He also wrote 'Purple Dust' and 'Red Roses for Me' with an Irish setting, melding expressionist technique with traditional Irish characters, scenes, songs and subject matter. He brings to forefront the zestful Irish spectacle with the song, pageantry, rustic setting, magic in 'Purple Dust'. He was honest enough to admit later,

"Like James Joyce, it is only through an Irish scene that my imagination can weave a way."<sup>4</sup>

In 'Red Roses for M', he portrays the unending conflict between the capitalist and the humanists. One fight for money, the other for equality. The latter fight for their right against the social forces hoping for a new dawn. With his vivid poetic imagination and promise for a new vision, this play is phenomenal. It can aptly be said,

"When the Irish artist begins to write, he has to create his moral world from chaos by himself."<sup>5</sup>

His later plays are vibrantly hilarious fantasies that dramatize the conflict between the spiritual and material forces of human nature. His favourite 'Cock-a-Doodle Dandy' followed by 'The Bishop's Bonfire', and then 'The Drums of Father Ned' are extremely rich and variegated than his conventional realistic drama. He displays his genius by mixing perfectly Farce, satire, melodrama, lyricism to the main plot. At the same time he also evinces his unwavering faith in moral values and a firm belief in man's innate uprightness - Man has the

power to redeem himself.

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He manifests his point of view that the Church has lost its value and has become clerical instead of Christian. In these plays the moral forces are governed by God of Love whereas the evil forces by God of Terror. In 'Cock-a-Doodle Dandy' the God of Love incarnates in the merry Cock that wages an unflinching war against Father Domineer, the priest of false religion who believes in terrorizing his subjects. The Cock strives to dispel religious fanaticism and Puritanism from Nyadnannave, a small village in Ireland with ebullience and incantation. The Cock initiates a series of enchantment and bewilderment for the simple people and indicates them to live a mirthful life instead of remaining scared. The Conservative people think Cock to be an embodiment of some deleterious Spirit though the youth especially the women are spell bound by its message.

The play is a parable of Irish spirit in conflict with the repressible forces. Father Domineer exercises his authority by employing sundry magical tricks, making them fearful of death and damnation. There is no place for freedom and love.

"A whisper of Love in this place bites away the soul."<sup>6</sup>

The father shows his power by killing the lorry driver brutally who doesn't accede to his demands. Michael and Mahon try to subdue their wives by rebuking them, belittling them and inflicting atrocities on them. The Climacteric of this tussle takes place in the famous Exorcism scene where the hobbling and crippled but conceited Father Domineer emerges from the tumbling house, symbolic of Ireland, hinting at the externment of the cock with its spirit of love and joy. The power of Darkness has won but only partly. Michael feels that without love and joy there is nothing left for him but to die. It takes immense self control and fortitude to follow the Cock in its celebration of life - "a place where life resembles life more than it does here."<sup>7</sup>

'The Bishop's Bonfire : A Sad Play Within the Tune of Polka' presents the discordance caused by suppressing the natural instinct of love and joy. In the village of Ballyoonagh there are preparations made for the visit of the Bishop at Councillor Reilligan's house. He is beaming with joy for he has been made Papal Count. There is also a bonfire arranged to burn the objectionable or Evil Literature. The false piety of the councillor can be seen in the way he manipulates his children. He coaxes his daughter Keelin to abandon her poor suitor and fixes her match with an old but rich farmer. He asks his other daughter Foorau to abide by her chastity and remain virgin even after being aware that she loves Manus

Moonroe. Father Boheroe urges her “to love the beautiful flesh of humanity, a sparkle with vigour, intelligence and health”<sup>8</sup>

He is offended to see “no colour, no thought, lean cattle thin milk, worn out meadows giving dusty hay: not a single building calling a halt for a look at it, not even the tawdy Church”<sup>9</sup>. Though men and cattle starve and die, yet money is spent lavishly on church towers. He wants men to fight against all odds and not endure it quietly.

In ‘The Drums of Father Ned’ there are conflicts between youth and senility, between sexual expression and repression, between zest for life and lust for money, between revelry and misery, between freedom and servitude. But in this combat the forces of Good emerge triumphant. This play fills us with *joie de vivre*. The play starts with a Preramble or flashback in Doonavale where the Black and Tan officers are ready to spare the round tower of the church if the two archenemies Binnington and Skerighan compromise, but they decline. They can talk about business deals but would never give up their stand on Free state v/s Republican. They stand with Father Filifogue to suppress the Tostal singing in favour of musically inferior religious hymns. But the youth refuse to endure. They organize the Tostal in their own way. Through the love-story of Michael and Nora, the playwright envisions a new Ireland where there is liberty of expression and action.

“We have stood quiet in our fields, on our hills, in our valleys; we have sat quiet in our home ,trusting the power that has held down would show justice; but we have found neither security nor peace in submission; so we must strike for the liberty we all need, the liberty we must have to live”<sup>10</sup>

The incorporeal presence of Father Ned and the sound of his drums heard at the backstage represents O’ Casey’s brand of joyful Christianity.

As a priest Father Ned is a representation of both Catholicism and Protestantism. He is identified with church and his accompaniment with drums show his participation in the life force of joy. Nora fantasizes Father Ned.

“If he didn’t dance himself, He must have watched the people at it, and, maybe, clapped His hands when they did it well. He must have often listened to the people singing, and been caught up with the rhythm of the gentle harp and psaltery and His feet may have tapped the ground along with the gayer sthrokes of the tabor and the sound of the cymbals tinkling.”<sup>11</sup>

Conclusion:

These three later plays demonstrate a vision of a New Golden Era for both Ireland and the World. They propagate the message of becoming more humane and patient. O’ Casey has found the style of making his expressionist style compatible with typical characters and generalized allegory. There is preoccupation with the future and not with the past as in Dublin Trilogy. They are plays of optimism, hilarity and self fulfilment. His mythical Christian outlook is his new vision for Ireland and the world. He does not lash out bitterly at the follies and conservatism of Clerics rather makes them realize the requirement of joy and zest in their lives. His buoyant spirit is conducive to his zestful writing.

“Theoretically as well as in actuality, we are all against what O’ Casey is against- injustice, oppression, narrow mindedness and life denial. And we are all in favour of what O’ Casey affirms - freedom, self fulfilment, beauty, and love. More than any other playwright he is substantially the minstrel of St. Paul’s message of Charity, of Caritas or love.”<sup>12</sup>

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