

Building Empowerment Through Drama: The Characterisation Process of Irish Women in Three Plays by Sean O'Casey

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Abstract: *Irish female imagery and its connection with the Irish New State politics seem to be one interrelation which requires further examination, especially with a focus on the women who had active participation in the Irish society, not only the few ones from the historical records, but mainly the ones that lacked special social status. Sean O'Casey, in his first three productions on Abbey Theatre's stage, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), placed powerful female characters on the stage, transferring the heroism from the male figure to the female subject. These are representations of women who relied on their own agency, able to act in a higher level of autonomy in a different range of situations independently of cultural contingencies. Through these dramatic texts, taking both character construction and sociological approaches, I seek to demonstrate in my work-in-progress, how O'Casey, even being in the awakening of the twentieth century, could insert in his plays notions of individual empowerment through the creation of empowered female characters.*

Keywords: *Irish drama; Sean O'Casey; Woman representation; Individual empowerment.*

Politics and art made many attempts to maintain the conservative, yet imaginary order for the twentieth-century Ireland. Artistic expressions in the island, mainly literature and drama, have provided purposeful dialogues in order to assess the Irish women's experience in such a context. Interestingly, with regards to dramaturgy, the drama appearing onstage would turn into drama offstage and vice-versa. Thereby, for women, theatrical representation of the beginning of the twentieth century mostly contributed to the reinforcement of a powerless image; however there were productions which revealed playwrights concerned with gender unfair disparity. One of the few male playwrights who demonstrated commitment to diverge from the nationalistic male-oriented path followed by the Irish drama of the twentieth century was Sean O'Casey. In his first three productions on Abbey's stage, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock*

(1924) e *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), it is possible to find female characters that mismatched the dominant powerless shape which constituted mostly women's theatrical portrayals. On this basis, O'Casey's female representations configure a presumed deconstruction of the Irish traditional female figure. Characterising the feminine in such a subversive form, aware of the unfair conditions ordinary women had to face during Ireland's process of independence, meant getting distanced from the intensified cultural nationalism's ideology which devised the depiction of the Irish traditional family.

Almost one hundred years ahead of O'Casey's time, gender equality and women's empowerment, both in real-life and in the mimetic realm, are still challenging topics in the modern Irish context. A more detailed look at the last century shows that, in a wide range of areas, the individual and collective female trajectories have been an issue of ongoing discomfort to be dealt with. To illustrate one of the questionable situations women have faced, Gerardine Meaney (77-78) comments on the incongruous aspect of women's writing in Ireland. She talks about a seemingly scarcity of precedent for this writing in Irish literary history, pointing that "this lack is merely apparent, in the sense that a great mass of material written by Irish women exists.¹ Irish women have written more novels, poetry and plays than the most dedicated literary archaeologist can trace", but, unfortunately, "this work is only available to specialists, in academic libraries, and to those with the time and skills to seek it out". Although it is difficult to decipher a reasonable justification for questions like this and others which involve women's status throughout history, a field of Irish Studies has provided room for debating the tendency of the valorization of the feminine. Margaret Kelleher, in her article "A Retrospective View on Irish Women's Literary Studies", presents a good overview of women's literary studies in Ireland as well as of the development of the Irish Feminist Criticism, more particularly from the second half of the twentieth century on. Mentioning the timely publication in 2002 of the volumes 4 and 5 of the *Field Day of Irish Writing*, under the title *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, which brought increased attention to female representations, she highlights the necessity of keeping the debates on women's experience. Additionally, more currently, "Waking the Feminists"² reunited women and men striving for equality for female participation in the theatre in Ireland. The campaign has mobilised women from different areas in an attempt of exposing the mechanisms by which they have been excluded or marginalised. Although these efforts are the culmination of many years of work and waiting, they also represent the beginning of many new questions concerning women's issues in the Irish community.

Proof of this lies in the fact that, latterly, women's issues have usually been addressed in Irish political agendas, reasserting not only the concern of feminist struggles that followed in the twentieth century and continue in the present, but also revealing that solidarity and collectivity on a global and local level are important and necessary aspects to be improved in the Irish community. The idea of empowering women's images has been articulated with possible solutions for other problematic questions of the country. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade listed gender equality and women's empowerment as one of the key focus of Irish Aid in 2015.³ Minister Charlie Flanagan

said that Ireland has played a leading role internationally to promote progress on women's empowerment, adding that "Empowering women and girls and promoting gender equality are critical in tackling maternal and child mortality, reducing poverty and ensuring that countries develop sustainably." Furthermore, in the 2014 seminar, organised by the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence (ICGBV), the former president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, asserted that "Women's empowerment is vital to stop man-inflicted violence," and added "We have to address the equality and empowerment of women as part of this. We have to value women's rights in every country," the world has to give "a sense to the girl child that she is as important as her brothers." At the same occasion, Sean Sherlock, Minister of State at Department of Foreign Affairs, announced that it was at the core of the department's work to prioritise gender equality and women's empowerment.

Since the first references to "empowerment" in the 1970s, a great deal about the term's definition has been written. For the most part, the use of the term in the areas of sociology, psychology, administration, economics and public health, approaches the meaning of autonomy and agency, as defined as a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping system, and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change (Rappaport 3). Such idea may be extended to the concept of an individual's autonomy, associated to a social and political environment, which leads to a community-level self-reliance and change. In this respect, this study will mainly provide a methodical overview of the notion of empowerment with a starting point in the foremost approach on the topic developed by the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, extending to the more recent studies of Julian Rappaport and E. Summerson Carr which emphasize, respectively, empowerment in the individual sphere and its feminist approach. According to this line of thinking, the most relevant focus on empowerment is its assumption as a process since its definition as such provides the basis to examine and understand the stages of this phenomenon, enabling the subject to take control of her/his life and to make decisions with regard to herself/himself. Considering the prominent and increasing usage of this concept in the Irish contemporary discourse as a form of struggling against the troubled questions involving women's affairs, this study proposes to bring the relationship between the feminine subject and the process of empowerment closer to the female imagery in Irish drama as a possible pathway to better understand and to clarify women's experience the twentieth-century Ireland's context. Regarding the theatrical form, this research intends to apply Hegel's constructs about theatrical character, chiefly his ideas on the freedom of the character-subject. To the philosopher, as drama plays with concrete realities, all dramatic exterior actions have their origin in a character's free spirit insofar its representation mimics human beings in all their fullness. In other words, Hegel's poetics sees the character's nature as subject, representations which must appear as essentially free, able to determine their own fate, able to end any oppressive situation, and if he does not do it, it is because he decides, freely, not to do it. (Hegel 1158-1205). All in all, the study will outline firstly the existence of process of individual empowerment in the actual female experiences and then to approach this real-life mechanism to the examination of the construction

of O'Casey's feminine theatrical representations attempting to contribute towards the development of women's issues in the actual Irish community.

The revolutionary Irish context gave O'Casey the crucial impetus to create the theatrical figure of "new women" and to reshape the fixed narratives of nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, and sex. In tandem with the historical context and some movements, O'Casey's three plays are shown to encapsulate a revolutionary and communal challenge to fixed identity boundaries in turn-of-the-century Ireland. "Interestingly, O'Casey portrays women as either those most opposed to or most influenced by any sort of idealism" (Wilson 322). Such female figures recover the idea that "life is more sacred than patriotic slogans; human realities are more meaningful than fanatical abstractions, particularly when in the name of the national honour the revolution devours its own children" (Kilroy 93).

O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* brought the dramatist to the artistic circle of the Abbey Theatre. Set in the 1920s working-class Dublin, it involves the urban guerilla warfare of Ireland's War of Independence. This play would become the first of the three productions collected in his work known as *The Dublin Trilogy*. In this initial period, O'Casey's concern was to portray earnestly Irish people as he saw them in Dublin tenements, a place where he was born and raised. O'Casey watched the needs of the forgotten Irish, including poor women and then decided to give voice to them through his plays. In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Minnie Powell is one example of these forgotten poor women who lived in the tenements. She is a "courageous character and is worthy of the audience's esteem, while the men, especially Donal, are not" (Wilson 324). She flirts with Donal Davoren, a man who has poetic aspirations whilst the other tenement residents believe he is a terrorist. In an attempt to protect Donal from false accusations, she is killed in a gunfire while she shouts in favor of the Republic (O'Casey 58). According to Wilson, "Minnie's death is the main event of this play, bringing to light a different view of nationalistic sacrifice than we have seen in any other playwright" (323). Minnie is a powerful representation since her unhappy end tells us about the irony of the idea of sacrifice, it helps the audience to rethink of the concept of martyrdom. The possibility of reassessing the problematic question of sacrificial deaths through Minnie's representation seems to allow us to define her in an empowered way since her death was not the affirmation of what Irish people were used to think of the sacrificial losses; inversely, it proposed a re-signification of the traditional concept of willing die for the national cause.

Juno and the Paycock (1924) was O'Casey next play for the Abbey after the success of *The Shadow of a Gunman*. The play drew such large crowds in its first week that it had to be extended. It depicted the Boyle family living in the tenements during the Irish Civil War in 1922. As the patriarch, Captain Boyle, is constantly out of work, Juno, his wife, is the one in charge of the family. The other family member who has a job is another woman, Mary; however she is on strike. Johnny, the son, is almost always in his bed because he has been crippled during the war. Basically it is the mother, Juno, who

does everything to hold the family together. She is the person on the stage that does the housework, has to work for the family's daily income. She is the Irish mother who tries to keep things together while her lazy husband is hanging out with friends in a pub and at the end of the play, she is the only support Mary, who is pregnant, has since her father does not seem to be supportive. Juno is undoubtedly a gendered representation. She is strong, assertive, and capable of tremendous devotion to her family, the representation of "moral authority above any of the men" (Murray 67, 70). Although her domestic and maternal actions correspond to the traditional stereotype thought for Irish women, her performance is not limited to the maternal and domestic sphere. The representation of Juno is an empowered one because it goes beyond of what was expected from a woman, demonstrating that real heroism may emerge wherever and whenever it is least expected, frequently in women like her (Kiberd 222). Juno's behaviour breaks the traditional order of the Irish family and might be equated with what Perkins and Zimmerman classified (didactically) as intrapersonal empowerment which is when the subject acts confidently and competently in a specific situation (575). "Juno is not a stand-in for Ireland, but a character who represents real Irish women" (Wilson 325).

The last play of the trilogy, *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), shows a cast of characters in a Dublin tenement experiencing the Easter Week in 1916. Unlike most of the plays which remembered the uprising, O'Casey did not focus on male figures who had become martyrs in the eyes of many Irishmen. He depicted a wasteful war, full of cowards, displacing the common view about the heroic male image. *The Plough* may also be viewed in a gendered perspective if we see it as a character-based play, focusing on the role of Nora Clitheroe, newly married with Jack, a commander in the Irish Citizens Army. "In this play, Nora is an Irish woman unwilling to sacrifice her husband to the cause of national freedom. Through her, O'Casey rejects any notion that women encourage their men to fight to the death [...]" (Wilson 326). Nora's dismay over the hostilities brought by the nationalistic ideology questions the often-commendable image that the heroes are powerful representations since they are the only ones who suffer for they are directly involved with the war, while women are a mere presence in these men's lives ready to send them to die. She is "the central character which reveals a reversal of the common sense of the male figure as the main image of the Easter Rising for, although Jack clearly aspires to heroic performance in joining the fight, it is Nora who is actually the heroine of the story, bravely acting against the influence of Irish nationalism." Regarding her characterization, Nora's description has elements which challenge the idealized national female stereotype of passivity and weakness. "O'Casey elaborated Nora's description with adjectives which helped to construct a strong female image. Expressions which indicate strength, like "alert," "nervous energy" and "the firm lines of her face are intermingled with other characteristics which demonstrate femininity, such as her facial features" (Parra 100). Once again, as well as with Juno, Nora also has characteristics related to domesticity and family, but in her case these are symbols which produce an antagonistic effect since the way she conducts the family's issues has

nothing to do with the nationalistic project. Her role in the play surely exposes a different meaning to the Irish concept of sacrificial war and also a female image differing from the one represented by Cathleen Ni Houlihan; as Wilson observes, in *The Plough* it is the “masculine war destroying the feminine” opposing the contrast Cathleen Ni Houlihan’s idea “of the masculine war saving the feminine Ireland” (327).

Against the flow of the nationalistic theatre produced in Ireland during the independence process period, Sean O’Casey comes up with his three plays whose framework was the real armed conflicts which occurred during first three decades of the twentieth century and surprises the audience by clearly placing women, in different conditions and backgrounds, as subversive elements of the constant powerless female image in Irish dramas. He makes a crucial inversion: the heroic figures in *Dublin Trilogy* are not men, but women. Thus, this work-in-progress argues that O’Casey’s process of construction of dramatic representations of powerful women closely resembles the real female figures that, having their consciousness raised by the stages of the process of individual empowerment, gained confidence in their abilities to voice their wills and to fight for the control of their lives. Doing so, this empowered model of the Irish woman may provide a relevant form of challenging and giving new meaning to the roles imposed on women even nowadays.

Notes

- 1 Tina O’Toole’s *The Irish New Woman* (2013) is a valuable research which supports the existence of women’s active participation in the Irish literary context. The author concentrates her analyses in the works of female writers from 1880-1922, as George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne), Sarah Grand, L. T. Meade, George Moore, Katherine Cecil Thurston, Hannah Lynch and Anna Parnell. O’Toole demonstrates how this “new generation” of writers resisted the hegemonic discourse of those in power, subverting gender and sexual identities and challenging regulated roles in the family.
- 2 A grassroots campaign calling for equality for women across the Irish theatre sector that ran from November 2015 to November 2016. Further information about the campaign can be found in <http://www.wakingthefeminists.org>.
- 3 <https://www.dfa.ie/news-and-media/press-releases/press-release-archive/2015/march/gender-equality-a-key-focus-of-irish-aid/>

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