

Motherhood in O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy

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O'Casey is a working class writer who grew up in the slums of Dublin. No playwright loved people in the Dublin slums more than O'Casey. His plays include autobiographical elements, which explain his love shown for the downtrodden in his plays. Reading his autobiographies, we find that O'Casey's ideal, insistence and aspiration about politics and religion are expressed mostly by the male characters in his plays, while his female characters do not assert their political and religious convictions. It seems that the reason for this was because O'Casey relied on the images of his mother and women he grew up with in his childhood and youth. Although he associated with new women who were playing active parts in political movements, O'Casey did not employ their images for his female characters, because they were from the middle or upper classes.

O'Casey, however, believed that "presidents should be women". In a recent interview, when Rosette Lamont asked the daughter of O'Casey, Shivaun O'Casey who is a stage director, "Your father was a feminist, wasn't he?", she answered as follows. "Sean always said that presidents should be women and then there would be no wars because women know what it means to lose a son."¹ Whether O'Casey was a feminist or not in our contemporary definition, this paper is to examine the portrayals of a variety of female characters in O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, namely *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Plough and the Stars*, and sounds out the true meaning of what O'Casey always believed, that "presidents should be women".

Women in his trilogy are powerful and heroic in comparison to cowardly men. It can be seen that the role of woman is considered very different from that of man by O'Casey. I will try to prove these points by analyzing the transition and transformation of images of the women in the three works.

We will begin our analysis by considering a female character, Minnie, in *The Shadow of a Gunman*, as the central character, and Davoren and Shileds in contrast with her. Davoren is lodging at the room in a tenement house of the peddler Seamus Shields. The dwellers in the tenement mistake Davoren for a shadow of a gunman. Minnie Powell appears on the stage knocking at the door to lend Davoren some milk for the tea. What Minnie tries to do is only to approach him with some secret motive for wanting to know him.

As her questions reveal, she approaches him in a roundabout way to win his love. Nevertheless, Minnie is a straight-forward woman, and her actions have a consistency without contradiction. Puzzled by her talk, Davoren is gradually attracted by her.

There are other characteristics that O'Casey employed from his personal contact with women in the Dublin slums. They do not insist on politics or on principles and they are not educated as the female characters are not in his plays. Likewise, they do not acquire culture as Minnie does not.

Minnie reveals her ignorance in their conversation, but she does not feel small, because she has confidence in herself, which is due to the following reason:

She is a girl of twenty-three, but the fact of being forced to earn her living, and to take care of herself, on account of her parents' early death, has given her a force and an assurance beyond her years. She has lost the sense of fear (she does not know this), and consequently, she is at ease in all places and before all persons even those of a superior education, so long as she meets them in the atmosphere that surrounds the members of her own class.²

Thus her environment has played a major role in moulding her confidence, pride and character. She is proud of herself, and feels neither isolated nor poor.

One more characteristic of Minnie reflects the fact that none of the people from her social class can continue to talk long on

any one subject. They have had no training or experience of philosophical or deep thinking, and practical work is more important to them than acquiring knowledge and education. Thus no one can tell where Minnie's topic may drift on to.

On the other hand, Davoren does not look down on uneducated Minnie, and he answers her questions politely, while showing his knowledge and culture to her. He deserves the title "a poet" in contrast with uneducated Minnie: Minnie has a strong mind, and therefore Davoren applauds her brave speech by saying, "Lovely little Minnie, and brave as well; brave little Minnie, and lovely as well!"³ Her courage is actually proved in the last scene, when Davoren and Shields know that there are bombs in Maguire's bag in their room. The two men are flustered, and only Minnie acts fast by bringing the bag into her room and saying, "...maybe they won't search it, if they do aself, they won't harm a girl. Good-bye... Donal."⁴

In spite of her hope, after all she is taken away on a truck and shot trying to escape from it.. She has displayed self-sacrifice for her love, and it has been proved that her love for Davoren is true. She may not really understand Davoren, but she chooses death for her love. Her action is brave and heroic in comparison with flustered men.

Although Davoren also loves Minnie, he has not the courage. He moves in a triple set of tention: between poetry and his slum surrounding, between braveness and cowardice and between egotism and patriotism.⁵ Such condition inactivates him, but Minnie who is single-minded about action appears to be like Virgin Mary or Cathleen ni Houlihan to Davoren, and the audience must feel the same way.

II

Among the two main women in *Juno and the Paycock*, Juno and her daughter Mary, Mary has the characteristics of new women. She is influenced by the books she reads, such as *The Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck* by Ibsen. She does not want to be a good wife and good mother like her mother Juno. She is portrayed as follows:

She is a well-made and good-looking girl of twenty-two. Two forces are working in her mind — one, through the circumstances of her life, pulling her back; the other, through the influence of books she has read, pushing her forward. The opposing forces are apparent in her speech and her manners, both of which are degraded by her environment, and improved by her acquaintance — slight, though it be — with literature.⁶

She goes on a strike against her employer and insists on her principles, and she blames her mother, though she is a good wife and mother who takes care of the family. Thus the quoted phrase, "pushing her forward", means that she attempts self-realization. However, she is in love with Charlie Bentham, who is an affected man. We can see that Mary in the Dublin slums hoped to marry a man who is good in appearance and is in a better environment than hers. That is the force "pulling her back". Pulled between the two forces in her mind, Mary's image of a new woman falls through. In the end, she becomes pregnant by Charlie and is abandoned by him. Her sweet dream of a marriage leads to her tragedy.

On the other hand, Juno works outside her home and manages the house-hold at the same time. Juno's husband, Boyle, always goes to drink at a pub and does not work. He is a burden for Juno because he does not fulfill his duty as a husband or father. Boyle is a henpecked husband as his friend, Joxer, expressed that "when the cat's away, the mice can play."⁷ Juno plays the part of a cat and Boyle plays the part of a mouse in her family, and Juno takes good care of him like his mother.

Juno performs the role of the omnipotent wife, accepting her husband, but at the same time she despises him. We wonder if it is Juno's responsibility that her husband is a selfish child. O'Casey portrayed Juno as follows:

Were circumstances favourable, she would probably be a handsome, active and clever woman.⁸

Despite her potential for a better life, Juno has only worked hard for her family in the poverty of the Dublin slums, but it is true

that, from the beginning, she is superior to others around her. This becomes evident when she is the only one to accept human weaknesses in others and to understand them instead of merely criticizing them.

Juno has a daughter Mary and a son Johnny, but the relation between mother and son seems different from that between mother and daughter. Juno's attitude toward her son Johnny is too indulgent, as Mary criticizes for such an attitude of her mother's.

Johnny has been a coward since he was shot in the Easter Rising. He is afraid because he has betrayed Commandant Tancred. Johnny's fear causes him to lose his temper and yell at his mother, and Juno tries to relieve and comfort him whenever he is frightened. Here is an example:

JOHNNY. Sit here, sit here, mother ... between me an' the door.

MRS BOYLE. I'll sit beside you as long as you like, only tell me what was it came across you at all?⁹

The reason why Johnny relies on Juno as above is obvious, that Johnny's father Boyle is useless in the Boyle family and the family never has good feelings toward him. However, it is not the only reason why Johnny relies on Juno. It is because the relationship between a mother and her son is deep. We should notice that mother's suffering and grief are deeper and more painful when she loses her son.

Mothers who have sons appear in many of O'Casey's plays, one of whom is Juno. The grieved speech of Juno after her son is lost is identical with that of another old mother, Mrs. Tancred, whose son had also been killed.

Mother o' God, Mother o' God, have pity on us all!
Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets, when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets? Sacred Heart o' Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone, and give us hearts o' flesh! Take away this mudherin' hate, an' give us Thine own eternal love!¹⁰

Juno who could not understand Mrs. Tancred's grief and desperation, now understand them whole heartedly, and regrets that she did not sympathize with her before.

O'Casey offers quotes from the Bible in the mothers' speech repeatedly, in order to show that the love of mother is noble like the love of God, which Doris daRin points out as follows:

O'Casey's use, therefore, of lines from Ezekiel for Juno's threnody is quite compatible with Dublin speech, as the original passage from Ezekiel indicates:

And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and I will give them a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 11:19

... The threnody reflects O'Casey's deep admiration for Irish womanhood. Juno stands forth as a symbol of faith, loyalty, courage and charity.¹¹

In short, O'Casey depicted motherhood by using the words from the Bible which reinforces the concept of a mother's strong affection for her son. On the other hand, however, a mother's affection causes her to dote upon her son, and it prevents her from becoming independent. She can only achieve self-growth when she loses her son.

We have mentioned that the relation between mother and daughter is different from that between mother and son in the case of *Juno and the Paycock*. When Juno knew Mary's pregnancy, she consoles her daughter as the member of the same sex. A mother realises her own importance. Juno has an independent spirit for the first time, and decides to leave home with Mary under the most miserable conditions. Ronald Ayling compares Juno and Mary:

...Juno is the comforting figure in a *pietà* scene of some power; this is but a symbolic visual foreshadowing of the more demanding role she voluntarily takes on towards the end of Act III. When, in the prayer to the Virgin Mary, we

see her as worthily representative of suffering womankind and, especially, motherhood.¹²

The strength of motherhood is shown in the words of Juno as follows:

MARY. My poor little child that'll have no father!

MRS BOYLE. It'll have what's far better — it'll have two mothers.¹³

We notice that Juno's words of comfort show the following principle: A mother is stronger than a father. Two mothers are much stronger than a mother and a father. Juno decides to leave home. Her decision is made out of love for her daughter. On the other hand, however, her decision is made out of deep love for her son, because she made this new choice to overcome her deep grief for the loss of her son. She did not want to pass each day lost in grief, and collected the courage to desert home and husband. Juno attains superiority over Mary in strong spirit.

III

Next we will discuss three main women, Nora, Mrs. Gogan and Bessie, in *The Plough and the Stars*. Nora and her husband, Jack Clitheroe, are described as persons with extremity in their natures and aspirations. Nora has a deep attachment to a happy married life with her husband, while Jack is a typical patriot who is vain and wants to be a commandant in the Irish Citizen Army. Nora and Jack are not harmonized in social consciousness and values of life. Their feelings are emphasized in Act One in their room where Jack's feeling is expressed in a picture of Robert Emmet, and the white chrysanthemums in the red and green vase symbolized the Irish flag. On the other hand, Nora has Fluther repair the key of her room because she wants to keep their privacy. The way Nora arranges her room shows her joy of intimate living. When Jack sings for Nora, she feels happy in their world. However, it is a escapist poem for Jack, because he has thought that he cannot become a Commandant.

However, in that particular scene, it is remarkable that Nora

expresses her wish not to be just a house wife who stays home alone and works only for her husband, but something more than that:

CLITHEROE. Well, you're finding out now that I amn't tired of it yet, anyhow, Mrs Clitheroe doesn't want to be kissed, sure she doesn't? [He kisses her again.] Little, little red-lipped Nora!

NORA. Oh, yes, your little, little, red-lipped Nora's sweet little girl when th' fit seizes you; but your little, little red-lipped Nora has to clean your boots every mornin', all the same.¹⁴

It is an expression of her egotism and independent will, but Jack does not have the capacity of accepting her will, so he does not answer a word. Giving up her wish, Nora tries to restore their relationship by humouring him. However, as soon as she finds that her appeal is in vain, she puts on a white hat to attract him, as Mrs. Gorgan says that it belongs to the sphere of "the woman's mystery".¹⁵ Nora is satisfied by attracting his attention, while Jack is satisfied by being a commandant. Thus both Nora and Jack are self-centred.

The knocking on the door brings back reality and is an indication of Nora's real tragedy to follow. Captain Brennan comes to bring Jack the letter from General Connolly. When Jack finds out that he can become a commandant, he goes out with Captain Brennan. Unable to merely wait for Jack's return, Nora goes to look for him during the fighting, and tries to win back his heart. Nora explains her thinking:

They said th' women must learn to be brave an' cease to be cowardly....Me who risked more for love than they [the fighting men] would risk for hate....¹⁶

James Simmons explains Nora's behaviour in this way:

Anyway her courage is a challenge as well as a gloss on her ideas in the first act, her selfishness, her desire for a little gentility and romantic love.¹⁷

All of this amounts to concluding that Nora's passion for Jack has made her brave and heroic.

Mrs. Gogan, another character to be mentioned here, has a daughter who is a sickly girl, and is a little woman of forty who is conscious of death (It is important to keep in mind that O'Casey seems to use the age forty for his women characters). Another middle-aged woman to appear in this play is Bessie, Nora's upstairs neighbour. She is lonely, waiting for her son to come back from fighting in the war, and because she is lonesome, she sometimes drinks and sings a hymn at midnight.

The Protestant Bessie and the Catholic Mrs. Gogan trade insults about religion with each other, but they unite in their attack of Nora in Act One. Both of them show no understanding about the feelings of a young woman. However, when Nora who went out to look for Jack came back and cried, their attitudes toward Nora change from that of contempt to sympathy because the cry of Nora was of truth.

An' there's no woman gives a son or a husband to be killed — if they say it, they're lyin', lyin', against God, Nature an' against themselves.¹⁸

O'Casey wrote in *The Irish Times*, that "Nora voices not only the feeling of Ireland's womanhood, but also the women of the human race."¹⁹ However, audience in the Abbey Theatre raised a riot against this voice of Nora. In those days, most of the people in Ireland had a patriotic principle as expressed by Jack Clitheroe.

CLITHEROE. You have a mother, Langon.

LIEUT. LANGON. Ireland is greater than a mother.

CAPT. BRENNAN. You have a wife, Clitheroe.

CLITHEROE. Ireland is greater than a wife.²⁰

We must acknowledge, however, that this line is O'Casey's irony, because though O'Casey hoped for independence of Ireland, he knew women were victims of fighting. He sympathized with and admired women who endured hardships as the greatest of human being.

In Act Four, Nora loses her premature baby and goes mad. She

will keep shutting out the outside world. Then Bessie shows great courage and generosity of spirit in her concern and care for Nora. Bessie who is mother shows noble love of motherhood. She is shot trying to protect Nora from the bullets, and singing a hymn, she dies. Mrs. Gogan, a mother who lost her daughter, rushes into the room and persuades Nora to leave with her. Bessie, as a mother of a son, is the very mother who holds the same principles as that of Nora when she cried, "An' there's no woman gives a son or a husband to be killed."²¹

Although both mothers care for Nora, Bessie is more heroic than Mrs. Gogan. It may reflect O'Casey's admiration for a mother who has a son, as we have observed in *Juno and the Paycock*.

IV

We have analyzed O'Casey's women in the three plays, and now we are now ready to consider the difference between the young women and the middled-aged women. The young women, Minnie, Mary and Nora, try to attract men by dressing up and have the qualities of new women. However, if these women think that the basis of women's worth is the ability to attract men, they are not aware that these basic notions of women's worth are an obstacle to their independence. The transition of these three women toward desirable images of woman for O'Casey can be summed up as follows: Minnie does not insist on her principle, but displays motherly affection toward Davoren and later acts heroically. Although Mary insists on her principle, she is abandoned by a man even before marriage. However, it is suggested she will be a mother and change for the better. Although Nora who is at first happily married and becomes actually a mother, both her baby and her husband are dead and she goes mad not being able to fulfill the expected role of a mother. Thus these three young women seem to embody O'Casey's ideal of a transformation of womanhood from women who insists on her principles to a woman who is a mother.

On the other hand, the middle-aged women, Juno, Mrs. Gogan and Bessie always console and support young women. They do not worry about their looks, and they are grounded in their roles as mothers. Juno who is a mother of a daughter and a son, is the strongest in

her family, as David Krause described:

Juno Boyle is O'Casey's universal mother and like most of the realistic and compassionate women who appear in his work.²²

Mrs. Gogan, a mother of a daughter, supports Nora in the last scene as Juno supports Mary in the last scene of *Juno and the Paycock*. Although Mrs. Gogan is not Nora's mother, her behaviour reflects maternal affection for a daughter. Bessie is a mother of a son, and when shot, she sings a hymn, which is like Juno because in her lamentation for the dead son, Juno's words are also quoted from the Bible.

Bernard Benstock pointed out in his article in *The Southern Review*:

Bessie, a Protestant and loyalist like Mrs Casside. O'Casey gives her a heroic role greater than that fulfilled by the others.²³

Judging from the above, it is clear that O'Casey thinks the love of mothers is superior to that of young women, and that the love of mothers is sublime. O'Casey also seems to be saying that the love of mothers for their sons is deep, and this reminds us his mother with the Protestant background. The Protestant Bessie is an image of O'Casey's venerable mother, whom O'Casey described in his *Autobiographies I*:

Forty years of age the woman was when the boy was three, with hair still raven black, parted particularly down the middle of the head, gathered behind in a simple coil, and kept together by a couple of hairpins; a small nose spreading a little at the bottom; deeply set, softly gleaming brown eyes that sparkled when she laughed and hardened to a steady glow through any sorrow, deep and irremediable; eyes that, when steadily watched, seemed to hide in their deeps an intense glow of many dreams, veiled by the nearer vision of things that were husband

and children and home. But it was the mouth that arrested attention most, for here was shown the chief characteristic of the woman: it quivered with fighting perseverance, firmness, human humour, and the gentle, lovable fullness of her nature.²⁴

As we have noticed, the middle-aged women in his plays are about forty years old, which is a reflection of O'Casey's admiration of his mother as he remembers her.

V

Women in O'Casey's Dublin trilogy confront suffering or danger, and women are more heroic than men. Among these women, the middle-aged women who are mothers, are stronger and more heroic than the young women. Mothers' actions are due to maternal affections. O'Casey venerated mothers who live strongly while being victims of wars. Therefore, we are convinced by examining O'Casey's doctrine that motherhood is the greatest of gifts. Finally, we may conclude that when O'Casey said that presidents should be "women", what O'Casey meant were "mothers", especially mothers of sons, because they know the sorrows when they lose their sons in wars as Juno and Bessie did.

Whether he is accepted as a true feminist today is questionable. However, we can acknowledge that O'Casey had feminist intentions in his own way, in his own time.

Notes

- ¹ Linda Ben-Zvi ed., *Women in Beckett* (Illinois: Univ. of Illinois, 1990), 31.
- ² Sean O'Casey, *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey*, ed. Ronald Ayling (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), *The Shadow of a Gunman* 10.
- ³ O'Casey, *Shadow* 14.
- ⁴ O'Casey, *Shadow* 38.
- ⁵ Heinz Kosok, *O'Casey, the Dramatist*, trans. Heinz Kosok and Joseph T. Swann (N.J.: Colin Smythe, 1985), 21.

- ⁶ O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock* 47.
- ⁷ O'Casey, *Juno* 52.
- ⁸ O'Casey, *Juno* 47.
- ⁹ O'Casey, *Juno* 74.
- ¹⁰ O'Casey, *Juno* 100.
- ¹¹ Doris daRin, *Sean O'Casey* World Dramatists (New York: Unger, 1976), 51.
- ¹² S. F. Gallagher ed., *Women in Irish Legend, Life and Literature* Irish Literary Studies 14 (N.J.: Colin Smythe, 1983), 98.
- ¹³ O'Casey, *Juno* 99.
- ¹⁴ O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars* 120.
- ¹⁵ O'Casey, *Plough* 107.
- ¹⁶ O'Casey, *Plough* 146.
- ¹⁷ James Simmons, *Sean O'Casey* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 87.
- ¹⁸ O'Casey, *Plough* 146.
- ¹⁹ Sean O'Casey, *Blasts and Benedictions*, ed. Ronald Ayling (London: Greenwood, 1967), 89. This article "The Plough and the Stars: A Reply to the Critics" was printed in *The Irish Times* on Feb. 19, 1926 and in *The Irish Independent* the following day.
- ²⁰ O'Casey, *Plough* 141.
- ²¹ O'Casey, *Plough* 146.
- ²² David Krause, *Sean O'Casey and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 25.
- ²³ Bernard Benstock, "The Mother-Madonna-Matriarch in Sean O'Casey", *The Southern Review* 6 (1970), 619.
- ²⁴ Sean O'Casey, *Autobiographies I* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 5.