

O'Casey's Adoration: *The Silver Tassie*

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I

The Silver Tassie (1928) is a major turning point for Sean O'Casey in both his work and his life. Unlike the Dublin trilogy, O'Casey's realistic plays, *The Silver Tassie* shows a new form of expression, for O'Casey wanted a change from what the Irish critics had called burlesque photographic realism, or slice of life.¹ This play caused a major change in O'Casey's life, when it was rejected by the directors of the Abbey Theatre. This famous controversy over *The Silver Tassie* began with the following letter from one of the directors, W. B. Yeats:

I am sad and discouraged. You have no subject. You were interested in the Irish civil war. . . . But you are not interested in the Great War; . . . and so write out of your opinion. . . . there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity of action and your great power of the past has been the creation of some unique character who dominated all about him and was himself a main impulse in some action that filled the play from the beginning to the end.²

O'Casey was understandably bewildered and shocked by this unexpected reaction, because he thought that *The Silver Tassie* was the best work that he had ever done. He already had the support of George Bernard Shaw, and O'Casey tried his best to have this play presented at the Abbey, only to fail. Following the controversy, O'Casey exiled himself from Ireland and went to London to continue writing plays. In the end, *The Silver Tassie* was first produced by C. B. Cochran in London at the Apollo Theatre on October 11, 1929.

¹ Eileen O'Casey, *Cheerio, Taitan* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 8.

² David Krause, ed., *The Letters of Sean O'Casey: Volume I 1910-1941* (New York: Macmillan, 1975) 267-268. W. B. Yeats's letter to O'Casey, on 20 April 1928.

In addition to the change in his technique as mentioned above, O'Casey's characters demonstrate an innovative internal transformation. For example, most of us would accept the following analysis of David Krause regarding the characters of O'Casey's Dublin trilogy:

The women in O'Casey's plays are realists from necessity, the men are dreamers by default. The men are frustrated and gulled by dreams which they are unable and unwilling to convert into realities.³

The people of the Dublin slums of O'Casey's youth had been the models for his characters before *The Silver Tassie*. However, we cannot find realistic people in *The Silver Tassie*, except for a pair playing comic relief, Sylvester and Simon. O'Casey's treatment of characters in this play turns symbolic with the change of technique. No doubt, the symbolic image of women seems to show the greatest change, which transforms O'Casey's view of womanhood. If we assume that his female characters are based on the ideal women in the male playwright's heart, we will be able to explain the symbolic treatment of his women and the change in his view of womanhood. Therefore, this paper is written with the aim of analyzing the image of his female characters in *The Silver Tassie*, in the process of tracing O'Casey's changing concept of ideal women, who showed the greatest change in characteristics.

II

Before discussing female characters, we must draw attention to the fact that *The Silver Tassie* is the story of a man, Harry Heegan, who is not a war hero but an athletic hero--the best football player and the winner of a silver cup, which is affectionately referred to as a tassie and is the object of a song.⁴ O'Casey tries to depict Harry Heegan as a legendary hero with the material of war to emphasize his usual anti-war subject.

³ David Krause, *Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 75.

⁴ The title of the play *The Silver Tassie* was taken from a Scottish song 'Burns' (My Bonnie Mary) as O'Casey described the following song in his autobiography: Gae fetch tae me a pint o' wine / An' full it in a sulver tassie; / That I may drink before I gae / A service tae my bonnie lossie.

However, it must be emphasized that this hero achieves tragic proportions not only through war but also through two women, Jessie Taite and Susie Monican.

In Act One Jessie Taite appears as Harry's girlfriend who, according to the stage directions, loves Harry only as a powerfully built hero. When Harry wins the football game, she feels elated by identifying the glory of a boyfriend with herself. For example, when Jessie comes to Harry's home after the game, she explains with excitement about the game which Harry won: "And we scream'd and shouted them down with 'Play the game, Primrose Rovers, play the game!'"⁵ The silver tassie which Harry was awarded is a triumph cup for Jessie, too. Harry wishes to share his triumph with her and first offers her red wine from the silver tassie, while allowing his best friend Barney to drink wine from a glass. Soon after that Harry himself drinks wine from the silver tassie, whispering sweetly to Jessie, "Now a kiss while our lips are wet."⁶ Here the silver tassie symbolizes not only a triumph in the football game but also Harry's love. However, the stage directions describing Jessie suggest a dangerous love for a man:

Jessie is twenty-two or so, responsive to all the animal impulses of life. Ever dancing around, in and between world, the flesh, and the devil. She would be happy climbing with a boy among the heather on Howth Hill, and could play ball with young men on the swards of the Phoenix Park. She gives her favour to the prominent and popular:⁷

Judging from the above, Harry plays the role of satisfying only 'the animal impulses of life' for Jessie. What Jessie loves are Harry's 'sinewy muscles of a manual worker made flexible by athletic sport' and his 'boisterous' quality, 'sensible by instinct rather than by reason.' O'Casey believes that women like Jessie live in the world between the flesh and the devil, and Harry loves only her body without her spirit.

The sexual love between Harry and Jessie calls forth fearful retribution for a man. When he was wounded and crippled after fighting in the war, Jessie deserts him and takes as her new boyfriend Barney, who is ironically Harry's best friend. Her attitude proves clearly that her love is Eros, which seeks sexual love, a pleasure of the flesh. Harry is at a

⁵ Sean O'Casey, *Seven Plays by O'Casey*, ed. Ronald Ayling (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), *The Silver Tassie*, 195. All quotations from the play are from this text.

⁶ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 196.

⁷ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 194.

loss for what to do and becomes hysterical. He crushes the silver tassie, which was a 'sign of youth, sign of strength, sign of victory' for him. When the silver tassie is broken, it shows the end of his love. Moreover, the silver tassie is a symbol of fate for Harry. However, Saros Cowasjee points out the following:

The Silver Tassie is not a tragedy of the soul but of the flesh. Harry's longing for Jessie is physical rather than spiritual, and the force that drives him forward is not love but jealousy and spurned passion.⁸

Many critics consider that the theme of this play is anti-war, and the war causes Harry's tragedy. If now we look at this tragedy from a different angle, there is much truth in Cowasjee's opinion. The war is only a medium of tragedy which leads Harry to ruin. It seems reasonable to suppose that Harry was ruined by a sexy woman. Therefore, Jessie plays the role to ruin a man by using sexuality as a weapon, like Pandora or Eve.

As far as love is concerned, O'Casey's treatment of Harry and Jessie is different in spite of having the same desire and living in the same world--flesh and devil. Jessie's love portrays her egoism when she deserts crippled Harry, while Harry's love portrays the sublime by continuing his love for Jessie. These different values could be used to exploit in paradigmatic fashion the dichotomy between man and woman, but we cannot find that Jessie is criticized for her love and attitude in this play by O'Casey. Possibly, Harry may be another figure to represent O'Casey himself. Garry O'Connor points out the following:

... in *The Silver Tassie* O'Casey was also dramatising his relationship with Eileen--although why he should have turned the successful outcome of his rivalry with Ephraim into its obverse in the play, and why he should have presented Heegan, the character based on himself--or the one with whom he most identified--as a nihilistic vision of a defeated nationalist spirit, cannot be explained in any way other than that he had not really adapted to the new reality of his life.⁹

In O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, the appearance and the idea of O'Casey himself were ambiguous as a result of all the male characters containing elements of O'Casey's

⁸ Saros Cowasjee, *Sean O'Casey: The Man behind the Plays* (New York: St. Martin's, 1964), 12.

⁹ Garry O'Connor, *Sean O'Casey: A Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 236.

personality. We can assume that Harry in *The Silver Tassie* is based on O'Casey himself, as Garry O'Connor refers. Therefore, the play manifests and dramatizes O'Casey's love for Eileen. When the play was put on the stage, O'Casey wished that Eileen played the part of Jessie as shown in his letter to her:

Billy's going to suggest to C. B. that you could play the part of Jessie [in *The Silver Tassie*], and if that happens, well we'll . . . It would be really a great thing if you were chosen for the part of Jessie, . . .¹⁰

This hope of O'Casey proves that the image of Jessie was created by O'Casey's feeling for Eileen. Consequently, the image of the desirable Jessie originated in the figure of Eileen.

III

We will discuss the role of another important woman, Susie Monican. In the opening scene Susie's appearance gave a strong impression as she polishes a soldier's gun and preaches to the two older men, Harry's father Sylvester and his friend Simon, who profane the name of God. In expounding her own theory, she always cites the Bible as if she is filled with religion. Thus, her figure is characterized and symbolized by both the gun and God.

It is not natural for a female figure to polish a gun, because the image of the gun is associated with a man in the battle. In short, the image of the powerful gun and the stereotypical feminine woman who cannot go to war are directly opposite. Her appearance is obviously mannish in Act One, and her holding of the gun in her hands suggests symbolically that she leads a man around by the nose or a man is in her power. Symbolically, Susie suggests that the fate of a man is due to a female attitude; how she polishes him, how she ruins him.

The God spoken of by Susie is an anticipation of the scene of the battlefield in Act Two. The soldiers in the battlefield who hover between life and death cannot help replying to God. In Act Two O'Casey depicts the scene of war by the technique of expressionism.

¹⁰ Eileen O'Casey, *Sean* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 93. This is a part of Sean's letter to Eileen, date unknown.

The battlefield may be a terrible world of the absurd dream and an unreal world where there is no women and nothing exists except God and the male soldiers.

In Act Two, the soldiers and Staff-Wallah chant over and over as follows:

SOLDIERS. For we believe in God and we believe in thee.

STAFF-WALLAH. The enemy has broken through, broken through, broken through! Every man born of woman to the guns, to the guns.

SOLDIERS. To the guns, to the guns, to the guns!¹¹

The two images of the gun and God are closely related. David Krause points out the relation of the gun and the God in this respect as follows:

. . .they [soldiers] have not been able to find Him on the battlefield, they go on believing in Him and in the weapons of war that might save them. . . . Just before the enemy break-through at the end of the act the soldiers sing their songs to God and the Gun--and it is the Wounded on the Stretchers, the mutilated and dying, who remind us that 'the image God hath made' and the war is destroying, is the image of 'power and joy', which Harry Heegan symbolized in the first act. ¹²

As Krause mentions, if power is suggested by God and joy is suggested by the gun, what Susie delivers in her hands--the gun--also suggests joy. This assumption goes to the very heart of the problem, because it seems that Susie has power over Harry's fate. Moreover, I agree with Saros Cowasjee's opinion about Susie's lines in Act One which are nearly always quotations from the Bible:

In *The Silver Tassie* O'Casey had no intention of having a stab at religion and if he did use Biblical phrases and reverse their meaning, it was because he wanted the play to be a kind of ritual¹³

¹¹ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 217.

¹² Krause, *Sean O'Casey*, 117.

¹³ Cowasjee, 125.

The above quotation means that the ritual image of Susie includes the sacred.

We can find another image of pious Susie. She is one of the women who longs for attention from Harry as an athletic hero. When Barney lifts up her skirt, teasing her, she gets angry; "You khak-cover'd ape, you, what are you trying to do? Manhandle the lassies of France, if you like but put on your gloves when you touch a woman that seeketh not the things of the flesh."¹⁴ Soon after that, however, when Harry puts an arm around Susie to mollify her, she makes the following excuse; "I don't mind what Harry does. . . . Harry's different."¹⁵ These lines show that Susie also has a side of her personality associated with the flesh and the devil like Jessie. Susie can also be a woman whom a man desires, and she is interpreted as follows by Sylvester and Simon:

SIMON. She's damned pretty an' if she dressed herself justly, she'd lift some man's heart up, an' toss down many another. It's mystery now, what affliction causes the disablement, for most women of that kind are plain, an' when a woman's born plain she's born good. I wonder what caused the peculiar bend in Susie's nature? Narrow your imagination to the limit and you couldn't call it an avocation.

SYLVESTER. [giving the head of his pipe a sharp, quick blow on the palm of his hand to clear it]. Adoration.

SIMON. What?

SYLVESTER. Adoration, Simon, accordin' to the flesh. . . She fancied Harry and Harry fancied Jessie, so she hides her rage an' loss in the love of a scorchin' Gospel.¹⁶

Their conversation makes it apparent that she conceals jealousy and fretfulness behind religion. The symbolic image of Susie turns to a realistic image of a woman. As Sylvester says, her adoration is not directed to God but to a hero and the flesh. In this line, it is not altogether surprising that in Act Three Susie is suddenly transformed into a sensual nurse:

She is changed, for it is clear that she has made every detail of the costume as attractive as possible. She has the same assertive manner, but dignity and

¹⁴ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 196.

¹⁵ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 197.

¹⁶ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 187.

a sense of importance have been added. Her legs, encased in silk stockings, are seen (and shown) to advantage by her short and smartly cut skirt. Altogether she is now a very handsome woman.¹⁷

This final description of her is great praise for the possibility of the physical appearance of women. The costume should be as attractive as possible with O'Casey's hope for a short and smartly cut skirt, and the overall look should be desirable. This description of Susie is our first introduction to O'Casey's new message of sexual liberation that preoccupies him till the end of life, to quote Robert Hogan's description,¹⁸ although we could see such signs among O'Casey's young women even before *The Silver Tassie*. O'Casey's young women know how to charm and manage men by dressing up in short skirts. The image of such a woman governs O'Casey's ideal, as it can be seen in Eileen's own description before their marriage:

I took great care with my appearance. Always noticing dress and colour, he would invariably tell me about them; he liked good legs, and skirts then were short and free.¹⁹

Thus, it is clear that the female image of O'Casey's ideal is revealed not only in the figure of Jessie but also in that of Susie.

The background of Act Two is placed at the hospital. Susie works as a nurse, a spiritual and physical angel for wounded soldiers. Nevertheless, she fails to live up to the expectations of the soldiers, Sylvester, Simon and even Harry for whom she longed before. Her attitude toward the soldiers is not humane, as she calls them by their bed numbers instead of names. In Act Four Susie has a lover, Surgen Maxwell, and she no longer loves crippled Harry.

Two crippled men are presented; one is Harry, who was an athletic hero, and another is Teddy, who typified male chauvinism. Both of them were emphasized as masculine men who were described as 'powerful', 'big' and 'rough'. In their miserable situations the two suffer a similar misfortune of reversal by war. Harry's case, however,

¹⁷ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 219.

¹⁸ Robert Hogan, *The Experiments of Sean O'Casey* (New York: St. Martin's, 1960), 110.

¹⁹ Eileen O'Casey, *Eileen*, ed. J. C. Trewn (London: Macmillan, 1976), 93.

goes beyond a tragedy of war to a tragedy based upon female sexuality and caused by Susie's loss of interest.

Susie speaks matter of factly to Jessie who still feels some remorse for Harry:

JESSIE. Poor Harry!

SUSIE. Oh nonsense! If you'd passed as many through your hands as I, you'd hardly notice one. [To JESSIE] Jessie, Teddy Foran and Harry Heegan have gone to live their own way in another world. Neither I nor you can lift them out of it. No longer can they do the things we do. We can't give sight to the blind or make the lame walk. We would if we could. It is the misfortune of war. As long as wars are waged, we shall be vexed by woe; strong legs shall be made useless and bright eyes made dark. But we, who have come through the fire unharmed, must go on living.²⁰

Her insistence that the two crippled men live in another world suggests her idea of separation. Harry is suffering in the real world and Susie is dancing in the fancy world. The fancy world of the dance is, however, seen from Harry's point of view. Harry had hoped to dance with a lover at the football club, as the winner of love and a football game. Therefore, after Susie's speech, the dance scene of the two couples--Burney and Jessie, Susie and Surgeon Maxwell is in fantastic and transcendent world for Harry. This world symbolizes the very dream that Harry pictured for himself, a happy life with a sensual woman, which in reality he fails to obtain.

IV

In the early plays of O'Casey, he depicts the love of young women as Eros, and that of the middle-aged women as Agape with great respect. In *The Silver Tassie* the figure of the mother whom O'Casey usually worships has little meaning. The female characters in *The Silver Tassie* are given a great deal more attention as sexual symbols.

James Simmons's theory holds some truth:

²⁰ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 28.

How shocking and surprising it is to see an O'Casey woman presented as one of the destroyers. . . . Doubly strange that his vision of woman should change so radically in the year of his courtship. The dangerous lover had ousted the mother.²¹

The dangerous love, Eros, is led by the flesh. To Harry, Jessie is the sum of the life and love and joy that he has lost forever,²² and in the image embodied by Harry, she is a symbol of sexuality like an icon for men. The following quotation further explains the point:

The image of the whore is also used to justify male power. Men's use of physical brutality, forcing woman into submission is the response to the whore's supposed sexual power over them.²³

However, it must also be mentioned that O'Casey does not forget the figure of mother. It is clear that crippled Harry cries for help to God and his mother in Act Four:

Dear God, this crippled form is still your child.

Dear mother, this helpless thing is still your son.²⁴

Here, Harry's mother is treated on an equal footing with God, with a prototype of the mother as the Virgin Mary. In Ireland the Virgin Mary is popularly adored. In most of O'Casey's plays the statue of the Virgin is always placed in the room. In Act Two of *The Silver Tassie* we can find a symbolic figure of Virgin Mary in the stained glass window in the war zone, and near it, a life-size crucifix, which has caused the upper part of the figure to lean forward with the released arm, outstretched towards the figure of the Virgin. O'Casey tries to express that even a crucifix tries to reply on the figure of the Virgin. If the

²¹ James Simmons, *Sean O'Casey* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 98.

²² Carol Kleiman, *The Silver Tassie*, ed. Harold Bloom, *Sean O'Casey* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 150.

²³ Jenny Beale, *Women in Ireland: Voice of Change* (London: Macmillan Education, 1986), 73.

²⁴ O'Casey, *The Tassie*, 247.

Virgin figure symbolizes the mother, Harry's mother is placed in a higher position than he is.

All women, including the whore and the mother, are idolized creatures for Harry. The whore and the Virgin, however, stand out as opposing forces: the whore is sexual but the Virgin is considered pure. It reminds us of James Simmons's phrase, "the dangerous lover had ousted the mother", again here. The strong image of women is a source of temptation and sexual pleasure for men in this play. It seems that this image has relevancy to O'Casey's private life of love for Eileen at that time or, otherwise, this is an accurate reflection of O'Casey's ideal woman. Although *The Silver Tassie* was published in 1928, it is imagined that it was written while O'Casey was in love with Eileen, as Eileen mentioned, "I know most of the play must have been contemplated before we were married".²⁵ When *The Silver Tassie* was printed, O'Casey dedicated the book to Eileen with the yellow daffodils in the green vase which she liked. O'Casey wrote to Eileen about her being his ideal woman:

How glad I am to remember that I saw so much in you from the start to knowing each other; that there was breadth and depth in that beautiful girlish form of Eileen Carey, that a lovely face and beautiful figure were veil to something deeper still, that behind the loveliness was a personality and a power. That this loveliness was to be desired, but it was to be honoured too.

You are more to me than anything in the world. I love you deeply, intensely, passionately, my own beautiful, adorable, and desirable darling Eileen.²⁶

From the above passage, we can find the image of Jessie in O'Casey's desire for Eileen. Their sexual woman is not a humble object for him. On the contrary, she is an honoured person. It is possible that O'Casey treated the play with a background of such relevant aspects of his life.

We have seen that the image of O'Casey's sexual woman is based on Eileen. The image of the sexual woman focuses a similar pattern between Jessie and Susie. Jessie is a flat character presented as only a sexual woman, and Susie, called a handsome woman, is

²⁵ Eileen O'Casey, *Sean*, 69.

²⁶ Eileen O'Casey, *Sean*, 92.

a round character which includes Jessie's characteristic sexuality. The woman who has a strong mind as well as sexuality is the very ideal for O'Casey. Moreover, we need to remember the ritual aspect in which Jessie and Harry drink red wine from the silver tassel and the ritual image of Susie's quotations from the Bible. Both images contain sacred elements although neither is related strictly to religion. The sacred image of the women suggests idealized figures for Harry in the real world. The image of a purely sexual woman like Jessie and of a sexual woman with more intellectual power like Susie is an idol which O'Casey worships. This ideal represents O'Casey's adoration.

It is agreed that the theme of *The Silver Tassel* is anti-war as many critics point out, and it marks a turning point in O'Casey's dramatic technique and life. In this paper we have also confirmed that this play adds another turning point in O'Casey's depiction and adoration of female characters, even though it may not seem a drastically marked one, for toward his later years O'Casey's ideal woman continues to drift between the ideal mother and the ideal sexual woman.