

Seán O'Casey: Political Activist and Writer

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Seán O'Casey gave a voice to those who are rarely heard: the poor, the dispossessed, the tenement-dwellers, whose lives he shaped into works of art. Their very presence on the stage is their claim to justice and a better future. He was a socialist, a humanist and an exceptional writer who put politics at the centre of his work, insisting that the writer can be a transformative force in society. Exiled to England at the age of forty-six, O'Casey sent his blasts and benedictions across the world for the rest of his life. As Richard Watts has pointed out, however, 'his anger was based, not on his dislike for mankind, but on his love for it'.¹ Dismissing his political beliefs does O'Casey an enormous disservice as a writer and a human being. O'Casey was one of the most political writers of his generation, constantly exploring the frontiers between literature and politics. Like his friend, George Bernard Shaw, O'Casey wrote for a purpose. His life reflects the history of the early twentieth century, a period shaped by two great political ideals: nationalism and socialism. History and politics were woven into the fabric of his life – they gave him focus and shaped him as an artist.

A sympathetic reading of O'Casey's drama illustrates how his own lived experience animated his concerns with political, social, and moral issues. James Larkin, the Irish trade union leader, had a profound effect on O'Casey. Larkin, who came to Dublin in 1907 on his 'divine mission of discontent',² inspired O'Casey to use words as weapons in the fight against poverty and oppression. But it was his own experience as a labourer, underfed and exploited, that heightened his interest in socialism. O'Casey believed that his participation in the Dublin lockout of 1913 ranked as his finest moment.

116

Seán O'Casey was born in Dublin in 1880 at 85 Upper Dorset Street and lived in a small enclave just north of the river Liffey for the first forty-six years of his life. His family were Protestant and supporters of the British connection. Despite his family's unionist connections, O'Casey joined the Gaelic League and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) sometime around 1903, working tirelessly for the nationalist movement for the next ten years of his life. O'Casey was an unlikely member of the Gaelic League as few working class Protestants joined. Being the great scholar that he was, he soon became proficient and, over time, a first-rate Irish speaker. The dilemma confronting O'Casey during his time in the Gaelic League and the IRB was how to hitch the plough to the stars, or, at a more basic level, to put a loaf of bread on the worker's table as well as a vase of flowers. He eventually broke with the nationalist movement over their failure to support the workers during the lockout in 1913. How it must have rankled with O'Casey to hear about a worker sacked, or a family evicted while in the strike headquarters at Liberty Hall during the afternoon, and later that evening to be in the company of the offending landlord or employer at some nationalist event as they loudly denounced the British presence in Ireland. Nearly all of O'Casey's biographers agree that the

lockout was the one genuinely transformative event in his life.

Politics and drama

If artistically, Shakespeare and Boucicault inspired the young O'Casey, Bernard Shaw transformed his view of drama and politics. In 1912, Kevin O'Loughlin, a member of the St Laurence O'Toole Club, urged O'Casey to read Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, insisting that the play would 'make a new man' of him.³ Despite his limited reading of Shaw at this stage of his life, Shaw's writings quickly helped O'Casey to clarify his thinking on the national question and socialism during the momentous events of 1913. In a letter in 1938, he said it was 'the preaching of Jim Larkin and the books of Bernard Shaw that swung him over to the left'.⁴ He learned his trade as a writer in the publications of the nationalist movement and in the pages of Larkin's paper, *The Irish Worker*. Writing about working class affairs, he gradually fused the literary tradition of John Mitchel, James Fintan Lalor and Shakespeare with the King James Bible and the hard-edged demands of the socialist movement into a literary weapon deployed for open class warfare. If the Gaelic League had educated O'Casey in grammar and syntax, Larkin gave him his revolutionary subject.

O'Casey had a long apprenticeship as a writer before his first play *The Shadow of a Gunman* was produced at the Abbey in 1923. The Abbey audience enjoyed the irony and comedic qualities of the play as it suited the mood of a country grown tired of death and war. Produced one year later, *Juno and the Paycock*, began to shake O'Casey's audiences out of their complacency about the past, but it was in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), that he plunged a dagger deep into the heart of the myth of heroic sacrifice so central to Irish Republicanism. For a section of the audience, this was a step too far. While respecting O'Casey as a great dramatist, Peadar O'Donnell was just one of many republicans who were bitter about O'Casey's work: 'His Plough and the Stars I find nauseating. There is nothing in this play from which any revolutionary action could proceed.'⁵ A modern critic, James Moran, writing in the same vein, suggests that it was written from an ultra left perspective 'to denigrate the Rising' and that it was 'a cynical attack on 1916.'⁶

Through his work, O'Casey demanded that people look at the reality of what had been achieved for all the talk of 'blood sacrifice' and 'romantic Ireland'. Pearse or Connolly could not be blamed for the conservatism and backwardness, economically and socially, of the Free State, as they had never envisaged such

an outcome. However, O'Casey did fault those who came after them for promoting the cult of sacrifice and romantic nationalism that overwhelmed the social and economic demands of the revolution. In *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey also turned the conventions of the historic play inside out in a way that went beyond formal innovation. He summoned his characters from the margins of history and placed them in the spotlight while the great men and women of history were confined to the wings. The looting scene in *The Plough and the Stars* caused offence to many in the audience as it appeared to demean the ideals of the rebels. Looting was widespread, and O'Casey was right to include that aspect of the rising. However, the scene can also be construed as an intimation of what 1916 should also have been about, namely the expropriation of the Irish capitalist class. This underlying, but never overt, socialist theme develops as the play progresses. The petty squabbling is cast aside. A sense of them and us develops – of community, of solidarity – and a politicisation of the tenement dwellers, while unstated is, nevertheless, implicit in the play's ending.

The starting point for any political critique of the Dublin plays is to accept that O'Casey was presenting the 1916 Rising and the subsequent War of Independence as the historical development of the 1913 lockout.

O'Casey was attempting to reflect the reality of the newly independent Free State. Nationalism had failed to deliver for the masses on the potential for radical social advancement that the working-class struggle of 1913, the socially progressive content of the 1916 Proclamation, and the Democratic Programme of 1919 had all envisaged. Seán O'Faoláin is one of the few critics who understood with the utmost precision what O'Casey was suggesting in the Dublin Plays; 'Seán O'Casey's plays are thus an exactly true statement of the Irish Revolution whose flag should be, not the tricolour, but the plough and the stars of the labouring classes.'⁷ When in 1928, W.B. Yeats rejected O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*, it led to an irrevocable breakdown in relations between O'Casey and the Abbey. O'Casey, by now living in England, never wrote another play for the Abbey.

Rise o' the Red Star

In the late 1930s, O'Casey described Moscow as 'a flame to light the way of all men towards the people's ownership of the world'.⁸ Moscow was just the final stop on an intellectual journey that had commenced long before the Abbey accepted his first play. O'Casey was aware of the revolutionary developments in Russia in 1917 and beyond. He was a member of the Socialist Party of Ireland

and took an active part in the agitation in support of the Russian Revolution. He recalled how he raised 'his voice at the Dublin meetings, held to protest against the interference waged by the Great Powers in order to down the struggling Revolution'.⁹ Despite the rise of Stalinism in the late 1920s, and the show trials of the old Bolshevik leadership, which destroyed all vestiges of worker's control in the USSR, O'Casey supported the USSR up to the time of his death in 1964.

The rise of fascism in the 1930s and especially the Spanish Civil War also had a profound effect on O'Casey. In a letter to his publisher in November 1936, he wrote, 'I am praying to God that the Spanish Communists may win.'¹⁰ He responded to the political and economic crisis of the 1930s and 40s by writing a series of plays that Jack Mitchell has termed his 'revolution plays': *The Star Turns Red*, *Purple Dust* and *Red Roses for Me*.¹¹ *The Star Turns Red* (1939) was his literary contribution to the fight against fascism in Spain and Germany and significantly in Ireland as well. In a letter, he spelt out his purpose in writing the play: 'Star Turns Red was of course, a curse on the Nazi-Fascist powers; plus, the attempt to form the "Blueshirts" in Ireland.'¹² The play depicts the world of the 1930s, where the centre had politically dissolved, and the options facing humanity were either socialism or

barbarism. *The Star Turns Red* was O'Casey's most trenchant literary statement on communism, fascism, and the Catholic Church's support for Franco, with walk-on parts for Paddy Belton's Christian Front and the Blueshirts in Ireland.¹³ O'Casey described the play as 'a confession of faith'.¹⁴ There is no ambiguity in this clash of ideologies; he is clear about which side he supports.

Literature and politics

All great works of art or literature must be assessed primarily on their artistic merit; that is the function of aesthetics. However, any discussion of Seán O'Casey's drama inevitably breaks out of the realm of aesthetics and into the realm of politics. Many of his post-colonial critics insist that 'O'Casey never sees or at least never presents any understanding of the important role played by nationalist ideology' in Irish politics.¹⁵ But that is precisely what O'Casey was warning about – how nationalism had dominated Irish politics to the exclusion of class politics, and the negative outcomes associated with this. Declan Kiberd writes about the post-revolutionary disillusionment that is at the heart of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. Kiberd defends the republican tradition by suggesting that O'Casey's point was that 'nationalism rather than

real republicanism has triumphed, and with it the self-interest of the propertied class'.¹⁶ Kiberd suggested that this is 'O'Casey's darkest play', one that lays bare all that is wrong with the world, but that O'Casey is less clear in implying what he stands for. O'Casey exposes the irrelevance of the nationalists and the impotency of the workers, but he never takes it one step further to 'raise questions about the entire social system which gives rise to such blindness'.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, there are problems with some political aspects of the Dublin plays; O'Casey was not rigorous enough in measuring up to the exacting questions raised in the plays about the outcome of that exciting decade, but his plays did, at least, undermine the smug confidence of conservative nationalism.

International standing

In the 1950s and 60s, as the English-speaking world turned away from O'Casey, German productions added to his reputation and consolidated his position as an innovative writer of international standing.¹⁸ Because of their shared political perspectives, Bertolt Brecht particularly welcomed O'Casey's work, specifically exploring how his post-Dublin drama could be staged. The radical tradition of Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, combined with the technical abilities of German theatre,

120

meant that they were able to highlight the way O'Casey integrated the tragic and the comic to explore human relations on a more personal level. *Purple Dust*, which was staged by the Berliner Ensemble in 1966, showed O'Casey's stagecraft at its best. Hans-Georg Simmgen suggested these productions were a development of the 'creative and critical element of Brecht's theatre work'.¹⁹ This work showed O'Casey as one of the most innovative and thoughtful dramatists of the twentieth century. Over one hundred productions of his work, mainly in East Germany, were staged during that time, and it is interesting to reflect on his struggle to develop a synthesis between politics, form, and content that paralleled European developments in drama. Like Brecht, O'Casey set himself against 'Tragic Theatre' because he believed that 'nothing human can possibly be outside the powers of humanity'.²⁰ Perhaps 'optimistic tragedy' is a better description of his work; inherent in the death or defeat of his working class heroes and antiheroes is the possibility of progress.²¹

Theoretically, his contribution to the debate on the relationship between literature and politics was slight, but a selection of his essays on the theatre, collected in two books published after his death, are still of interest.²² They reflect his attempt to develop both a form and a technique that was in step with the

changing historical context and the range of content matter he dealt with during his career. O'Casey understood more than most of his generation that 'art never follows a flag'.²³ Ireland was for him an endless conflict of love and hate, of fulfilment and failure. Indeed, it was his relation to the conflicts of the early 20th century that makes his work so interesting, and at times, so contradictory. Unlike his friend, the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid, O'Casey could never be accused of painting nationalism red. To avoid the sentimental image of Ireland peddled by the remnants of the Irish Literary Revival, he tried to link his later work to the modernist developments in European theatre.

Debates on culture

The debates over the relationship between literature and politics, the role played by culture within a capitalist society, and the moral duty of a writer in an epoch of extreme crisis were issues that exercised the progressive movement during the 1930s. Unfortunately, the debate became polarised between those who supported the cultural policy of the Soviet Union under Stalin and those who believed that while art should and must respond to the historical and social context of its time, artistic production must also be allowed a high degree of autonomy. Alick West, a former student of Trinity College Dublin, wrote of the

tension between culture and propaganda that dominated much of the debate in the 1930s. In his autobiography, commenting on this relationship, West wrote what is perhaps the best summary of that debate:

In this sense it was true that culture is a weapon in the fight for socialism. But the truth depended on recognition of the greater truth that socialism is a weapon in the fight for culture. For our final aim was not the establishment of a political and economic structure, but the heightening of human life. Without this recognition, the slogan becomes a perversion of the truth since it degraded culture into a means to a political end.²⁴

O'Casey, to his credit, stood with dramatists such as Ernst Toller, a socialist, who declared that 'as a writer I speak to all who are prepared to listen, regardless of what party or group they belong to. The idea is more important to me than the slogan'.²⁵ Over the last one hundred years or so, the relationship between politics and art has been a contentious and challenging issue for political activists offering critical responses to a work of art. Where does the balance lie between a political assessment of a work of art and an aesthetic one? The difficulty with a response that judges art through the politics of the artist, as was favoured by

sections of the left from the 1930s onwards, is that several of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, such as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, were politically on the right and in some cases supporters of fascism. A more nuanced view understood that their political opinions may have diminished the individual, but not the work. A second complication is that a great deal of modernist writing does not lend itself to a political reading because of the way it rejects historicism or causality, emphasising instead, the importance of experimentation with form and language, symbolism, and the distorted reality behind the outward appearance.

O'Casey hated the 'boy meets tractor' style of writing that emerged from the USSR in the 1930s. He refused to be dictated to about what he could or should write, and perhaps this is why he never joined the Communist Party. Any attempt to silence his fellow writers and artists, whether the attack came from the right or the left, was fiercely resisted by O'Casey. His condemnation of the 'concrete shelter' style of Soviet literature in 1946 was as forceful as anything published at the time: 'There isn't any doubt in my mind that the concrete shelter is as bad as the ivory tower; worse, in fact, for the ivory tower keeps in faint touch with present life, but the walls of a concrete shelter are too thick to hear even a

whisper of it.’²⁶ O’Casey always understood that his political involvement was a civic or moral duty and the writing of drama was his vocation. His concept was not art as propaganda, but politics as a vision of a new way of life that could be captured in his art. In all his work, after he left Ireland, he attempted to defend the values of spontaneity, experimentation, artistic quality, and the writer’s independence from dogma. In other words, his work was in no sense an instrument of propaganda for this or that political ideology or party but was something that had an innate connection to the fate of humanity and an active and committed attachment to its place and time.

Summary

Paul Kerryson, who directed the Dublin trilogy in 1992 in England, expressed doubts about the post-Dublin plays: ‘His later plays showed him to be ahead of his time, but I don’t think they have anything in particular to say today.’²⁷ Other dramatists who looked at the totality of his work saw it differently; Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney and John Livings in Britain, Arthur Miller and Lorraine Hansberry in America, Augusto Boal in Brazil, Brendan Behan, John Arden, Roddy Doyle and the Sheridan brothers at the Project Theatre in Dublin, provide evidence to the contrary. Brian Friel spoke for a generation when writing

about O’Casey: ‘We all came out from under his overcoat.’²⁸ Production techniques have caught up with O’Casey’s imagination, and a new generation of directors and actors are exploring the underlying potential of his work, freed from the burden of history that has dominated, and in some cases overwhelmed, productions in the recent past. Directors are taking a fresh look at O’Casey, reinterpreting the plays rather than presenting them as traditional classics of the stage. The ANU Theatre Group’s production of *The Lost O’Casey* in 2018 reframed O’Casey’s one-act play from 1924, *Nannie’s Night Out*, as an unflinching examination of motherhood, addiction, and Dublin’s chronic housing crisis in a contemporary setting that points to a possible way forward for future productions or adaptations of these neglected plays.²⁹ In *The Lost O’Casey*, ANU channelled their rage against poverty and injustice in the spirit of O’Casey, but with a decidedly twenty-first-century edge. Both O’Casey’s 1924 production of *Nannie’s Night Out* and ANU’s 2018 *The Lost O’Casey*: ‘forced audience members out of their comfort zone by confronting them with what they would prefer not to see: the unsettling reality of lives lived on the streets and behind the doors of tenement rooms or council flats’.³⁰

O’Casey was uniquely placed to write about the working class because, almost

alone among his literary generation, his background in the north Dublin tenements gave him access to that world. He created working class characters that we now take for granted. O'Casey also cut across the concept of the 'great men of history', who shape the world around them by their actions. In a piece in the New York Times in 1950, O'Casey reflected on *The Plough and the Stars*:

If it has any 'significance' it is that a small number – or even one fine mind – may initiate a movement but cannot bring it to success without the cooperation of what is called 'the common people'. The gallant men who rose in 1916 to strike for Ireland's independence were defeated, and what they stood for only succeeded when, years later, the people as a whole swung around from opposition to support.³¹

If Brecht and his contemporaries articulated the capacity of modern urban men and women to throw off the concept of bourgeois individualism in favour of egalitarianism, O'Casey articulated the position of the Irish working class left behind by the historical failures of Irish nationalism. O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, written in the post-revolutionary period, explores the same dynamic as Toller's *Masses and Man* or Kaiser's *Gas II*, which registered the disillusionment they felt following the failure of the German

Revolution at the end of the First World War and the collapse of their expectations and hopes.³² When the German revolutionary, Karl Liebknecht, defended the failed socialist revolution in 1919 by suggesting that 'there were defeats that were victories'; he could have been writing about the 1916 Rising. Liebknecht went on to say that there were also 'victories that were more fatal than defeats'.³³ For Seán O'Casey and many others, the narrow-minded conservative state that emerged following the War of Independence and the Civil War was a 'victory' that felt like a defeat.

Endnotes

- 1) Richard Watts Jr. 7 August 1960. *New York Post*.
- 2) Pádraig Yeates. 25 August 2003. *The Irish Times*.
- 3) Sean O'Casey. 1975. *Letters*, Macmillan, New York. Vol. 1. p. 697
- 4) *Ibid.*
- 5) Peadar O'Donnell. 1974. Quoted in Michael McNerney, *Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel*. Dublin, O'Brien Press. p. 197.
- 6) James Moran. 2005. *Staging the Easter Rising: 1916 as Theatre*, Cork, Cork University Press. pp. 33, 34.
- 7) Seán O'Faoláin. 1970. quoted in Ronald Ayling (ed), *Sean O'Casey*, Nashville, Aurora. p. 194.
- 8) Sean O'Casey. 1952. *Autobiographies*, Macmillan, London. Vol. 5. p. 75.
- 9) Sean O'Casey. 1975. *Letters*, Macmillan, New York. Vol. 1. p. 781.
- 10) *Ibid.* p. 642.
- 11) Jack Mitchell. 1980. *A Study of the Twelve Major Plays of Sean O'Casey*, New York, International Publishers. p. 149.
- 12) Sean O'Casey. 1992. *Letters*, Washington, Catholic University of America. Vol. 4. p. 279.
- 13) Formed in the 1930s, the semi-fascist Army Comrades Association, later known as the National Guard and modelled on Mussolini's fascists in Italy was also known as the Blueshirts from the colour of their tunic. In August 1936, the *Irish Independent* called for the formation of a committee to support Franco's fascists in Spain. This led to the formation of the Irish Christian Front with Patrick Belton the organisation's president.
- 14) Sean O'Casey. 1975. *Letters*, Macmillan, New York. Vol. 1. p. 775.
- 15) G. J. Watson. 1978. quoted in David Krause (ed). *The Paradox of Ideological Formalism: Art vs. Ideology*. *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 28. No. 3. pp. 516–24.
- 16) Declan Kiberd. 2001. *Irish Classics*, London, Granta Books. p. 484.
- 17) *Ibid.*
- 18) See Regina Heidenreich-Krawschak. Fall 1978. *Critical Reception of Sean O'Casey in Berlin since 1953*. *The Seán O'Casey Review*, Vol. 5. No. 1. pp. 55–68.
- 19) Hans-Georg Simmgen. 1980. *O'Casey Stage Productions in the German Democratic Republic*. in Micheál Ó hAodha, (ed.), *The O'Casey Enigma*, Cork, Mercier Press. pp. 70–80.
- 20) Bertolt Brecht. 1967. *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, John Willett (tr.), London, Methuen. p. 32.
- 21) For details of German productions see Manfred Pauli. 1977. *Sean O'Casey: Drama, Poesie, Wirklichkeit*, Berlin, Henschelverlag.
- 22) Sean O'Casey. 1974. *The Sting and the Twinkle*, London, Macmillan. Sean O'Casey. 1967. *Blasts and Benedictions*, London, Macmillan.
- 23) Sean O'Casey. 1978. *Notebook 15*, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
- 24) Alick West. 1969. *One Man in his Time*, London, Allen & Unwin. p. 132.
- 25) Ernst Toller. 1987. quoted in Martin Kane (ed), *Weimar Germany and the Limits of Political Art*, Fife, Hutton Press. p. 120.
- 26) Sean O'Casey. 1946. 'The Theatre and the Politician', *Commonwealth Review*, London.

- 27) Quoted in Victoria Stewart. 2003. *About O'Casey: The playwright and the work*, Faber & Faber. p. 98.
- 28) Brian Friel. Spring 1978. *Seán O'Casey Review*, Vol 4. No 2. p. 87.
- 29) ANU Theatre Group. September 2018. *The Lost O'Casey*, Abbey Theatre, Dublin, was based on O'Casey's forgotten play, *Nannie's Night Out*.
- 30) José Laners. 2021. *Dragging Our Hidden Slums into the Centre of the Footlights: Homelessness, addiction, and audience discomfort in Sean O'Casey's 'Nannie's Night Out' and ANU's 'The Lost O'Casey'*, *New Hibernia Review*. Vol. 25. No. 2. pp. 60–75.
- 31) Sean O'Casey. 12 March 1950. *New York Times*.
- 32) Ernst Toller. 1935. *Masses and Man. Seven Plays*, London, John Lane, and Georg Kaiser. 1963. *Gas II*. New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing.
- 33) Karl Liebknecht at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/laboraction-ny/1943/vol07no04/liebknecht.htm>.