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SEAN O'CASEY'S EARLY PLAYS AND
THE IRISH REVIVAL

This article is based on the author's Master Thesis entitled "The Irish Spirit in O'Casey's Early Plays" /1976/ written under guidance and supervision of doc. dr hab. I. Janicka - Swiderska, and available in the English Dept., University of Łódź.

It is a popular error to link Sean O'Casey's early drama with a literary movement known as the Irish Revival even though it is otherwise agreed that the term should be applied rather to the years preceding World War I. Though Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats were still active at the time of O'Casey's debut, the tide of Irish genuine dramatic originality, which had stormed the foreign shores amazing all theatrical world, was over. Synge was dead, the then Lady Gregory's drama could not reach far outside Ireland, and W.B. Yeats was committed to far too many activities to alone keep the receding wave up. The star of the Abbey Theatre faded for want of "fuel" from new ambitious dramatists. As a result the Abbey Company revived plays already produced, or staged non Irish drama, usually commercial novelties from West End.

The troublesome years of European and home wars deepened the

crisis of ^{the} Abbey but, at the same time, invited authors to give artistic expression to great passions tormenting Ireland and the world. W.B. Yeats seemingly did not hear this call of the times. Other authors wrote patriotic plays of little value /Lennox Robinson, St. John Ervine, count^{ess} Markiewicz/. The appearance of a new, first-rate dramatist, which O'Casey surely was, opened a way to "revive the Revival".

After rejecting Sean O'Casey's earliest plays, the Abbey Company produced "The Shadow of a Gunman" /1923/, then "Juno and the Paycock" /1924/, and "The Plough and the Stars" /1926/. Both the author and the theatre needed each other and both profited a lot from this cooperation: O'Casey saved Yeats theatre from decline and bankruptcy; the Abbey, in turn, made him famous. The Abbey Theatre attracted both the best among Irish actors /F.J. McCromick Gaby Fallon, Barry Fitzgerald 1// who played O'Casean major characters in Dublin productions, and the most renowned critics who, however, did not help O'Casey much having proved much less sensitive than their English colleagues. The latter gave the rising playwright a hearty welcome, crowned with G.B. Shaw's: "I am most enthusiastic" 2/. In case of a success, which with O'Casey was tremendous, the name of the Abbey was a warrant of wide interest among critics and West End producers. In this way O'Casey's fame crossed the Irish Sea and, with time, the Atlantic.

Not satisfied with the reading of the anti-war message of "Juno", O'Casey wrote the provocative "Plough" which caused a scandalous rioting in the theatre during the third night of the play's run. "You have disgraced yourselves again" 3/. Yeats

roared from the stage at furious mob meaning a similar reception of Synge's "Playboy of the Western World". Synge's masterpiece had also been mistaken for a slander to the audiences' national pride, an offence against patriotism, and a challenge to morality. Analogous reception of "The Plough and the Stars" could well confirm O'Casey's critics in their attempts to match him with John Millington Synge. This habit has been pointed out by Mr. Ronald Ayling in his brilliant introduction to the collection of critical essays "Sean O'Casey":

"It is a common critical practice to review O'Casey's work as though he was, primarily, an Abbey dramatist following in Synge's footsteps" ^{4/} and as " /.../ a footnote or appendix to J.M. Synge and the Abbey Theatre Movement" ^{5/}.

Truly, there are some similarities with Synge's drama to be traced in O'Casey's workshop of the Dublin period, but these are secondary to obvious differences between the two playwrights. Both make use of the colourful regional dialects: one of the Aran Islands and Western Ireland, the other of Dublin slums. Both find their comic and tragic themes in everyday life of the Irish people but false analogies should be avoided, since the two dramatists developed quite different techniques Synge was, above all, a poet, O'Casey essentially a realist. In "Riders to the Sea" Synge exploited the tragic muse in her purest shape, "The Playboy" makes use of a tragicomic pattern, while O'Casey's drama cannot be classified that easily. His was a mixture of the tragic and the comic, melodrama, farce, and the grotesque: the technique so complex that it does not fall under any of the accepted terms. Moreover, J.M. Synge's drama

is not based on social and political questions to the same extent as is O'Casey's. Although some motifs of this nature may be traced in the reactions of the villagers to murder in "The Playboy", these traces cannot be compared to the impact political and social issues had on the shape of O'Casey's "Dublin Trio". Therefore, and for many other reasons Synge and O'Casey are incomparable and, moreover, belong to two different periods in the history of Irish drama.

Neither may we compare Sean O'Casey's art to that of W.B. Yeats. Yeats' purpose in constructing his plays was to obtain maximum simplicity and unity /which also shows through his interest in the ascetic formula of the Japanese No theatre/, while O'Casey used variety of artistic means and styles introducing dialect, mixture of dramatic genres, music, songs, off-stage effects, and later, even dance. No common points can be found in the attitudes of the two playwrights toward Ireland. Though both exploit the name of legendary Cathleen in Houlihan /Yeats - in "Countess Cathleen", O'Casey - in "The Shadow of a Gunman"/, their concept of this popularly acknowledged symbol of Ireland are just the opposite. For Yeats the old woman underwent a metamorphosis becoming a beautiful and joyous young lady whenever the Irish took to arms and shed blood for her sake, whereas in O'Casey's "Gunman" Seumas Shields depicts her as an old woman who suffers because of the bloodshed.

O'Casey's drama bears no resemblance to that of Lady Gregory who exploited old Irish mythology rather than contemporary themes, and set her plays in rural locale while O'Casey made use of urban setting and hence constructed entirely different

characters. However, the question of similarity or influence Lady Gregory's art could have had on O'Casey is altogether irrelevant since the Lady's drama belongs artistically to the period even before Yeats and Synge. Her drama is postromantic in spirit which is simply incompatible with the early socio-political plays by Sean O'Casey.

Finally, even if O'Casey had wished to imitate the three greatest Abbey authors: Synge's poetic drama, Yeats' ascetic symbolism or Lady Gregory's pastoral and romance, he simply could not have ~~done~~, because he had not been well acquainted with their output before he entered the Abbey with his first plays^{6/}. His attention was focussed on Shakespeare and classics of literature when he wrote his first Dublin plays in a poor tenement room^{7/}. He had been in the Abbey as a spectator but twice before he entered it as an author^{8/}.

When all these points are taken into account, it becomes clear that Sean O'Casey's early plays cannot be regarded as inspired in any way by Synge, or Yeats, or Lady Gregory. O'Casey's plays cannot be counted among those which made for the so called, Irish Revival. This, however, does not contradict the statement that O'Casey occupies one of the leading positions in the Irish dramatic heritage.

NOTES:

1. ed. E.H. Mikhail and John O'Riordan. The Siting and the Twinkle, MacMillan /London, 1974/.
2. ed. Ronald Ayling. Sean O'Casey, MacMillan /London, 1969/: Introduction.

3. script of Cradle of Genius, film by Plough Production Ltd. /1959/, as in The Siting and the Twinkle op. cit.
4. R. Ayling op. cit., p. 21.
5. *ibid.*, p. 24.
6. D. Krause. Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work, MacGibbon and Kee /London, 1960/: pp. 21-22.
7. *ibid.*, pp. 18-19 and 21-22.
8. *ibid.*, p. 22.