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The Silver Tassie: A Melange of Dramatic Techniques

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Abstract

Dramatic criticism of any playwright has almost always taken two divergent directions, one considering plays as literature and the other considering them as theatre. It is true of O'Casey's plays also. Critics of the first direction, notable among whom are T.R. Henn, Raymond Williams, Ronaki Peacock and Moody Prior, have expressed dissatisfaction with O'Casey's achievement as a playwright because his plays are not good literature. On the other hand, theatre critics like John Gassner, George Jean Nathan, Brooks Atkinson and Maxwell Anderson hold O'Casey in high esteem for his remarkable sense of the theatre. When Yeats criticized *The Silver Tassie*, of course unjustifiably,¹ he was of the party of the first group of critics.

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The Yeatsian response to *The Silver Tassie*² has been adopted by a much later critic like John O'Riordan, but for praising *The Silver Tassie*. O'Riordan considers *The Silver Tassie* as treating of the European War as its central theme. But if we consider the play as a whole we will have no difficulty in concluding that the War here, an historical event, has been mythologized as is the case with O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, and acquires a metaphoric status of a menacing factor disrupting human relationships and helping in the portrayal of the ugly crust of selfishness and materialism on human soul. In this regard this play is basically different from Shemil's *The Journey's End* which O'Casey has described as a piece of false affrontery."³ The acrimonious exchange between Yeats and O'Casey after the play was rejected by the former in May 1928,⁴ is now too well known to require any discussion. We propose to discuss in the present paper the dramatic techniques of *The Silver Tassie* as a whole and not concentrate on the second Act of the play only which was done by Yeats.

Almost all the critics have concluded that the play has a neatly divisible structural framework, the first, third, and fourth Acts are realistic and the second Act is expressionistic.⁵ Though O'Casey has denied any acquaintance with expressionism- "I don't know what expressionism means--"⁶ We are inclined to accept the line of Joan Tepleton who has asserted that "the dream structure of the second Act is in line with Toller and Kaiser and that it is a basic departure from realistic theatre." But we are hesitant in agreeing with her that the second Act is the most significant carrier of "the weight of the play's theme."⁷ Our analysis of the play in

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the following pages will demonstrate that the technique of the whole play is non- realistic and is, in fact, an epitome of all modern techniques-- such as naturalism, expressionism, symbolism, Brechtian Verfordung (alienation) music, dance, song, myth and pantomime- all amalgamated by the alchemy of O'Casey's unique imagination.

What Robert Hogan said about four decades ago holds true even today." the play," he asserted, "is a strange and vivid melange of methods whose potentialities have never been fully plumbed."⁸ The operation of the blended technique is discernible from the beginning until the end of the play. The allegedly realistic scenes show O'Casey's subtle exploitation of non-realistic scenes show O'Casey's subtle exploitation of non- realistic devices as the 'exclusively' expressionist second Act⁹ has strong realistic elements. The opening sentence of the first stage direction, for example, on the one hand establishes the naturalistic slum locate of the action and on the other simultaneously focuses on the bizarre and sinister visual image of "the center mast of a steamer, at the top of which gleams a white light,"¹⁰ thus, creating dual stage for presenting two situations - quite different in connotation-- simultaneously which is analogous to the cinematographic technique. The one situation is the hysterically jubilant march of the hero's procession of victory with all the flavor of vitality, strength, joy and dance. The other hinted at situation is the waiting steamer which will soon whistle the protagonist away from his exuberant and Dionysiac activity to his journey to the eventual destruction of everything that is going on during and at the end of the procession: this simultaneous duality of the positive and the negative is reinforced by the colour combination of the props on the stage. The colors, purple, red and yellow, co-exist with the black. Besides the dual stage, and the colour schemes, O-Casey employs Symbolism in the midst of the realistic details. Susie Monican, for example, as we look at the stage before the action begins, a staunch believer in self-denial and puritanical practices, is shown as "standing at the table polishing a Lee Enfield rifle." The phallic symbolism of the image to subtly undercut the blind religious belief in self-denial is too vivid to miss. This point is immediately reinforced by what the dramatist says in the following stage direction:

She is a gift of twenty-two, well-shaped limbs, challenging breasts, all of which are defiantly hidden by a rather long dark blue skirt and bodice buttoning up to the throat, relieved by a crimson scarf around her neck...¹¹

The scheme of the colours is a pointer to the assertion of the eventual victory of the natural urges over the spirit of self denial: The implication of vitality and suggested sensuality of the colour red in the company of the dark blue of self denial is inescapably present here.

As the dramatic action beings with the gossip of the minor characters- Sylvester and Simon- about preparing our response to the hero before he puts in his appearance on the stage, we hear the almost simultaneously going on chanting of a religious hymn by Susie and the song of cy, freedom and satisfaction by Mrs. Foran at the prospect of her cruel and nagging husband's imminent departure for the trenches. The initial situation, preparatory to the commencement of the main plot and to the appearance of the major characters, amply demonstrates the complexity

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of O'Casey's dramatic technique- an amalgamation of realism, symbolism, song chant, painting, farce (e.g. in the deliberately self- conscious and quite often incongruous use of the language in the manner of a Mrs. Malaprop and their alternately tapping and blowing through their pipes). the serious, the comic and the farcical go on simultaneously in the initial situation itself in the conversation among Sylvester, Simon, Mrs. Heegan, and Susie. This pattern is discernible in all the allegedly naturalistic situations.

In Act I the main story begins after prolonged comic interruptions which are significantly conducive to the creation of the naturalistic fibre of the play. In fact, O'Casey devotes about twenty five of the thirty-four pages of Act 1 to the preparatory part. The pace of the preparatory dramatization is rather slow in the naturalistic manner. But once Harry arrives on the stage the pace of the action is hysterically fast as the excitement of the victory and its brief celebration is intense. The excitement of victory has again been conveyed through a technique, amalgamated of naturalism, symbolism, song and Dionysian intensity of the physical jostling together of the hero and his fans, Ironically enough, the situation of excitement, jubilation and intense expression of exuberance is punctuated repeatedly in the ritualistically intoned anxiety of Mrs. Heegan about the likelihood of her son's missing the steamer which will meet with the punishment of desertion and deprivation of the mother's regular war allowance. There is a subtle mixture of the ecstatic moment of the full play of the file force and the negative force which is propelled by materialism and selfishness. O'Casey deliberately uses religious ritual's distortion to have sinister innuendoes for Harry, who, as it were, meets with nemesis for his blasphemy contained in his using the silver cup with explicit sexual connotations. Herein this situation of: Dionysiac excitement O'Casey is using the silver tassie image in a semi mythicized sense. It acquires a complex symbolic significance relating to the religious connotation of the 'cup of love', the sexual symbolism and the symbolism of the triumph of the muscle power and youth of man. O'Casey establishes the complexity of the tassie symbolism in the beginning of the play so that its destruction towards the end of the play may produce the desired dramatic experience. The complex dramatic technique of The Silver Tassie- epitomizing almost all the modern dramatic devices- reaches its landmark point as the first Act draws to a close. The apparently naturalistic movement of the first Act ends with the highly symbolical and expressionistic mixing up in the ritualistic chanting of the characters (you must go back) first individually then collectively. In this intoning of the blind but selfish adoration of war, the characters, who have stayed back home, appear to be urbanized and reduced to a conceptualized entity. The melange of the dramatic devices is completed when the above intoned hurrying out of the war heroes is punctuated by the soldiers' singing the Scottish ballad, entitled *'The Silver Tassie'* by Robbert Burns. In an ironically significant manner the Irish ballad being sung while the soldiers are walking to the steamer becomes increasingly inaudible while the chanted hurrying out remains at a louder pitch.

Act II, a professedly expressionistic scene to simultaneously portray the immediate reality and suggest the timelessness of the experience, is in fact dependent upon abundant

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realistic details, alternating with symbolic features. The locale of the action of the scene is "the war zone." the visually realized realistic details are mentioned in the detailed stage direction. the pictures of "jogged and lacerated ruin of what was once a monastery, "heaps of rubbish mark where houses once stood," "the ground dotted with rayed and shattered shell-holes", "red cross station," "figure of the virgin," "white faced wearing a black robe," "a life size crucifix," whose one arm is "released by shell" and which is "learning forward the released arm outstretched towards the figure of the Virgin," "a gunwheel to which Boy is tied," "a big howitzer gun with a long sinister barrel," etc. are all concretely realistic with symbolic signification.¹² Later in the scene the appearance of the Visitor, from outside the world of the scene, establishes, sarcastically, the connection between the two worlds -- i.e. the world of devastation on account of war and the world of the people who are responsible for it.¹³

The significant expressionistic features in Act II are that the characters lose individuality and are reduced to mathematical anonymity. Besides this, they are all dehumanized as they are huddled into a mass entity: The great athletic hero of the first Act is left unidentified. The totality of the picture of the locale and its present occupants are conceptualized abstractions of the effects of war. Then the place and action of the scene are as isolated and cut off from the human world as the dehumanized individual participants in the drama of the present situation are. Lest this expressionistic abstraction might be too bizarre, the dramatist expressionistic abstraction might be too bizarre, the dramatist establishes a link of this isolated territory with the outside world through the soldiers reminiscing their familial life back at home and their receiving gifts and letters from home.¹⁴ We have the sinister interweaving, throughout the almost static scene, of intoning of biblical passages of destruction and the Mass, and prophecy of the Croucher which contains blasphemous inversion of life giving religious faith in the deliberate pursuit of the war.¹⁵ The voice coming from the monastery- "Accendat in nobis Dominus ignem sui amoris, et flammam actemae caritatis"¹⁶- meaning the fire of divine love and eternal charity, ironically contrasts with the vision of institutionalized hatred. The soldiers' weariness and fatigue is brought out through the visual and linguistic effects contained in the clear inarticulacy of their grumbling.¹⁷ the most dominant expressionistic image in the midst of other images of loneliness, dehumanization, despair and misdirection of faith is the image of the howitzer gun standing sinisterly in the company of the dilapidated and moaning monastery and the helpless crucifix. The inverted faith in arms and destruction naturally brings in the dramatic experience of the hopelessness of man's predicament. The war has deliberately not been typically or temporally localized so that, as mentioned earlier, the timelessness of experience is focalized. In fact, O'Casey has done the same thing in his Dublin trilogy where war of a sort forms the background to project human predicament. Thus, this controversial scene, much praised and maligned, has a thickly textured technique consisting of a variety of dramatic devices, both conventional and innovative.

As we have mentioned earlier, the last two Acts are declared by a majority of O'Casey critics as realistic. If we take the substances of the overall situation of Act III it is certainly

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realistic so far as the goings on of a hospital ward are concerned. It faithfully presents the layout, organization and the operation of an indoor ward. As we had to wait for the main dramatic action to begin for about 25 pages of the first Act, here also the major portion of the Act is devoted to the comical choric function of the duo- Sylvester and Simon- in regard to their clarifying to the audience the changed amorous scenario involving Jessie, Harry and Barney. The other important naturalistic bit of the theme of the third Act is a continuation of Mrs. Heegan's obsessive concern with the economic aspect of war service in the first Act and that of "a hundred percent incapacitation" holding out the prospect of "the maximum allowance." The central thematic concern of Harry's predicament is dramatized only towards the end of the Act. the buoyant athlete of the first Act has now been reduced to a "living" commodity incapable of movement. His picture is that of a pathetic creature hoping against hope and trying toward despair. Now this element of despair of a robust youth reduced to a 'wheeling creature', where no hope is within sight despite the repeated chanting of "while there is life there is hope," is conveyed not through realistic, representational device but through the exploitation of non-naturalistic devices such as symbolism, subtle suggestiveness and underlying contrasts. The use of contrast is hinted at in the simultaneously operative dual stage technique. The main stage is one of dehumanization, death in life, despair and enclosure - this is the hospital ward itself. The other stage is the outside world where the setting sun throws a gleaming light on the breeze breathing verdurous and health asserting world of nature. The subtle symbolism is starkly realized visually in the shape of the patients' beds which bear mathematical numbers. Harry's bed gives the picture of a tomb with a cross appended on the top to a wooden piece attached to the bed. Barney leaves the bunch of flowers, a souvenir for the patient from his earlier fan and beloved, on the feet of Harry as if Harry was already buried and the floral tribute is offered as a ritualistic formality. Besides these, the colour combination of white and black assigned to Harry's ward outfit creates a collective picture of dismal darkness engulfing his life where he can appear merely as an object of self-pity. Thus, it is the non-realistic devices which lend suggestiveness and intensity to the meaning emanating from the naturalistic paraphernalia and action of this allegedly realistic scene.

The final Act appears more solidly realistic, insofar as the events are concerned and the story line develops to a conclusion, than the first and third Acts. The setting of the action is the dance hall of the Avondale Football Club. the decoration of the dance hall, with its colour scheme of red, crimson and black, and three lanterns hanging from the ceiling suggesting "an illuminated black cross," and the use of a dual stage again are the significant pointers to the continuing technical pattern of amalgamating a variety of dramatic devices to signify life and death, disease and health, which establishes, as it were, the cosmic pattern of light and dark in the universe. The comic scene between Sylvester and Simon about the telephone episode is crudely farcical in the Boucicoltian tradition.

But it contributes to the realism of the whole scene. The movement of the story towards a tragic catastrophe and conclusion is patently naturalistic. But this facade of naturalism is

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enlivened by passages of lyricism,¹⁸ antiphonal voices, litany of deprivation and chanting, ironically echoing that of Act II,¹⁹ and song which is contrapuntal with the contrasted mood of the action going on in another corner of the dance hall.²⁰ In addition of this we have the symbolic significance of the silver tassie which is identified with life and with Harry. Since Harry is now "mangled and bruised" the silver cup must also be so.

References

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