

Walking the "Thorny Way":
Pressures and Predicaments of Womanhood in

Sean O'Casey's *Three Dublin Plays*

by

Sarah L. Townsend

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A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2002

For my mother
who made me Irish by osmosis

Acknowledgements

I wish to extend sincerest thanks to my thesis advisor, Professor George Bornstein, for introducing me to Irish literature and supporting the academic endeavors that have culminated in this thesis. His wisdom, dedication, and unceasing encouragement have made such a project not only possible, but also extremely rewarding. I additionally would like to thank Professor Andrea Henderson for creating such a supportive community in which to work. Finally, I am especially grateful to my family for believing in me always.

Abstract

This thesis examines the experience of Irish womanhood during the revolutionary period of 1916-22 as depicted in Sean O'Casey's plays *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *The Plough and the Stars*. I argue that while the plays' women are not a homogeneous group of characters, they do share a common experience of entrapment. Extreme poverty economically and psychologically entraps O'Casey's tenement women, and the female characters cannot locate a sufficient definition of womanhood in either traditional teachings or revolutionary rhetoric. I trace the consequences of entrapment through the various women of O'Casey's stage.

My first chapter examines the traditional dictates of femininity expressed by characters in the plays. Dominant principles from religious and social teachings insisted upon female religiosity, sexual purity, modesty, domesticity, and propriety. Such demands, however, are irrelevant and unattainable for the tenement women; economic advancement from the squalor of the slums takes precedence over traditional ideals. The conditions of the tenement environment prevent the women from establishing a normative female domestic space. Thus, the female characters spout traditional definitions of womanhood, but they cannot always follow such a model of femininity.

In Chapter Two, I turn to another dominant set of ideology—that of revolutionary rhetoric. While the O'Casey's tenement women reject this ideology, they cannot escape its consequences. Nationalist literature often represented Ireland as a woman, and Cathleen ni Houlihan emerged the most common of such figures. Authors of many nationalist works enjoined women to follow Cathleen's exemplary dedication to Ireland. I examine several portrayals of womanhood in various nationalist writing and expose the inconsistencies between the works. Some of these political works portray Cathleen as passive; such representations uphold dictates of traditional purity and maternal duty. Other literature presents a more militant figure that readily sacrifices her children. I challenge works of nationalist rhetoric in which the author illogically concludes that maternal love and political sacrifice can coexist. I then examine the manner in which plays' men trade their wives and mothers for a female Ireland figure who, incidentally, is portrayed in masculine terms. The male characters replace their female counterparts with the androgynous Cathleen ni Houlihan, thereby compromising the women's feminine identity.

My third chapter examines the ways in which such insufficient ideologies affect the women of O'Casey's plays. I argue that both the inconsistent ideologies of womanhood and the women's own flaws precipitate tragic endings. While *The Shadow of a Gunman*'s Minnie Powell deludes herself into dying for what she perceives to be a glamorous cause, *Juno and the Paycock*'s Juno Boyle, *The Plough and the Stars*'s Nora Clitheroe, and their respective neighbors struggle to protect their families and homes from the consequences of war. The women, however, cannot escape the surrounding violence and destruction. Through common experiences of loss, the women form a tenuous solidarity, albeit one that O'Casey depicts with little hope. I conclude my thesis by placing O'Casey's plays into the broader historical framework of conservative post-revolutionary Irish politics in order to suggest that the processes of ideological entrapment portrayed on O'Casey's stage continue to be of critical and social concern.

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Short Titles

Juno: O'Casey, Sean. *Juno and the Paycock. Three Dublin Plays.* London:
Faber and Faber, 1998.

Plough: O'Casey, Sean. *The Plough and the Stars. Three Dublin Plays.*
London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

Shadow: O'Casey, Sean. *The Shadow of a Gunman. Three Dublin Plays.*
London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

Introduction

In 1924, the Dublin theater critic Joseph Holloway wrote, "[Sean] O'Casey is amused when he hears people say, who never were in a tenement, that his plays are photographic of the life he depicts. They not knowing anything at first hand of what they are talking."¹ Sean O'Casey catapulted to high acclaim as champion of the Dublin poor following the production of his plays *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). These three plays, collectively termed the Dublin plays, portrayed tenement life more realistically than had ever been shown on the Irish stage partly because, as enthusiasts claimed, O'Casey wrote out of his personal experience with poverty. Joseph Holloway, however, notes the irony of the situation. The individuals who applauded O'Casey for his vivid depictions of the Dublin poor were themselves far removed from the conditions of the tenements. Sean O'Casey became renowned as a realist for depicting a world that his Abbey Theatre audiences had never seen.

O'Casey's admirers were nevertheless correct; the dramatized slums of the Dublin plays were grounded in truth. This self-educated playwright's work contrasted sharply with that of his literary contemporaries, for O'Casey's personal experiences did provide him with an intimate understanding of tenement life. In 1880 Sean was born the youngest of thirteen children, and after his father's untimely death in 1886, O'Casey's

¹ Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill, eds., *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection From His Unpublished Journal. 'Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer'* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 232.

family suffered poverty and deprivation. Sean worked for many years as a manual laborer before his writing became a career. O'Casey also infused his plays with political sentiments that he experienced firsthand through his various political activities. O'Casey joined both the Gaelic League and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and he helped organize the 1913 strike of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union led by Jim Larkin. O'Casey also served as the Secretary of the Irish Citizen Army from March to October of 1914 and wrote for the *Irish Worker*, a paper affiliated with Larkin's union. All of these experiences contributed to O'Casey's eventual political disillusionment. O'Casey gradually abandoned the labor and nationalist movements partly because he believed they neglected to adequately address the needs of the poor. By the Easter Rising of 1916, O'Casey had disassociated himself from his political attachments.² His political disenchantment and close connection to the urban poor appeared onstage years later in his tenement characters. The women of the Dublin plays, in particular, echo O'Casey's personal sentiments. O'Casey treats his dominant, apolitical female characters with a sympathy that has prompted critics to label him as a feminist. O'Casey scholars traditionally read the tenement women as pacifists and realists who operate in direct opposition to the hapless and politically-clouded men. Critics like David Krause, George Watson, and Bernard Benstock tout the heroic humanity of O'Casey's women; Benstock hails them as "magnificent heroines, larger than life-size."³ These and other similar

² David Krause, *Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 1-28. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "O'Casey."

³ Bernard Benstock, *Peacocks and Others: Sean O'Casey's World* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976), 93.

traditional readings of the female characters upheld the original interpretations of O'Casey's Dublin plays for several decades.

In the 1970's and 1980's, scholars began to dispute O'Casey's traditional labels as realist and ardent feminist. Biographical studies challenged the supposed reality of the Dublin plays by showing that the author's childhood was not equivalent to those of the tenement dwellers he depicts. O'Casey's only real immersion in the Dublin slums, in fact, occurred during a brief five-month period in 1921-22 when he shared a tenement apartment on 35 Mountjoy Avenue.⁴ Early revisionist work set out to dismantle the heroic celebration of female characters that critics like Benstock offer. In his 1984 account of modern Irish drama, D.E.S. Maxwell deconstructs the model of the apolitical humanitarian female by noting the women's faults: the women do at times espouse political stances and abandon their virtues. Furthermore, he argues that the men whom the women triumph over are not all bad; they, at least, act in manners consistent with their (often flawed) political beliefs.⁵ O'Casey's own letters diminish the heroic interpretation of the female characters, for the author demonstrates that he certainly is not a hero-worshipper. In a letter to the *Irish Independent*, O'Casey bitterly attacks those idealists "determined to make of Ireland the terrible place of land fit only for heroes to live in."⁶ Such evidence has prompted increasingly anti-heroic representations of the women in the Dublin plays, and certain scholars are extremely critical of not only the

⁴ Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 112. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁵ D.E.S. Maxwell, *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama, 1891-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 100-1.

⁶ David Krause, ed., *The Letters of Sean O'Casey, Volume 1* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 175. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "Letters." The quoted excerpt is taken from O'Casey's response to the Republican-led riots to *The Plough and the Stars*.

women, but also the author. Declan Kiberd and Seamus Deane both criticize the playwright's sentimentality and, by default, the women who serve as agents of such emotion. Kiberd attacks O'Casey for employing conventional theatricality, stock characters, and one-sided political representations. The plays' only accomplishment, Kiberd suggests, is its "attack on all -isms and [its] celebration of wives who pick up the pieces left in idealism's wake."⁷ Deane offers a similar argument, stating that although "O'Casey sponsors through women a humanism," the plays are nevertheless dangerously, manipulatively, and forcedly sentimental.⁸ Kiberd and Deane diminish the role of women to that of the one-dimensional figure solely used to evoke a sympathetic response from the audience. In *The Politics of Irish Drama*, Nicholas Grene agrees that the female characters evoke sympathy for their gender, but he challenges Kiberd's and Deane's contentions that the plays are ideologically biased. Instead, Grene argues that the trilogy of plays "works against any simple moral or ideological polarization" (131). His contention is persuasive, yet his argument contains, as do the arguments of Kiberd and Deane, fundamental limitations. Due to the vigorous deconstruction of the women's heroic roles, the female characters virtually disappear from these critical discussions. O'Casey's women, once acclaimed heroines, are so derided and devalued by such criticism that they cease to appear worthy of discussion. Most current critical work on O'Casey focuses on issues of class and politics, and discussions of the tenement women are reduced to scanty sections (sometimes a mere few lines) of an O'Casey chapter in a

⁷ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1995), 223.

⁸ Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 108-9.

broad text on Irish drama. This is a regrettable phenomenon, for close examination of the women's situations and actions actually reveals a great deal about issues of class and politics. A thorough discussion of the women in the Dublin plays, then, will bolster the study of issues that are of contemporary interest.

This study is dedicated to a sustained examination of Irish womanhood as an historical experience, and it traces the manner in which O'Casey depicts the challenges of Irish femininity onstage. This is a study in entrapment. While the female characters differ in age, occupation, belief, and action, O'Casey's women and their real-life counterparts shared the common female experience of entrapment. Inescapable poverty economically confines the women, and dominant ideological codes fail to apply to the specific conditions of their lives. O'Casey certainly does not create perfect women; his characters trap themselves through their own flaws as often as they are entrapped by outside forces. Nevertheless, O'Casey treats the women with a sympathetic pathos. Debates over the author's labels as realist and feminist obscure the fundamental core of O'Casey's drama—namely, the intersection of sympathy and honesty. O'Casey operates as a critical human empathizer who recognizes the limitations placed upon the tenement women, both enforced and self-imposed. His characters have serious flaws, and yet he recognizes the limiting “conditions that arrest human development, stifling the desire. . . and deadening the faculty to understand and enjoy the higher things of life” (Krause, *Letters* 119). O'Casey documents the human shortcomings present in both the creators of ideology and the victims that such rhetoric affects.

I. Abiding

When *Plough*'s Bessie Burgess quotes the Bible about a "woman loud an' stubborn, whose feet abideth not in her own house," she unintentionally describes the collective challenge posed to all the tenement women: to abide by the traditional dictates of womanhood presented in religious and social teachings. Both the female characters onstage and the Dublin women of O'Casey's time operated in a society governed largely by the institution of the Church and remnants of a patriarchal Victorian culture. *Shadow*'s Adolphus Grigson initially appears to be a living embodiment of this patriarchal dominance, for he repeatedly brags about using biblical instruction to monitor the behavior of his wife. Grigson lectures Seamus Shields accordingly:

I tie meself to no woman's apron strings, Mr. Shields; I know how to keep Mrs. Grigson in her place; I have the authority of the Bible for that. I know the Bible from cover to cover, Mr. Davoren, an' that's more than some in this house could say. And what does the Holy Scripture say about woman? It says, 'The woman shall be subject to her husband', an' I'll see that Mrs. Grigson keeps the teachin' av the Holy Book in the letter an' in the spirit. (46-7)

Grigson confidently constructs himself as a representative of an overbearing patriarchal order. Ironically, he appears throughout the remainder of the play as a satirized coward. Grigson and the other men in the Dublin plays take little action to establish male dominance over the women. Instead, the women act as proponents of traditional notions

of femininity and patriarchal rule. The Irish Church of the time was a male-dominated institution, and yet in O'Casey's plays the men rarely discuss religion. The women, in contrast, frequently reference and ardently uphold religious teachings. *Plough's* Jennie Gogan and Bessie Burgess cite biblical quotes throughout the play as evidence in their various arguments. The religion they claim to so fervently defend appears to be more a specious pretension to religious superiority than a genuine zeal, for many of the women's actions contradict their supposed religious principles. This phenomenon occurs throughout the Dublin plays—women uphold the tenets of traditional femininity while simultaneously acting in ways contradictory to such teachings.

Biblical insistence on chastity merges with Victorian prudery in the women's principles regarding immodest dress and sexual behavior. Gogan despairs over Nora Clitheroe's revealing clothes, complaining, "I'm always sayin' that her skirts are a little too short for a married woman. An' to see her, sometimes of an evenin', in her glad-neck gown would make a body's blood run cold. I do be ashamed of me life before her husband. . . . the mysthery of havin' a woman's a mysthery no longer" (154). For Gogan, a woman's outward appearance implies the state of her inherent morality, and the practice and appearance of sexual purity remains a hallmark of femininity. Female domesticity also rests at the heart of the traditional womanhood that O'Casey's females espouse. Gogan's ailing daughter Mollser wistfully expresses to Nora the desire to fulfill the ideal female role of wife: "I often envy you, Mrs. Clitheroe, seein' th' health you have, an' th' lovely place you have here, an' wondherin' if I'll ever be sthrong enough to be keepin' a home together for a man" (179). The women of the plays support the propagation of this

feminine role by acquiescing to it and by maintaining the male domains of politics and the pub. Burgess hypocritically derides Gogan's presence in the pub, claiming that "a woman on her own, dhrinkin' with a bevy o' men, is hardly an example to her sex" (190). In doing so, she perpetuates the injunction for female domesticity and traditional values.

Although O'Casey's women (and, incidentally, not the men) uphold traditional teachings, their ideas do originate from a certain patriarchy present in Irish society. The women may often adhere to the social teachings. Nevertheless, the institutions that govern the women's lives are dominated by men. The male institution of the Church wielded significant power over women of O'Casey's time, and as Florence Walzl suggests, almost all other dimensions of Irish public life catered to men. Walzl notes that men of O'Casey's Ireland "[sought] their pleasures outside the home with male companions in pubs and elsewhere. . . . Ireland [was] 'a land made for the male—card playing, horse racing, coursing, fishing. It [was] a paradise' for men." Women remained in the homes because, according to Walzl, the outside world excluded them.⁹ The fact that O'Casey's women characters verbally uphold the separation of male and female realms reveals the salience of such ideologies in Irish society. Expectations of female propriety and domesticity were well-established. The grave disparity between the women's words and their contradictory practices, however, suggests that this ideology remains inapplicable and unattainable for the females of the tenements.

⁹ Florence Walzl, "Dubliners: Women in Irish Society," in Suzette Henke and Elaine Unkeless, eds., *Women in Joyce* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 45-6. In this passage, Walzl quotes from Sean O'Faolain, "Love Among the Irish," in *The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World*, ed. John A. O'Brien (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1953), 111-22.

For O'Casey's women, such teachings have little relevancy to their lives. These tenement inhabitants cannot operate as ideal mothers and homemakers, for the stifling conditions of the slums prevent the women from achieving any sort of propriety or decorum. According to Krause, the death rate of Dublin at the turn of the century outstripped that of virtually any other city in Europe or Asia. Krause states, "All the functions of life from birth to death were carried on in one room. . . . the majority of which were declared to be unfit for human habitation" (*O'Casey* 5). The women of the Dublin plays must attempt to succeed as mothers and homemakers in an altered, unsuitable domestic and maternal space. Not surprisingly, the women often fail in such efforts. Economic survival takes precedence over maternal and domestic duty, and children and homes bear the consequences. In *Juno*, Captain Boyle and Joxer Daly make a mess of the home and consume the family's food while Juno is working in order for the family to economically survive. *Plough*'s Jennie Gogan often leaves her consumptive daughter Mollser at home alone while she works, although Gogan also neglects her children at other times. Nora Clitheroe must, for financial reasons, house the disruptive Peter Flynn and the young Covey who constantly threaten the propriety of her home with their messiness and arguments. Rosie Redmond, for whom prostitution is a mode of survival, compromises societal insistence upon feminine sexual propriety. In all these cases, the tenement women operate in a world in which the norms of the nuclear family, private home, and maternal housewife are suspended. Conventional female behavior, likewise, is deferred.

The women's situations within unorthodox domestic settings only intensify their differing opinions, which often explode into accusations and arguments. Many varying ideas occur along political lines and age disparities. In *Plough and Shadow*, Mrs. Gogan and Mrs. Grigson criticize the appearance of twenty-two year old Nora Clitheroe and twenty-three year old Minnie Powell, respectively. O'Casey describes Gogan and Grigson as forty years of age, although Mrs. Grigson "looks much older" due to her difficult life (42), and each is dressed in shabby, conservative clothing. The young women, on the other hand, dress in a manner evoking youth and attempts at style. Nora delights in her new hat and her charming clothes while Minnie bedecks herself in "her fancy stockings, an' her pom-poms, an' her crepe de chine blouses" (59). Ronald Ayling suggests that through their clothing, these young women use creative expression as an outlet for their aspirations to escape the slums.¹⁰ Nora certainly wishes to rise above her tenement surroundings, and her neighbors interpret such aspirations as class betrayal. The tension between her indulgent idealism and their tempered realism angers Mrs. Gogan, who claims, "Oh, you know, she's a well-up little lassie" (155). Bessie, too, is especially outraged when Nora attempts to lock her out of the Clitheroe home for being socially inferior. Bessie verbally attacks Nora, exclaiming, "Why is she always thryin' to speak proud things, an' lookin' like a mighty one in th' congregation o' th' people!" (167). The resentment is intensified by the actual lack of opportunity for poor women of the time. O'Casey's characters have few chances of rising from slum dwellings, and

¹⁰ Ronald Ayling, "Two Words for Women": A Reassessment of O'Casey's Heroines," in *Woman in Irish Legend, Life, and Literature*, ed. Ronald Ayling (Totowa, New Jersey: Colin Smythe, 1983), 93.

therefore they release the frustrations of thwarted dreams in their antagonistic relationships with one another.

O'Casey realistically depicts the dilemmas of defining womanhood in the socially stratified Dublin society of the early twentieth century. The women of O'Casey's tenement setting pressure one another to operate within the standards of a certain bourgeois femininity that they will never attain given the grim conditions of their surroundings. The female characters do not attempt to negotiate a more fitting code of womanhood, and O'Casey suggests that the stifling conditions of poverty "[destroy] the power of creation" necessary to think outside the bounds of traditional social teachings (Krause, *Letters* 119). The tenement women instead cling to an impossible ideal and inevitably fail at achieving this standard of femininity. As nationalist fervor grew in the years leading up to the Troubles, another set of ideology came to pervade Irish society—that of revolutionary rhetoric. A new model of womanhood encoded within the nationalist rhetoric soon took hold, with all its contradictions and disastrous consequences.

“For the first time in his life, Sean felt a surge of hatred for Cathleen ni Houlihan sweeping over him. He saw now that the one who had the walk of a queen could be a bitch at times. She galled the hearts of her children who dared to be above the ordinary, and she often slew her best ones. . . . What an old snarly gob she could be at times; an ignorant one, too.”

O’Casey, *Innishfallen, Fare Thee Well*¹¹

II. Encounters with Cathleen ni Houlihan

The pressures of femininity that turn-of-the-century Irish tenement women faced only intensified with the growing popularity of nationalist propaganda. Representations of womanhood portrayed in revolutionary works quickly pervaded notions of the feminine in Ireland. For the women of O’Casey’s stage, the encounter with this set of ideology contrasts sharply with their relationship to traditional feminine codes. The female characters of the Dublin plays reject the heroic and sacrificial language of political propaganda. In *Joyce, O’Casey, and the Irish Popular Theater*, Stephen Watt states, “O’Casey’s dramas include no Cathleen ni Houlihans or Anne Devlins—in short, no Mother Irelands leading their sons to historical heroism.”¹² Watt is correct in that none of O’Casey’s female protagonists espouse nationalist rhetoric. In fact, the one woman who spouts wartime propaganda, the woman Nora Clitheroe encounters at the barricade, does not even appear onstage. Nevertheless, the women of the tenements suffer the consequences of the rhetoric just as they would if they had embraced the ideas

¹¹ Sean O’Casey, *Innishfallen Fare Thee Well* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1949), 186.

¹² Stephen Watt, *Joyce, O’Casey and the Irish Popular Theater* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 184. Hereafter cited in the text.

of the revolutionaries. The contradictions in nationalist ideology, specifically in the representations of women, affect the Irish females indiscriminately.

Watt errs later in his argument, however, stating that the Dublin women resist nationalist ideology because they are realists who "argue vehemently for life over deluded martyrdom" (185). The women of O'Casey's Dublin avoid revolutionary language not because they are realists tempered against dreaming, but because they are idealists of a different sort. The realities of tenement life do obscure the intensity of *political* ideals, which for many of the women seem silly and irrelevant. As the men head for the political rally in *Plough*, the child Mollser ponders, "Is there anybody goin', Mrs. Clitheroe, with a tittther o' sense?" (180). Instead, the female protagonists adopt an alternative ideology that remains inaccessible for them. Theirs is a rhetoric built upon both materialistic realism and a romantic, idealized version of love, motherhood, and the home.

The women's idealized dreams remain out of reach precisely because they become trapped in the contradictions of revolutionary rhetoric. While the women do not espouse political ideologies, they cannot escape the inconsistencies of wartime propaganda—rhetorical contradictions that cost the women their homes, families, and lives. The models of womanhood advocated during the revolution were written by men far removed from the realities of poor women's lives, and O'Casey's female characters have no agency in preventing the calamitous effects of such representations. Some critics read these circumstances as a case of hegemonic patriarchal control over women; others wish to eradicate the framework of male/female tensions from readings of the plays

altogether. It is a mistake to do the latter, for the women clearly operate in opposition to men in their rhetorical struggles and their actions. *Juno*'s Juno Boyle clashes with the attitudes and behaviors of her husband and son, and *Plough*'s Nora Clitheroe fights for her husband's attention against the rhetorical language of the army (which is presented on O'Casey's stage as a completely male institution). A naïve Minnie Powell is sent to her death in *Shadow* by the revolutionary hanger-on Seamus Shields and the poet Donal Davoren. However, the plays should not be read as a simple conflict between male nationalist ideology and passive female victimization. The plays' men fall prey to the lure of words just as easily as women, with equally disastrous effects. In addition, the women's tragic downfalls are in part fed by their own imperfections and limitations, not merely by an overbearing political rhetoric. That said, the propaganda of revolution, especially the models of female behavior, affect O'Casey's women in especially catastrophic ways and leave them with little possibility of escape.

The literature of the Irish literary revival became an early locus of feminine representations of Ireland. As co-founders of the Irish National Theatre, Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats led their counterparts in the representation of Ireland as Cathleen ni Houlihan. Many portrayals of the figure upheld the traditional expectations and ideals for women. Yeats's "Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland," published in 1904, bestows youth and purity upon the figure. In this poem, Cathleen ni Houlihan emerges as an austere source of motivation prompting reverence and awe. Yeats writes, "But purer than a tall candle before the Holy Rood / Is Cathleen, the

daughter of Houlihan.”¹³ Here, the Ireland figure of Cathleen serves as a source of steadfastness to temper the violent and eruptive power of the nationalist cause. She provides emotional strength, and yet his Cathleen does not participate in or support violent political acts. This passive figure aligns with other traditional representations of Ireland such as James Clarence Mangan’s ‘Dark Rosaleen’ and the Poor Old Woman portrayed in many works, including Patrick Pearse’s poem “I am Ireland.” Pearse writes, “I am Ireland: / I am lonelier than the Old Woman of Beare.”¹⁴ These figures, while inspiring, all serve as a passive emotional stimulus rather than an active participant in or instigator of national sacrifice.

Feminine representations of Ireland, however, were not homogeneously passive. In the more political and propagandistic nationalist literature, Cathleen ni Houlihan and other similar figures invoke Irish men to battle. In the play entitled *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which was written around the same time as “Red Hanrahan’s Song About Ireland,” Gregory and Yeats present a much more instigating and persuasive figure. The old woman portraying Ireland in this play lures men into battle, warning, “If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all.”¹⁵ The woman, through her persuasive rhetoric of sacrifice and the glory of the nationalist cause, lures the young peasant Michael away from his home and impending wedding to instead fight for Ireland’s freedom. This particular model of Cathleen ni Houlihan stands not as a

¹³ William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1996), 81.

¹⁴ Patrick Pearse, “I am Ireland,” in Maureen O’Rourke Murphy and James MacKillop, eds., *Irish Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987) ll. 7-8.

¹⁵ Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in *Modern Irish Drama*, ed. John P. Harrington (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 8. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “*Cathleen*.”

buttress to, but rather in opposition to, the traditional ideals of women as dedicated to the home and family. This supposed paragon of Irish femininity contradicts many of the tenets of womanhood that Irish women at the time believed. Similarly, the singlemost deliberate piece of political propaganda, the Proclamation of the Irish Republic (which O'Casey cites throughout his plays), also presents Ireland as a woman in a manner that contradicts the expected female roles of mother and protector. The authors of the Proclamation write,

Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom . . . the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.¹⁶

This famous piece of propaganda once again portrays a proactive female Ireland who, in her willingness to sacrifice her sons, perverts traditional motherhood and contradicts the core values of femininity that O'Casey's female characters seek to uphold. In these and other representations, the writers hearken back to the Celtic mythological warrior queen figure. Gregory and Yeats's old woman leaves the house transformed, and Patrick closes the play saying, "I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (*Cathleen* 11). This mythical inspiration, however, predates the Victorian era. Thus, the works that present both mythologically-inspired and Victorian-compliant versions of Ireland are laden with contradictions stemming from the varying standards of womanhood at the two different points in history.

¹⁶ Patrick Pearse et al., "Proclamation of the Irish Republic (10 March 2002)," <http://www.iol.ie/~dluby/proclaim.htm>. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "Proclamation."

The nationalist insistence on this violent female Ireland intensified in the years predating the Revolution. *Shadow's* Seumas Shields documents the increasingly dogmatic and absolutist ideology, saying,

You daren't open your mouth, for Kathleen ni Houlihan is very different now to the woman who used to play the harp an' sing, 'Weep on, weep on, your hour is past', for she's a ragin' devil now, an' If you only look crooked at her you're sure of a punch in th' eye. (39)

The hegemonic insistence upon women's compliance with this warrior queen model of womanhood reveals an attempt to exert control over the central role that women had within the home and family. As the dominant force within the family, women wielded much power over their husbands and children. Therefore, the nationalist cause hinged upon the compliance of women in sending their loved ones into battle. This paradoxical situation led to such conflicting portrayals in propagandistic literature. On one hand, the call to violence must necessarily dominate. However, in infusing the war-advocating female figures with attributes of maternity, domesticity, purity and asceticism, the nationalist leaders offered women a model they could respect and aspire to. These contradictions are readily apparent in the revolutionary Patrick Pearse's injunction to Irish women:

To the Irish mothers who hear me I would say that when at night you kiss your children and in your hearts call down a benediction, you could wish for your boys no higher thing than that, should the need come, they may be given the strength to make Emmet's sacrifice [of death], and for your

girls no greater gift from God than such fidelity as Anne Devlin's [to the Irish cause].¹⁷

In the idealistic literature of the revolutionary cause, maternal love and political sacrifice coexist. O'Casey's women, however, come to recognize the flaws in such logic.

War does not merely change elements in the women's lives. The very elevation of a feminized Ireland precludes their own importance to the men in their lives and erases the identities the women have created through home and family. In *Plough*, Lieutenant Langon asserts, "Ireland is greater than a mother" (200). Clitheroe agrees, saying what Nora most fears he will: "Ireland is greater than a wife" (201). Nora and the other women in the plays have become trapped by the "ragin' divil" between their idealized dream of proper womanhood and the rhetoric of Mother Ireland that renders them unnecessary. The women in the play feel they have been traded in for Cathleen ni Houlihan precisely because the new war rhetoric leaves them with no female role. Femininity has been replaced with masculinity. The Proclamation states that "Having organized and trained her manhood through her revolutionary organization . . . [Ireland] strikes in full confidence of victory" (1). A female Ireland has thus become androgynous, and the manhood of this female figure obliterates the need for any femininity the women in the play have to offer. In O'Casey's Dublin plays, the female characters' often contradictory actions mirror the mixed messages they received through traditional teaching and nationalist ideology. The women attempt to respond to the pressures of

¹⁷ Patrick Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Phoenix Publishing Co., 1924) 85.

nationalism in various manners that end tragically because, as O'Casey suggests, any assertion of femininity cannot thrive in this atmosphere of violence and shifting female roles.

Shadow's Minnie Powell comes the closest of all the women to adopting the nationalist rhetoric, but hers is a naïve and deluded attachment to the glamour of words and the figure of the gunman. Soon after she appears onstage, Minnie makes the wistful statement, "Poetry is a grand thing, Mr. Davoren, I'd love to be able to write a poem—a lovely poem on Ireland an' the men o' '98" (16). When Davoren discourages this activity, Minnie abandons the idea, instead acquiescing to what she believes are Davoren's political sentiments: "I know what you mean: it's time to give up the writing an' take to the gun" (16). Minnie sees the century-old, glorified and frequently memorialized rebellion of 1798 as synonymous to the Revolution going on around her, and in doing so becomes a clichéd revolutionary. She has no concrete conception of what the nationalists around her are fighting for. Minnie is lured as much by the attractive language of nationalist rhetoric as she is by any words at all; the language of revolution is as appealing to Minnie as the simple names that Davoren types for her. Minnie represents a specious patriotism, one that leads to her untimely death. When Minnie offers to hide the bombs for Shields and Davoren, she does not justify her action with any political beliefs. Rather, Minnie clearly demonstrates that Donal is the reason for such a sacrifice. Her final words as she leaves are, "Goodbye. . . Donal," and the stage directions immediately state, "She glances lovingly at Donal—who is only semi-conscious—as she rushes out with the bag" (53). Minnie essentially sacrifices herself for a false image, for she

believes she is saving a gunman, and not merely a detached poet. Her death is caused directly by the violent war going on around her, but the events that lead to her death are prompted by her own shortcomings—namely, the romantic and naïve illusions she harbors. O’Casey’s portrayal of Minnie follows a typical model for his heroines; his women’s downfalls are caused by both tragic circumstances and tragic flaws.

III. Communities of Alternatives: Renegotiating the Family and Home

For *Juno*'s Juno Boyle, *Plough*'s Nora Clitheroe, and their respective female neighbors, the consequences of revolutionary rhetoric play out not in political action, but in the realm of the domestic. The contradictions of nationalism affect the women's families and homes in devastating ways. Nonetheless, the women of O'Casey's stage precipitate their tragic downfalls through their own flawed characters and faulty actions, thus securing their entrapment. The women trap themselves and one another with judgmental superiority, selfishness, and psychological paralysis.

As mothers and wives, these tenement women struggle to fulfill their role as protector of the family amid pressure to send loved ones into the dangers of war. The messages of political writings such as the Proclamation of 1916 and Pearse's speeches documented the model of motherhood, Mother Ireland, as a woman ready and willing to sacrifice her metaphorical children for the war cause. Nationalists enjoined women to display a similar willingness in encouraging their sons and husbands to fight. The Old Woman in Gregory and Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* states,

It is a hard service they take that help me . . . many a child will be born
and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that
have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they
will think they are well paid. (10)

O'Casey's tenement women, however, illustrate the incompatibility of such a logic with the actual experiences of motherhood and marriage. O'Casey himself writes, "The safety

of her brood is the true mark of every woman. A mother does not like her son to be killed—she doesn't like him even to get married" (*Letters* 169). Nora Clitheroe echoes O'Casey's sentiments when she declares in a moment of fervent emotion and power, "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!" (208). Nevertheless, the women must face the consequences of a flawed ideology not because they accept it, but because their sons and husbands become heirs to the cult of violence in Irish politics. *Juno's* Johnny Boyle speaks the language of nationalist rhetoric. At one point he states to his mother, "Ireland only half free'll never be at peace while she has a son left to pull a trigger" (93). O'Casey deliberately quotes Patrick Pearse in this statement in order to reveal the imbeddedness of such rhetoric in the minds of Irish sons—rhetoric that would have been readily apparent to the Abbey audience.¹⁸ Juno responds to her son's nationalism equivocally and inconsistently. In some instances she mocks his idealism with worldly sarcasm. When Johnny boasts that he would endanger himself again for Ireland, "for a principle's a principle," Juno offers her sharp-witted response: "Ah, you lost your best principle, me boy, when you lost your arm; them's the only sort o' principles that's any good to a workin' man" (93). However, she also encourages her son's nationalism by boasting to Mr. Bentham of the sacrifices that Johnny has made for Ireland, saying, "He got hit in the hip; and his arm was blew off in the fight in O'Connell

¹⁸ O'Casey reproduces lines from the speeches of Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, throughout the plays through the characters of Johnny Boyle in *Juno* and the Voice of the Man in *Plough*. The excerpts come from Pearse's eulogy given for the Fenian revolutionary Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in 1915.

Street...None can deny he done his bit for Irelan''' (93). Juno glorifies her son's maimed body as a physical sacrifice and a manifestation of his devotion to the nationalist cause.

By glorying in Johnny's disfigurement, Juno unknowingly acquiesces to her son's final inheritance—a violent and maiming death. She ironically takes pride in her son's disfigurement, which later comes to fruition with the bullet-holes from his grisly death in which his body is "made a colander of" (117). However, before Johnny dies, Juno reveals her hypocrisy. In spite of her own ideological inconsistencies, she makes rash political judgments about Mrs. Tancred, whose son dies fighting for a different political cause. Juno at first sympathizes with Mrs. Tancred's loss but soon retracts into blame and criticism: "In wan way, she deserves all she got; for lately she let th' Die-hards make an open house of th' place" (117). Juno's ideological flaws prevent her from recognizing that Robbie Tancred inherits the same violent death that Johnny does. Only after the death of Johnny does Juno realize she and Mrs. Tancred have experienced a catastrophe that surmounts any political difference. Juno berates herself for failing to empathize with Tancred, moaning,

Maybe I didn't feel sorry enough for Mrs. Tancred when her poor son was found as Johnny's been found now—because he was a Die-hard! Ah, why didn't I remember that then he wasn't a Diehard or a Stater, but only a poor dead son. (146)

Juno and Mrs. Tancred unite in their deep grief and feelings of guilt as they assume the responsibility of seeing their sons to the grave. The two learn too late of the dangers that nationalist ideology poses to their children. The women forge a bond of reciprocity

through the maternal experience; Mrs. Tancred states, "An' now here's the two of us oul' women, standin' one on each side of a scales o' sorra, balanced be the bodies of our two dead darlin' sons" (115). However, the friendship comes at too high a cost. The women are unable to prevent their sons from inheriting the violence and cult of martyrology in their respective political factions, and have even encouraged the activity that leads their sons to death. Juno's final words in the play echo Mrs. Tancred's prayer over her dead son. In repeating this invocation, Juno separates herself from political loyalty and, instead, aligns herself with the plight of maternal loss.

O'Casey's women do not glorify the loss of their children. Their emotional and bitter responses reveal that the death of a child is not glorious or honorable, as Pearse would argue, but rather a heart-wrenching experience. The women reject the cold, flawed model of motherhood offered in the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Instead, Juno and Mrs. Tancred revolt against the ideological Mother Ireland by replacing her with the figure of the Virgin Mary. These women employ religious language, for such imagery explains loss in terms the women understand. Mrs. Tancred says a prayer on her way to the funeral, juxtaposing the image of her dead son with the image of Christ. She prays, "Me darlin' son was riddled with bullets!...Sacred Heart of the Crucified Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone...and give us hearts o' flesh!" (116). The Christ figure allows the women to accept and comprehend the slaughter of their sons in a manner that remembers and honors the sacrifice these children made. The mothers cope with their own inadequacies and failures to protect their children by elevating their sons' deaths and describing them as successors to the crucified Jesus.

Consequently, in creating the image of the children as Christlike sacrifices, the women identify themselves with the figure of the Virgin Mary. They look to the Virgin as an example to follow in accepting loss. The women invoke the mercy and aid of Mary, as Juno demonstrates in her plea "Mother o' God, Mother o' God, have pity on us all!" (146). Juno recognizes that she needs the example of the Virgin more than ever as she sets off with her daughter. Juno teaches her daughter Mary to look to Jesus's mother as she learns to be a mother herself: "We'll want all the help we can get from God an' His Blessed Mother now!" (145). Juno deliberately attempts to pass down a maternal alternative to Mother Ireland onto her children. Johnny Boyle adopts this model and calls to the Virgin in the moments that he foresees his own potential death. When he encounters the illusion of Robbie Tancred's wounded body, Johnny calls out, "Blessed Mother o' God, shelter me, shelter your son!" (106). Later, as he knowingly approaches his own death, Johnny acknowledges that he needs the aid of the Jesus's mother who, by witnessing her own son's death, can truly understand his impending agony. Johnny recites the *Hail Mary*, the same prayer that closes Robbie Tancred's funeral in Act Two: "Mother o' God, pray for me—be with me now in the agonies o' death!...Hail, Mary, full o' grace...the Lord is...with Thee" (144).

Even this substituted model of motherhood has faults. While Mary serves as an example of unselfish sacrifice, she fails to model successful motherhood if such maternity is defined by the ability to protect one's child. The Virgin herself was unable to save her own son from the violence of Pontius Pilate's state. Mrs. Tancred and Juno share a complex relationship with the figure of Mary, invoking her aid while also feeling

abandoned by her. They express to Mary a combination of anger and helplessness, crying, "O Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets, when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets" (115). The Virgin Mary acts as a foil to the figure of Mother Ireland, but she cannot effectively replace Cathleen ni Houlihan. Juno and Mrs. Tancred's alternative does not work because Cathleen ni Houlihan has already wreaked her havoc on the women by galling their sons into the revolutionary bloodbath.

For *Plough*'s Nora Clitheroe, the revolutionary rhetoric threatens to compromise that which she most prizes, her domestic life with her husband Jack. Nora uses a combination of trickery and sexual allure to divert her husband's attention away from political activity. She burns a letter containing Jack's military appointment in a desperate attempt to keep him away from harm and to herself. Nora also cultivates her sexual persona to maintain her husband's attention. O'Casey describes her as a woman who, when necessary, "persuades with her feminine charm" (164). As a result, her home becomes notorious for the marital bliss that thrives within. Mrs. Gogan complains, "You couldn't come into th' room but you'd feel, instinctive like, that they'd just been afther kissin' and' cuddlin' each other" (154). In Act One, Nora holds her husband's attention by playing the role of seductress, enticing him with kisses and taunting him with refusals. When Jack sings a love song and "Nora, putting an arm around him, nestles her head on his breast and listens delightedly" (175), the sentimental, romantically charged marital space of the home reaches its threshold. Nora has succeeded in capturing and holding Jack's attention, even if momentarily, in this idyllic scene in which other men have left for the male-charged political rally.

Nora's ploy succeeds for only a brief time. Jack soon leaves for battle with Captain Brennan despite Nora's desperate pleas for him to stay and comfort her. Jack disregards any of the sexual allure that once distracted him. This rejection is unsurprising, for in Act One, Mrs. Gogan warns, "After a month or two, th' wondher of a woman wears off" (154). In this instance, Gogan speaks correctly. Nora fails to hold her husband's attention in part because she never fully succeeds in interesting him in the first place. Nora sulkily notes that Jack had become restless not even a month after their marriage. Jack tries to pacify her by claiming to have sacrificed his army career for her, but Nora perceptively notes, "Ay, you gave it up—because you got th' sulks when they didn't make a Captain of you. It wasn't for my sake, Jack" (172). Jack's bitter response reveals the superficiality of the supposedly blissful, devoted marriage: "For your sake or no, you're benefitin' by it, aren't you?" (173). Even when Jack later sings Nora a love song in a seemingly romantic, heartfelt moment, the scene is uncomfortably sentimental, and the song artificial.

Nora's immaturity and sexual childishness complicate the task of holding together a weak, unfulfilling marriage. Nora Clitheroe epitomizes the societal trend in which insufficiently satisfying marriage precipitated the desexualizing of a woman. Her marital relationship mirrors the social fabric of the time. Florence Walzl argues that early twentieth century Irish marriages were largely devoid of physical fulfillment and often resulted in relationships that were sexually defunct (45-6). Nora's childishness reflects such marital strains. Her relationship to Jack is one of childish dependence. She relies on him for protection from her neighbors, begs his approval of her new hat, and asks for

an allowance. And although their home is sexually charged, Nora refuses more sexual advances than she accepts. Nora plays a game of cat-and-mouse with Jack, resisting his kisses by exclaiming, "Jack, Jack; please, Jack! I thought you were tired of that sort of thing long ago" (173). However, when he becomes angry with her refusal, the stage directions state that "she looks appealingly at him for a few moments; he doesn't speak. She swiftly sits down beside him, and puts her arm around his neck" (173). Nora depends on a ruse: she avoids sexual contact while cloaking her relationship in the guise of fulfilled marital bliss. Her inadequate semblances of sexual prowess entertain Jack for awhile, but once the opportunity of military participation surfaces, Jack leaves.

Out of this failure, Nora gains the courage to complete her most triumphant act. She boldly enters the violent, battle-laden streets to search for Jack, and upon her unsuccessful return she utters the most powerfully anti-war sentiments that appear in any of the three plays. With an uncharacteristic power Nora denounces the notion of bravery, yelling,

An' [Jack] stands wherever he is because he's brave? (*Vehemently*) No,
but because he's a coward, a coward a coward! . . . I tell you they're afraid
to say they're afraid! . . . Oh I saw it, I saw it . . . I saw fear glowin' in all
their eyes. (209)

She rejects the notion that any women willingly send their loved ones to battle, and in this moment of intensity Nora seems a potential agent for real resistance to the revolution.

Nora, however, quickly reverts back to the childishness she displays earlier, and her hysteria develops into an immobilizing madness. Once Jack leaves her a second time to fight, Nora becomes completely incapable of functioning. She must be cared for at this point as she acts out deluded, imaginary encounters with her husband. Nora cannot even successfully give birth to her child, who is stillborn. In a sense, her childish asexual nature psychologically precludes her ability to effectively mother a child. In her dementia, Nora cannot distinguish between her child and her husband; she calls unremittingly to an unknown third party, saying, "Where is it? Where's my baby? Tell me where you've put it, where've you hidden it? My baby, my baby, I want my baby . . . Give him to me, give me my husband!" (232). Nora's childishness leads her to view her offspring as an extension of her husband rather than as a manifestation of her own ability to guide and foster. Nora fails to meet the procreative expectations of a mature female. And although in her moment of anti-war fanaticism she secures consideration as one of O'Casey's powerful heroines, Nora's subsequent madness and immobility diminish her potential for progress. The character of Nora suggests that women will not be able to carry out their rhetorical demands for change in light of the limitations placed upon them.

The private home becomes a physical locus for the physical and psychological consequences of the war, and it serves in part as a microcosm of Irish society. The tenement home is unique, however, in its sheer squalor. This environment is both claustrophobic and stifling; Bessie Burgess's apartment is described as having a "compressed confinement . . . an unmistakable air of poverty bordering on destitution"

(226). The crowded configuration of Dublin tenement houses left little to no possibility of privacy. Krause writes,

Many tenements with seven or eight rooms, which when the houses were built in the eighteenth century had accommodated a single family, now had a large family in each room with an average of over 50 people in a house; there were also instances of houses bulging with as many as 73, 74, and 98 people. (*O'Casey* 5)

In the very opening scene of *Plough*, Fluther Good repairs a lock on the Clitheroes' door at the request of Nora, who endeavors to maintain a private home. Yet, the lock fails to keep her enraged neighbors out. The realities of this situation contrast sharply, on the other hand, with wartime propaganda that idealizes the private home as a haven from the fighting. These lines from a popular British World War I song close *Plough*:

Keep the 'owme fires burning,
While your 'ears are yearning;
Though your lads are far away
They dream of 'owme. (247)

The sentimentality of this song differs greatly from the women's lives. Their homes serve not as idealized respites from war, but rather as that which the women must fight intensely to preserve. O'Casey's tenement women wield much of their power within the walls of the home, but they do not operate as passive, idealized homemakers who merely "keep the home fires burning." O'Casey's women turn the home into a feminized space, thus exerting a modicum of control over men in a male-dominated society. The domestic

spheres of influence in the Dublin Plays mirror the society of the time, in which the family functioned as a center of matriarchal control (Walzl 46).

Many of the play's women work outside the home to provide for themselves, and *Juno's* Juno Boyle acts as a model representative of the working woman who gains ultimate reign over her house, regulating the behavior of not only her children but also her husband. Juno serves as sole provider and rational economist of the family. She lectures her unemployed spendthrift husband, "Your poor wife slavin' to keep the bit in your mouth, an' you gallivantin' about all the day like a paycock!" (77). Juno persistently presses Captain Boyle to secure a job, despite his many ruses to avoid working. Juno detests the presence of Joxer Daly in their home, for this man merely encourages her husband's laziness and wasteful habits. In an effort to exert control over her wayward husband, she forbids Joxer from entering. Juno clearly serves as the authoritative figure of the house, and she has the cunning and intuition to thwart Captain Boyle's efforts to trick her. When she catches Joxer in her kitchen, she responds with a sarcastic, manipulative command that promptly concludes Joxer's visit. Juno drives away this representative of the male-dominated environment that encourages her husband to continue his wayward behavior, and she attempts to preserve the home for her own ideal of industry and order.

For Nora Clitheroe, the creation of a private home allows her to channel social aspirations and creative efforts. She creates her home in a certain manner in order to psychologically, if not physically, escape the tenements. The stage directions for Act One of *Plough* state that "the room directly in front of the audience is furnished in a way

that suggests an attempt towards a finer expression of domestic life" (151). Nora labors to make her house distinct from the rest of the tenement. She repeatedly contrasts her respectable home with the rest of the tenement apartments. She warns Peter and the Covey that she will not tolerate the base behavior that their neighbors condone, and she demands that they adhere to "what's proper an' allowable in a respectable home" (166). Her emphasis on propriety reveals her effort to create an environment and standard of behavior associated with genteel society. Without any real political power, the inner space of the home serves as Nora's sole outlet for her social aspirations.

Fires from the uprising consume Nora's physical home, but her idealized home as it exists in her mind collapses as soon as Jack leaves her. Juno's home, on the other hand, deteriorates as a result of her own faulty actions. Juno allows herself to be lured by the attractiveness and pretensions of the false inheritance, and in the face of her newfound luxury she makes the mistake of abandoning her skepticism and economic savvy. Juno ceases to financially govern the home, leaving her husband to assume the role of provider (for the inheritance comes from his relative) and financial decision-maker. Not surprisingly, Captain Boyle fails to protect the home from destruction. This very man neglects to even understand the significance of his wife's name, Juno, which mythologically means "Mother of the Gods." Heinz Kosok describes Juno's namesake as a "Roman goddess who, with her train of peacocks, functioned as the guardian of the hearth and protectress of matrimony."¹⁹ Captain Boyle explains it differently: "You see, Juno was born an' christened in June; I met her in June; we were married in June, an'

¹⁹ Heinz Kosok, *O'Casey the Dramatist* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1985), 52.

Johnny was born in June, so wan day I says to her, 'You should ha' been called Juno,' an' the name stuck to her ever since" (93-4). Captain overlooks Juno's preordained role as central controller of the home, and he leads the family to ruin.

Juno remains a resilient character, however. The furniture company empties her home, and Boyle refuses her pleas to return from the pub. When Juno learns that Johnny has been killed, she resolutely leaves. She tells Mary, "Let your father furrage for himself now; I've done all I could an' it was all no use—he'll be hopeless till the end of his days. I've got a little room in me sither's where we'll stop till your trouble is over, an' then we'll work together for the sake for the baby" (145). Juno rejects the hopeless patriarchal world represented by Boyle and Joxer. Through this act of defiance in the face of adversity, Juno maintains that a home can be recreated.

The power of the recreated home emanates most strongly from Bessie Burgess's dilapidated yet welcoming tenement apartment. By opening her home to those neighbors whose houses are destroyed in the uprising, Bessie catalyzes the cohesion of a diverse body of individuals, and she surmounts divisive political lines to gain the respect of her guests. When the Covey muses, "I don't know what we'd have done only for oul' Bessie", Fluther concedes, "I always knew there was never anything really derogatory wrong with poor oul' Bessie" (228). In this salvaged domestic space, the women of the tenements form a semblance of female fraternity that they are denied by patriarchal Irish society. Bessie and Jennie Gogan, previously enemies, come to respect one another, and Bessie cares for Nora during her childbirth and madness. The men run off to fight at the end of *Plough*, leaving the various women alone as sole inhabitants of the unorthodox

Burgess home. This is as close as O'Casey comes to purporting a feminist doctrine in the plays.

The power of this female solidarity, however, remains tenuous. Little hope exists for the women to enact change in their society. *Plough's* children, Mollser and Nora's baby, both die by the play's end; Mary contains none of her mother's determination or conviction to pass onto her own child; and Bessie Burgess's dying words reveal not compassion or feminine spirit, but condemnation. Burgess screams to Nora, "I've got this through you . . . through you . . . through you, you bitch, you!" (244). Any communal feelings the women may have achieved become obscured by death. The women form relationships with one another, but they lose their idealized dreams of the traditional, proper home and family.

The women walk out at the end of *Juno* and *Plough*—Juno and Mary to a new life, Mrs. Gogan and Nora to the other wrecked and burning tenements or the fighting in the streets. O'Casey gives no indication that the women have anywhere better to go. He offers a bleak outlook and very little hope that such feminine solidarities will survive. The final scene of *Juno* places an ironic twist on the feminized home by offering the hopeless, drunken figures of Captain Boyle and Joxer as the sole heirs of this familial setting. This all-male usurpation of the kitchen documents the incompatibility of female domestic spaces with the suffocating world of patriarchal dominance, and its lack of procreative power suggests that the salvaged or restored home can only be productive (and reproductive) with the presence of women. *Plough* ends in a manner similar to *Juno*. Corporal Stoddart and Sargeant Tinley remain alone at the kitchen table and drink

the tea that Nora has just made. The abandonment of the private home by women and the usurpation of domestic spheres by the men reveals the complete perversion of the domestic familial space. O'Casey issues a reminder that the alternative homes of the Dublin plays lack complete nuclear families, and through the characters of his stage he suggests that the unorthodox familial constructs—results of economic conditions and political violence—offer little promise for the future generation.

Conclusion

The epilogue that history imposes onto the Dublin plays is full of irony. Onstage, Juno Boyle and Nora Clitheroe left their kitchens to be usurped by men, since an achievement of the domestic remained impossible under the conditions of poverty and violence. Irish women of O'Casey's Dublin, however, remained in the home. Despite small feminist movements and leaders that emerged from the Troubles, Irish society remained socially and politically conservative. From 1927-1948 the Fianna Fail party of Eamon de Valera led Irish politics in a popular twenty-one-year rule. De Valera's Constitution of 1937 coded into law the traditional codes by which women were to live. The document prohibited abortion, contraception, divorce, and woman's economic freedom. The state recognized that "by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved," and it subsequently promised to "ensure that mothers shall not be obligated by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home."²⁰ The constitution also preserved the power of the Church, thus upholding religious strictures that defined feminine behavior before independence. The historian Alan Jackson argues that the conservative social codes of the 1937 Constitution arose out of a generally acquiescent political climate. He states that Irish citizens "may have had qualms about the intrusive nature of the constitution, but in practice it did not so much impose as reflect a shared value system."²¹

²⁰ "Constitution of Ireland (12 December 2001),"

<http://www.irlgov.ie/taoiseach/publication/constitution/english/contents.htm>.

²¹ Alan Jackson, *Ireland 1798-1998* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 297.

The social climate of the decades following Irish independence, then, remained largely identical to the conservative, traditional society that characterized pre-revolutionary Ireland. For women like O'Casey's female characters, the war changed very little. Expectations of female behavior continued to be governed by men with no experience of womanhood or poverty, and women remained powerless to enact change.

O'Casey penned the Dublin plays very soon after the events that they depict, and yet the resonance of his work seems to be influenced by historical hindsight. One may speculate that O'Casey was a visionary who perceptively foresaw the narrow limits of those governing Irish ideologies and laws. Such a statement, however, must remain a mere speculation. The Dublin plays, nevertheless, do map powerfully onto the present moment. These plays ask the contemporary reader to critically consider the limiting ideologies contained in the social and political codes of the present. Through his portrayal of the tenement women in *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *The Plough and the Stars*, Sean O'Casey asks his reader to recognize and defend the voiceless individuals that remain entrapped today.

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