



Testimonies of the Dublin Tenements: Civilian Struggles During War in Sean O'Casey's *Dublin Trilogy*

Ms. D. Snehajansi¹ & Dr. M. Sagaya Sophia²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar (Full-Time), P.G. and Research, Department of English
Kalaignar Karunanidhi Government Arts College for Women (A), Pudukkottai
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu

²Research Guide & Assistant Professor, P.G. and Research, Department of English
Kalaignar Karunanidhi Government Arts College for Women (A), Pudukkottai
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu



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Abstract

Literature of the past glorifies war as the symbol of bravery and patriotism, but it often overlooks the struggles of civilians and the harsh realities of post-war life. During the height of World War I, Ireland was busy crafting guerrilla warfare against the British for their freedom. Though the nationalist struggle was essential, the cost of such resistance was borne most heavily by the working-class poor. Sean O'Casey was the dramatist of the age, whose work did not praise the heroic personages of the war or induce the patriotic fever among the people. Instead, it highlighted the poverty, starvation, poor health conditions, and police brutality during the war. The Dublin Trilogy (1923-26) set against the backdrop of the Easter Rising, the Irish War of Independence, and the Civil War, foregrounded the lives of people in the cramped Dublin tenements, struggling in war. This study aims to explore how O'Casey's plays capture the emotional and material realities of civilians in a time of national upheaval. It analyzes the Dublin Trilogy through Raymond William's concept of structures of feeling, by close reading the texts. This research attempts to prove that Dublin Trilogy is the artefact that acts as a testimony of the tenement people and preserves the lived experiences of the ordinary often receded by that period's prevailing ideologies of patriotic sacrifice.

Keywords: tenements, Irish war, Sean o'casey, poverty, disease, police brutality, structures of feeling

Wars did not benefit anyone other than brimming the contents of history books. It created chaos than calm, violence than peace, more deaths than lives, destruction than development. Because of the power thirsty leader of the countries, civilians bore the impact of the war. The Irish War happened between 1919 to 1921, was nothing short of cruelties of the great wars of the century. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) was planning guerilla attacks on the British and in parallel to that, the Black and Tans were raiding every building for the IRA members. And civilians were stuck between them, getting

suffered by the violences of the war. Traditional literature often glorified war and portrayed their protagonists as great undefeatable heroes. They failed to record the atrocities of the war and totally disregarded the civilians' part: it never highlighted the violence, loss of people's lives, poverty, and the destructive physical and mental trauma one had to undergo because of war. Only after World War I, writers started to acknowledge the viciousness of the war in their works. Sean O'Casey is one such writer who brought light on the civilian struggles during war through his plays. And this research aims



to analyze his plays to bring light to the civilian struggles portrayed in his works.

The Dublin Trilogy consists of three plays namely, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). Each play is set against the backdrop of different movements in the Irish War between 1915 and 1923 (Murray x-xii). To order the plays based on the chronology of the events, *The Plough and the Stars* portrays the Easter Rising of 1916, which is the starting point of the Irish War. *The Shadow of a Gunman* is set during the peak of the Irish War of Independence in 1920. Likewise, the Irish civil war that happened in 1922 is the setting of *Juno and the Paycock*.

The Shadow of a Gunman (1923) follows Donal Davoren, who is mistaken for an IRA gunman on the run. It showcased the time during Irish War of Independence, when the Black and Tans, and Auxiliary, British police force raiding the tenement of the play to search for the IRA member. *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) set during the Irish Civil War, the country was divided into two, the one who supported the Treaty called Free Staters and others who opposed it called Die-hards. But the play showcased Juno Boyle, a woman whose struggles in keeping her family safe in the midst of civil war, without having any support from her family's men. *The Plough and the Stars* is about the Easter Rising of 1916, in which Jack Clitheroe, the protagonist, participated as an IRA member. It consists of the violence happened during Easter Rising and how the characters were safeguarding them from the horror in addition to the starvation, poverty and illness because of war. Being born in a lower middle-class family himself, it came naturally for O'Casey to paint the working-class characters' lives in his plays (Trotter 74).

There are only a few scholarly works available on Sean O'Casey's works and most of them explored the contextual, form and thematic analysis of his plays. For instance, the study of Kim analysed how the women are portrayed in Sean O'Casey's work and explained how his work represented the women's suffering during the revolution (Kim). Comparative studies has been conducted on O'Casey's work, Hwang's work compared the domesticity in the trilogies of Sean O'Casey and a Korean writer Yu

Jin. He found out how both of their plays focused on nationhood and home, which in turn provided a transcolonial theatrical solidarity (Hwang). Spatial studies on the Dublin tenements in O'Casey's plays had been made by Brazeau, his research interpreted how urban spaces shape life and politics (Brazeau). The study of civilian struggle in general during the political upheaval is rarely explored, except Devine's article, which studies how the characters in *The Shadow of Gunman* are more afraid of tuberculosis than the threats of war (Devine). Hence, this current research attempts to explore how the Dublin Trilogy depicts the true feelings of ordinary people, living in the cramped tenements, their stand on this war and their struggles.

Raymond Williams defines "Structures of Feeling" as lived experience of human life documented in articulated forms like artefacts and says one can study the presentness of past through that articulated form (Sanehi 413-15). The focus of this present study is to investigate the three Dublin plays through the concept structures of feeling to find out whether these plays act as an artefact that documents the lived experience of Irish people during war. Williams insists that structures of feeling often create a tension between the pre-existing norms, so the lived experience of people at a particular time is against and new to the earlier well-known ideologies of that time (Sanehi 416). Thereby, this study aims to find such tensions between the new experiences of the civilians during war and the prevailing ideologies of patriotism and religion in Ireland by close reading the texts. By doing this, this research deduces how Sean O'Casey stands out as a writer who reflects the civilians' struggles during war, rather than exalting the heroes of war through his Dublin Trilogy.

The Lived Experience of Dublin Tenements

Dublin Tenements per se was the result of the Irish political factors like the 1801 Act of Union and the dissolution of the Irish Parliament. When the wealthy people migrated because of this political unrest, their Georgian houses had turned into tenements and became the abode of the poor. During the period between 1900 to 1938, there was a massive surge in the number of tenements in Dublin, numbered around 6,307. The living conditions of these buildings are



very concerning with overcrowding, no sanitation, starvation and disease (Kearns 1-2). Sean O'Casey perfected the art of representing the people of these Dublin tenements, setting of all the three plays in the Dublin Trilogy is in these Tenements. For instance, *The Shadow of a Gunman* sets in a return room in Hilljoy Square tenement house, a two-room tenancy in a tenement house is where *Juno and the Paycock* happens, and *The Plough and the Stars* has its setting in a front and back drawing room of a Georgian house. Raymond Williams defines structures of feelings, "... are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (Williams, "Structures of Feeling" 132). Through the settings of the plays, one could understand the actual living conditions of the people living in Dublin Tenements.

Poverty and Starvation

The utmost outcomes of the war is poverty and starvation. Ireland has a long history of poverty. Jonathan Swift in his work, *The Modest Proposal* satirically suggested to the poor parents to sell their babies as delicacies to the elite. In that case, the Irish wars induced more hunger in the poor working-class people. The mothers were out of ingredients in their home, because of the war groceries retail went high, tea and bread became the staple for the families at that time (Deleuze). In *Juno and the Paycock*, Juno says tea is ready for breakfast and Johnny, her son, is furious on hearing tea (O'Casey, Juno 71). During the Easter Rising, amidst the ambush, people were raiding the damaged shops for food and other essentials (Deleuze 3), which showed how needy and poor they were. In *The Plough and the Stars*, which set during Easter Rising, Bessie, the god fearing woman is shown raiding the shop with Mrs. Gogan, whom she had contradictory beliefs. For this she says, "Poverty an' hardship has sent Bessie Burgess to abide with strange company" (O'Casey, Plough 216).

Disease and Trauma

Another serious issue concerning the civilians' problem during the war is disease and illness. In *The Plough and the Stars*, there's a little girl Mollser, who is affected with tuberculosis or consumption. O'Casey's description paints a live picture of her

suffering, "Mollser came into the room. She is about fifteen, but looks to be only about ten, for the ravages of consumption have shrivelled her up. She is pitifully worn, walks feebly, and frequently coughs" (O'Casey, *Plough* 179). Amid the war and because of poverty, she could not get any medical help and at the end, she died. When Corporal Stoddart came to remove her body, he inquired what was the cause of her death, he was not much moved about her death due to consumption. For which, Covey, the socialist, condemned him, "Is that all? Isn't it enough? D'ye know comrade, that more dir o' consumption than are killed in the' wars? And it's because of th' system we're living' undher?" (O'Casey, *Plough* 235). Throughout the play, we could see characters afraid because of this disease. To specify, when Mrs. Gogan alerts Fluther about his cold by saying a well-built woman who recently died of consumption, "... I know a woman, a big lump of a woman, ... she had a little catchin' in her chest, an' they had just time to wet her lips with a little rum, an' off she went" (O'Casey, *Plough* 157). At the same time, Nora, the female protagonist, delivered a stillbirth baby, no professional help to get, Bessie takes care of her and gives whisky to subdue her suffering (O'Casey, *Plough* 225).

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has been the focus of the study recently, but Sean O'Casey mentioned this way before in the beginning of the twentieth century. In *Juno and the Paycock*, Johnny, the son of Juno or Mrs. Boyle is seen handicapped because of the war. Juno informs that he got shot in the hip during the war and his arm was shattered during the war in O'Connell street. He had trouble sleeping and got easily irritated by the sounds, he says, "I can't sleep with him – they're like thunder claps in me brain!" (O'Casey, Juno 71). When the family was talking about the ghosts, he hallucinated the dead comrade, Mrs. Trancred's son who was recently shot dead by the Free State supporters. The symptoms of PTSD are distressing thoughts, flashbacks of traumatic events, getting easily irritated, inability to sleep, and aggressive outbursts (National Institute of Mental Health). Johnny's inability to sleep, getting irritated with his family, flashbacks of his comrade getting killed shows that he is affected with post-traumatic stress disorder. He



not only got the physical wounds in the war, but also mentally affected by it afterwards.

Police Brutality

In addition to the poverty and bad health conditions, the civilians went through police brutality. The British government, to control the revolutionary people, appointed war veterans as police and commissioned them to Ireland between 1920 and 1921. There are two groups of police, that were positioned in the Ireland, the first one is Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) who were ex-soldiers who fought in World War I, and the second group is made of ex-police officers who acted as temporary force named the Auxiliary Division (ADRIC). The Royal Irish Constabulary is called the Blacks and Tans because of their improper mix of dark green and brown uniforms. Both groups were known for their violence, indiscipline, and atrocious handling of the commoners. (Leeson 1). Sean O'Casey never forgot to document their atrocities in his plays. The protagonist of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Davoren criticizes his friend Seumas's belief, he informs about the brutality of Black and Tans, "Your religion is simply the state of being afraid that God will torture your soul in the next world as you are afraid the Black and Tans will torture your body in this" (O'Casey, *Shadow* 7).

Auxiliary officers' duty was to patrol the city and to raid the houses for Irish Republic Army members. Often, these raids were offensive towards the residents in many ways, from burning shops and homes to murdering people, they have done notorious crimes (Leeson 3). The course of the play, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, is made with the base of those raids in the tenements. O'Casey himself, faced these kinds of raids as he was part of the Irish Republican Army (Murray xi). The second act of the play depicts the raid of the tenement by an auxiliary. For Auxiliaries, your affiliation never matters, they torture people regardless of your support to IRA or to British empire. In the play, Adolphus Grigson, a supporter of the crown and a religious man, is confronted by the Auxiliary officer. Mrs. Grigson narrates the officer's assaults on her husband to Seumas and Davoren, "An' what do you think they did, Mr. Shields ... they had the poor man sitting' up

in bed, his hands crossed on his breast, ... There's torture for you, an' they all laughin; at poor Dolphie's terrible sufferings" (O'Casey, *Shadow* 56). Afraid of their torture, Seumas and Davoren passed the bag of bombs to Minnie Powell, thinking they would not harm a woman. But at the end, they are left only with despair and guilt as Minnie was arrested and shot dead by the Auxiliaries, when she tried to escape from them.

As Raymond Williams defines structures of feeling as, "social experience which is still in process, often not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, ..." (Williams, "Structures of Feeling" 132). The poverty, starvation, illness, violence, and police assaults on civilians are personal struggles, which are the lived social experiences of that time. It may be personal or trivial concerning the nationalistic spirit of the time, but it is the authentic culture of the people living in the Dublin tenements. Sean O'Casey stood true to the civilians and recorded the actual experience of them during the war. Even though Sean O'Casey was once a secretary of the Irish Republic Army himself, without supporting the fake heroism or patriotism of the time, he portrayed the sufferings of the civilians during the war.

Raymond Williams propounded that art and literature record the social and material experience which is uncovered or imperfectly covered by the formal systems (Williams, "Structures of Feeling" 133). The Dublin Trilogy illustrated the lives of tenants of the Dublin tenements. It acts as a testimony of civilian life during war, by representing the poverty, starvation, illness, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), police brutality, and violence amidst the war. From the fore discussed findings, this present study enunciates that Sean O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy is the work of literature, which recorded the social and material experience of the civilian struggle which are often erased in the formal discourses. Even though the Dublin Trilogy was written in the twentieth century, it resonates highly with the contemporary era through its portrayal of civilians during war. At present, commoners are suffering from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and Israel-Gaza war, by recording the cruelty of war towards commoners, Sean O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy acts as a propounder of civilian safety and as the voice of the



voiceless sufferers. The possible areas that could be explored later include, studying the language used in the play like the Irish dialect and registers which are common in the Irish dialect, the importance of using Irish accent in the plays, the theatrical inquiry into stage direction and movement.

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