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The Harvest Festival: Seed-Bed for Future Innovations

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Abstract

Sean O'Casey came in the limelight with his Dublin Trilogy of which the first play, named, *The shadow of a gunman*, was premiered at the Abbey in 1923. But he had earlier written three plays- *The Frost in the Flower* (1917), *The Harvest Festival* (1918) and *The Crimson in the Tricolor* (1920)- which were rejected by the Abbey directorate. Of these the first and the last named above are still untraceable and it is "unlikely that either will ever be recovered now."¹ However, Luckily the manuscript of *The Harvest Festival* was acquired by the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library in 1969 and was not available to scholars until 1978. Robert Patrick Murphy has said, "I have not been able to examine. *The Harvest Festival*. Lola L. Szladits, Curator of the Berg collection of the New York Public Library, considers the holograph a 'museum piece' and maintains an official policy of discouraging access by students."² it was first published in America in 1978 and in Ireland and Britain in 19809. It is logical, therefore, that no study on the play could be made until this time, though references to it do occur in a number of book- length studies on O'Casey's plays. But even these stray remarks on the play are made on the basis of what O'Casey himself has to say about it in his *Innisfallen Fare thee Well*,³ and not on that on any close reading of the text. It is pertinent to notice that even seventeen years after its publication the play is yet to be performed. During his life time O'Casey himself showed no interest in the play in his writings and correspondence; his venture to revise the play remained incomplete; only the first Act is partly revised John O'Riordan has regretted: "The dramatist himself in his meridian years never strove to promote it."⁴ Even the O'Casey Annual and Sean O'Casey's Review, two major journals aiming at promoting fresh studies and researches on the unexplored areas of O'Casey's writings, have shown singular neglect of this play. Perhaps, drawing a clue from the dramatist himself, some of the major O'Casey scholars in their studies have disparaged the play.

Keywords: Materialism, Propaganda, Autobiographical elements, Naturalistic

The earliest study of *The Harvest Festival* in some detail is an article by Ronald Ayling, entitled "Seeds for Future Harvest Propaganda and Art in O'Casey's English Play"⁵ Of the plethora of critical materials published on O'Casey two book- length studies, which devote considerable space to *The Harvest Festival* deserve special mention. They are John O'Riordan's *A Guide to*

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O'Casey's Plays (1984) and Henz Kosok's *Sean O'Casey the Dramatist* (1985). All the three critics- Ayling, O'Riordan and Kosok- have focused on the autobiographical elements and on the topical subject matter with which, as they have asserted. O'Casey was occupied during the first two and half decades of the present century. They all declared that the play had marks of artistic immaturity. Kosok went to the extent of pronouncing that "a distinct disservice has been done to his reputation by its publication... it is all to their [the Abbey directors] credit that they rejected a play like this"⁶ Speaking, as it were, on behalf of the other two critics, too, mentioned above, Kosok goes on to say that it is a propaganda (in a pejorative sense) play where "plot, setting, characterization and dialogue are subordinated to its overriding propose."⁷ An effort has been made in the present paper to establish that *The Harvest Festival*, far from being primarily autobiographical, topical and artistically naive and structurally inadequate, is a clear pointer to the direction O'Casey's dramaturgy was to develop in his later plays and it has a topical and at the same time a universal theme as any great drama has.

The play deals with the adequately motivated efforts of a militant laborer who guides and conducts the activities of the striking laborers against economic depression and exploitation. In his struggle against the organized opposition by the exploiters, constituted of the feudal capitalists and the clergy, he is shot dead. His dead body is taken to the church for funeral service. But the vestry decides against it and the funeral cortege is diverted to the Workers' Union Hall for the workers' last prayer for the peace of the soul of the departed leader. As the funeral procession moves to the tune of the Dead March and the song of the Red Flag, the church bell rings to announce the commencement of the Harvest Festival. Even this bare plot outline demonstrates that the deeper thematic burden of the play is universal; it is a conflict between the instinct for survival, which has been always basic to the human existential issue, and the opposing, thwarting and negative forces represented here by the combined might of the unmerciful church and the exploiting, unscrupulous lot of blood suckers, the capitalists. The unholy alliance of the church and the capitalist is a metaphor for a mighty, insurmountable force which foils the efforts of the individual to survive decently, and eventually destroys the protagonist who is a representative of a larger chunk of humanity. If we had not had the knowledge of O'Casey's associations with and sympathy for the exploited working class to which he himself belonged, our attention to the metaphoric connotation would have been drawn more easily. The stuff of the play is, no doubt, taken from the contemporary Irish social history. But then all great literary compositions are rooted in their indigenous raw materials. It is the use of the indigenous material metaphorically which raises that work of art to the level of universality.

If we examine the blanket epithet of a 'naturalist' attributed to O'Casey we may have some difficulty in calling him a topical dramatist with a propagandist bias, as has been asserted by Ronald Ayling. We may not even concur with Robert Hogan's generalized statement that there is a new orientation in O'Casey's technique "in the direction of freedom, a breaking down the forms and conventions of dramatic realism" from *The Plough and the Stars* onwards.⁸ This

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is because even long before declaring his anti-naturalistic stance,⁹ O'Casey was naturally inclined towards non-naturalistic treatment of his allegedly topical corpus in a way that his plays acquire wider signification. In his earliest work available to us- *The Harvest Festival*- he has used non naturalistic devices, such as symbolism, Brechtian alienation, mythicisation, and a deliberate Chekhovian disconnectedness and looseness of structure. We have stated above how O'Casey's patently topical, autobiographical and factual material has been treated in such an artistic manner that it acquires a universal significance.

So far as structure and characterization are concerned. *The Harvest Festival* demonstrates strong naturalistic strains, no doubt. The looseness of the structure and certain disjointedness and formlessness of it can legitimately give cause for regrets by critics. The static nature of character- portrayal and the identifiably typical dramatic personate of the play, alongwith the presentation of a 'slice-of-life' with empathy tilting on the side of the sufferers and the exploited do qualify this play for being thoroughly naturalistic. But if we closely examine these very elements which entitle the play to the status of a naturalistic drama, we will have no difficulty in discerning that these elements are subtly treated in such a way that they retain their facade and superficial flavor of a naturalistic drama. But at the same time they are, in a highly suggestive manner, imbued with non-naturalistic signification to widen the semantic dimension of the play. For example, the disjointedness of the play's structure is conducive to the creation of montages to focus our attention more pointedly on crucial issues dealt with in the play. The most human character in the play. Mrs. Rocliffe, mother of the protagonist of the play (i.e. Jack), has been mythicised; in her resemblance with and echo of Synge's *Maurya* in *Riders to the Sea* she stands for the suffering and loss of all the bereaved mothers of the world. She is the only character who elicits our empathy while all the other characters are presented naturalistically but with a strong anti-naturalistic blending with Brechtian 'Verfremdung.' There is a striking parallelism between even the early O'Casey and Chekhov, and between O'Casey's distrust of naturalistic empathy and Brecht's *Verfremdung*, long before the theory of 'alienation' was explicitly stated by the latter.

Ronald Ayling takes great pains in establishing the naturalistic structure of *The Harvest Festival*. he points out the structural deficiencies of the plot of the play thus: "The Festival is something of an empty and contrived framework for the dramatic action and is seldom meaningfully related to it. It is artificially grafted on to the plot... a clumsy device... not skillfully integrated in the course of the action with the social strife and the socialist hero's martyrdom."¹⁰ In fact, Ayling's regrets prove our point that O'Casey was not interested in toeing in with the conventional looseness, disjointedness and certain irrelevances of the plot are a deliberate resolve in the direction of non-naturalistic 'representation which becomes explicit in his *Within the Gates*. *The Harvest Festival* has a close structural affinity with Chekhov's non-naturalistic play, *The Three Sisters* where the dramatist uses an exterior action (i.e. journey to Moscow), in the manner of O'Casey's action dealing with the celebration of the annual festival, within whose framework a number of interior actions, without explicit causal connections, are

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presented. The exterior action of *The Harvest Festival* may be apparently inconsequential, but it has symbolic implications on which contrast, irony and satire hinge. It also offers opportunities to present the different characters' feelings, emotional and intellectual responses and their attitudes to the various thematic issues.

The main thread of the interior action is the conflict between militant labor and the economic system. The minor strands are the mother-son relationship, the Rector's and Labor hero's influence with each other, the sacrifice of a comrade-in-arms long-loved habit of drinking, the issue of the scabs vis-a-vis the striking laborers, the church and its vestry's attitude to the masses and the internal dissension within the institution of the church itself. These minor issues throw light on each other, as well as contribute to the complexity of the apparently simple-looking main issue of the plot. All these threads are presented through juxtaposition and contrast which operate in the different dramaturgical components of the play and produce the required structural tension to hold the play. These major and minor strands of the plot, together, constitute the topical, societal entity comprising the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and the clergy. But these social constituents are not so much presented for naturalistic, representational and propagandist purpose, as Ronald Ayling would like us to accept, but as a convenient artistic framework to project human feelings, attitudes, and existential issues in circumstances which are hostile to human endeavor for freedom, equity, and justice. The ideas contained in the play may appear as O'Casey's early communistic leaning but to read propagandist intention in the play is hardly tenable in the face of its paramount human interest.

By Way of establishing our point of view --- i.e. O'Casey's deliberate use of a loose structure for artistic advantage--- we can briefly comment on the first Act of the play, which has attracted Kosok's adverse criticism. The Act opens with a conversation about the imminent Harvest Festival. The conversation suddenly shifts to the on-going strike by the laborers. No causal hints have been given in the opening situation for bringing in unrelated issues. Kosok naturally regrets O'Casey's long rambling exposition which the whole of the first Act is. But this alleged long, rambling first Act, presenting only the conventional exposition of the play, serves a significant artistic purpose. Here the bits of exposition are spread over the entire first Act so that the gaps are utilized for an effective focusing of the Kaleidoscopic apparatus on the feelings and attitudes of the different characters. Thus, the events connected with the Festival and the strike become metaphors or a symbolic framework for projecting human issues rather than the political or religious ones.

Besides the artistically desirable disconnectedness and rambling nature of the plot movement, we discern another non- naturalistic device in the very first: Act of the play, i.e. Brechtian *Verfremdung*. For example, our sympathies for Tom and Mrs. Williamson were held in alliance in the opening situation of the act because of their caricatured presentation. But later in the situation our sympathies for Tom flow because of his essentially human approach to the basic problems of life, but are quickly reversed when Jack towards the end of the Act sums up his Catholic character. "Poor tom, you suffer under a dual tyranny-- afraid of

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your soul in the next world and afraid of your body in this."¹¹ At the same time our possible endorsement to Jack's heartless communism, which may be built up even on the debris of individualism and human feelings, remains in a state of suspended animation. In the first Act Jack's idealism, because of its negative human consideration and being contrasted with Tom's down-to-earth rootedness in humanity, though not without self-centredness, fails to elicit our empathy. But later in the play we find our response reversed in his relationship with and attitude to his mother and to Bill, his comrade-in-arms. This technique of 'alienation' and 'reverse-alienation' is more explicitly exploited in *The Plough and the Stars*.

Our intention in the present paper is not to defend all the structural and thematic weaknesses of the play. We only propose to point out that this earliest available O'Casey play is like a seedbed for a number of innovative dramatic devices which he uses in his later plays. Besides the use of rambling and disjointed structuring of the dramatic action, irrelevancies, 'alienation', and montage, *The Harvest Festival* uses other devices, too, such as simultaneity of events of different nature and import, the blending on auditory and visual effects for artistic economy and effectiveness and exploitation of color arrangement. A clear example of irrelevance as a structural expedience is discernible in Jack's long and rather too rounded speeches about socialism, workers abject submissiveness, and the poverty ridden, unhygienic and almost hellish conditions of tenement life.¹² This may appear undramatic, especially when we recall a similar practice of Shaw in whose long dialogues an idea is debated which causes friction and motion in the plot. This deficiency can be partly explained with reference to O'Casey's early enthusiasm for his explicit courtship with communism and partly because the play is undeniably a drama of ideas. There are several other examples where the clues for Jack's communistic tirades are rather feeble.

To illustrate O'Casey's use of double stage and blending of auditory and visual effects we can cite the simultaneous celebration of the Harvest Festival and the chanted offering of prayer for the peace of the soul of the departed labor leader, taking place in two different locales, which anticipates the last, powerful situation in *The Plough and the Stars* where the 'imprisoned' tenement inmates' laying of the game of cards, the tuck-tuck of the boots of the marching soldiers on the street and the distant portion of the town glowing with high-rising flames go on simultaneously. The other notable example, even in a relatively less significant situation, is thus: During the serious discussion between Bishopson and Jack, Mrs. Williamson has been arranging and admiring the heap of vegetables of different colours on the table, singing in a low but perfectly audible voice lines of a hymn, the message of which kindness and charity- is at variance with her and her clan's conduct and attitudes. This device of the simultaneity of disparate happenings, so artistically exploited by O'Casey in his later plays, hinges on juxtaposition and contrast, so crucial for his dramaturgy.

Kosok's regret that there is "an easy wavering between realistic and unrealistic presentation in plot."¹³ has considerable justification, no doubt. Even the second Act, like the First one, begins in a rambling manner and is in the nature of a repeat exposition, with

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information about the protagonist, the strikers conflict and its impact upon the life of the non-participating dependents in the workers families. Besides stuffing these pieces of information in an undramatic manner, there is considerable autobiographical stuff appearing as a conscious, deliberate and quite often labored. For example, Jack's habit of voracious reading his lack of formal schooling, his boyhood interest in the masses of the church and eventual withdrawal from the church activities, loving care of his courageous mother who never submitted to hardships, etc. all explicitly autobiographical do not contribute much to the development of the main issues of the play. Besides this, we have unwarranted, lengthy conversations (e.g. Mrs. Roccliffe with Mrs. Duffy, later with the Rector) and casually unconnected deposing of information which stall the development of the dramatic action. However, in the midst of this rambling stuff we have, interspersed, highly dramatically significant utterances and situations which propel the action as well as lend emotional solidity to an otherwise dry play of ideas. In this regard we can refer to Mrs. Roccliffe's apprehension at Jack's impetuous and impulsive nature which makes his accidental death credible. "He's such a hasty boy and he doesn't care what he says."¹⁴ Another example which it is relevant to mention here is Mrs. Roccliffe's Maurya-like (cf. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*) premonitions about some imminent catastrophe: "I feel as if there was something' terrible goin' to happen."¹⁵ As Mrs. Roccliffe's affinity with Maurya is unmistakable so is Jack's with Bartley.¹⁶ We can similarly determine the Rector's affinity (with his pious consolation) with Synge's Priest in *Riders to the Sea* who tries to explain away, like the Rector, the mother's intuitive perception of the destruction of her son O'Casey shows his indebtedness to Synge here in his naturalistic exploitation of the human situation so that the dryness of the play of ideas is somewhat moistened. However, O'Casey has widened the perceptual scope of Maurya in attributing to Mrs. Roccliffe's perception another dimension, i.e. Juno-like (cf. *Juno and the Paycock*) realization of the futility of exclusive dependence upon God, so succinctly stated in her, "what can God do against the stupidity of man."

We notice early in O'Casey's dramaturgy the exploitation of non-verbal devices to convey the sense of, for example, chaos by mixing auditory visual elements: commotion created by the strikes and the scabs, the shots of soldiers' guns and Mrs. Duffy's eye witness account, visualizing the rampaging scene.¹⁷ The use of the simultaneity of disparate happenings to underscore ironic and satiric effects is a technique which O'Casey employs in a number of his mature plays. By the close of the Second Act the play has, in fact, ended. The church bell announcing the beginning of the Harvest Festival---which in any way is not a thematic or structural concern of the play--- and the death of the leader of the workers Union are the concluding events of the Act. In the death of Jack the catastrophe, both at the political and personal levels, has occurred. Both the workers and Mrs. Roccliffe are left to suffer their fate. Nothing remains to hold out any hope to redeem them. In such a situation the third Act, which does not have any thematic or structural causation, is only in the nature of an anti-climax. It can at most elaborate some of the ideas and contrasts already presented. This is why the stuff of the final Act tends to be structurally independent of that of the earlier Acts. It has its own

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exposition, complication and conclusion. Looking at this Act like this would lead us to conclude that the story of the earlier Acts seems to constitute a background, as it were, to the final Act which is the drama of the play.

Ronald Ayling, perhaps the most influential critic of O'Casey's works, has tried to show O'Casey's artistic immaturity in *The Harvest Festival* mainly on three counts: viz. lack of functional tension between dramatis personae and artificial pattern of action; oratorical rather than dramatic dialogue, lacking in give and take; and caricatured characterisation which is not convincing. The trouble with O'Casey critics of *The Harvest Festival* has been that since it is his first play it should of necessity be immature, especially in view of O'Casey's lack of formal schooling and existence in an economically hard-pressed environment. My purpose in the present paper, as state earlier, is not to defend the artistic deficiencies of the play- there are quite a few of them, no doubt,--- but to assert that we should not close our eyes to the early innovative dramatic instinct of the playwright, which blossomed significantly in his later play. If we adopt such a liberal and open-minded critical stance, we will notice that the rambling nature of the lot structure, caricatured characterization, disjointedness, and abrupt changes in situations, issues discussed, and grouping of characters are rather deliberate and in the direction of O'Casey's inclination towards non naturalistic theatre long before he formally declared his hostility to naturalism.

On close examination of the play, we should have no difficulty in establishing that the alleged deficiencies here are deliberate. They demonstrate O'Casey's efforts from the very beginning for innovation. O'Casey was neither interested in presenting an organized and logically developed main plot with the other sub plots subordinated to it, nor was he concerned with the psychological exploration of characters based on casual relationship in the conventional dramatic mode. The play should not be taken as primarily concerned with the discussion of a social or political problem; that would certainly require a conventional, realistic structural framework of exposition, debate and conclusion. The play's intention is different. It intends to dramatically present the attitudes and feelings of diverse characters involved in different situations. Such a dramatic intention would require the use of a kaleidoscopic technique and deliberate disconnectedness. Once this pattern is recognized the alleged feeble tension between the stickers and the scabs, between the church and Jack, and Mrs. Duffy's dissociation from her good neighbour, can easily be understood.

The other stock criticism against *The Harvest Festival* is its oratorical dialogue. In fact, the dialogue here is not so much oratorical rhetoric as it is stylized, which is a pointer to O'Casey's non-naturalistic use of the langue. It is mostly Jack's speeches which invite Ayling's rather harsh indictment that the "Stylized speech often sticks out like a sore thumb."¹⁸ In fairness to O'Casey it can be asserted that Jack's wide reading, intellectual sharpness and sense of conviction make his allegedly oratorical speeches convincing and the lack of much give and take is dictated by the dramatic intention of not so much development a plot as projecting certain attitudinal points of view. Moreover, non-naturalistic handling of dramatic material

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requires certain amount of deviation from the normal interactional speech idioms. It is true that O'Casey's dialogues sometimes are inconsequential from a strictly dramatic point of view. But this tendency, characteristic of the absurdist technique, is O'Casey's conscious experimentation with technique and contingent upon the thematic intention of the play.

Both Kosok and Ayling have found fault with O'Casey's characterisation in *The Harvest Festival*. Kosok asserts that here characters are mostly allegorical abstractions,¹⁹ while Ayling feels that they "are painted in black and white colours and thereby become caricatures lacking conviction either as human beings or as credible representatives of particular vested interests."²⁰ This is too sweeping a generalization. In *The Harvest Festival* the major characters- Jack, Mrs. Roccliffe, and Rector Jennings- are individualized humans.: Even though they do not have much psychological complexity, they have considerable strength of personality and convictions. However, characters like Mr. and Mrs. Bishopson are certainly caricatured, but this too, has been done deliberately to offer a contrast with the other characters endowed with human feelings.

By way of summing up we can say that O'Casey's handling of the different dramaturgical components in *The Harvest Festival*- plot, theme, characterization, dialogue- look forward to their subtler and more artistic use in his later plays. Some of the significant technical devices, however, crudely used, and matured later are: O'Casey's deliberate use of loose plot structure to give his kaleidoscopic focusing adequate freedom of operation; his distrust of naturalistic empathy (ef. Brechtian *verfremdung*), application of what he said later in his career: "even in the most commonplace of realistic plays the symbol can never be absent."²¹ inclusion of the comic, the farcical, and the melodramatic into the serious and the tragic; juxtaposition and contrast; focus on human attitudes and feelings rather than on discreetly structured events; stylization, deliberate disconnectedness, occasional abstraction and inconsequential communication- pointing to a tendency for Absurdism, expressionism, etc.

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