

**Dying for Mother Ireland:
A Noble Deed or a Glorified, Nationalist Ideology?**

The theme of war has always been prevalent in modern Irish literature. In like manner to any other controversial themes, war tends to cause discord between individuals, creating different viewpoints and opinions on the subject matter. Some may view going to war as a courageous, valiant action – a self-sacrifice for one’s nation; the idea of which, “as both theme and setting, has haunted the development of Irish theatre.” (Richards 1) Others may look upon war as senseless waste of human life, as well as the suffering of the innocent. The ideology one stands by, together with their beliefs, tend to have a great influence upon their personal views concerning war. For instance, a nationalist is more likely to view it as something positive, whereas a realist would probably consider it as an unquestionably odious part of humanity. Coincidentally, these two immensely contrasting viewpoints – that is, nationalism and realism – along with other noteworthy differences, shall be put up against each other in this essay. The purpose of this paper is to examine, as well as compare the ideology of “dying for Mother Ireland” in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* by W. B. Yeats (together with Lady Gregory) and in *Juno and the Paycock* by Sean O’ Casey.

As it has been stated before *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (from here on shortened to *Cathleen*) was written by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory – who, unfortunately, was ignored in the composition of the piece in favour of Yeats (Richards 12) – and premiered in the year 1902. According to Joep Leerssen, the play was a “straightforward nationalist propaganda” and “made use of a theme from traditional anti-English legend and folktale.” (53) It consists of merely one act, the setting of which is a small cottage found in the Irish countryside – a location frequently reoccurring in modern Irish dramas – in 1798, the year of the Irish Uprising. The short list of characters – presumably resulting from the shortness of the play itself – includes the Gillane

family: viz. Bridget, a wife and mother; Peter, husband and father; Michael, their elder son; and Patrick, their younger son; along with Delia Cahel, Michael's bride-to-be; and the Old Woman. The Old Woman – i.e. Cathleen – is a symbol for Mother Ireland. Unlike other pieces of literature, where she is portrayed “as a young woman, in distress, importuned and enslaved by wicked men,” in this play she is embodied by an “old crone, bedraggled and down at heel.” (53) In spite of this, Michael, who seems to be almost enchanted by her, leaves his family and affianced behind to fight for her on the side of the recently arrived French troops and other Irish rebels. Michael's willingness to fight seems to reawaken the youthfulness and beauty of Cathleen within her. Interestingly, it is only the youngest son, Patrick, who sees her transform into her former self. This may imply that it will only be the next generation, who will be able to live in a country, that is not crushed under the tyranny of another nation. Even though Michael leaving causes great misery for his loved-ones, he is painted as a noble hero for his decision, who will be remembered by posterity. Which – as unfortunate as it is – will plausibly not be the case. He will presumably die as another nameless rebel, remembered by no one. Leerssen was certainly not exaggerating when he deemed this piece of writing “nationalist propaganda.” It glorifies the act of going to war, while simultaneously disregards the agony of those losing their sons, brothers, or fathers; not to mention the soldiers themselves, who either die or become impaired – both physically and mentally – for the rest of their lives. One may argue that Michael's sacrifice is indeed admirable, and all the rebels of the Uprising died for a just cause, such as liberating Mother Ireland, as well as her people. Nevertheless, this argument is highly idealistic, in view of the fact that it ignores the aforementioned problems resulting from the aftermath of war. Incidentally, it is important to note, that in spite of *Cathleen* being an eminently nationalist piece of literature, it by no means represents Yeats's views. As Leerssen states as well: “It [*Cathleen*] marked the brief, transient phase of his career when he was closest

to radical, separatist nationalism, (...)” (54) In other words, Yeats was no “die-hard” nationalist, despite this play portraying him as such.

Unlike *Cathleen*, *Juno and the Paycock* (from here on shortened to *Juno*) – written by Sean O’ Casey, and first performed in 1924 – takes a more realistic approach concerning the theme of war. The play, along with *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), constitute the so-called “Dublin Trilogy.” (McDonald 136) According to Chothia, these were – and still are – “his most highly regarded and frequently discussed works.” (125) *Juno* can be regarded as a tragicomedy, since in spite of its central theme – that is, war – being rather sorrowful, one can find a couple of humorous elements in the play – for instance, malapropism.

Another element which differentiates *Juno* from *Cathleen* is the setting, for the former takes place in a tenement in 1922 – the year of the Irish Free State and Civil War. Also unlike *Cathleen*, this play has a large cast of characters. However, the central characters are still a family of four: namely “Captain” Jack Boyle; Juno Boyle, his wife; and their children: Mary and Johnny Boyle. There are numerous side characters as well, the most notable of which are “Joxer” Daly, the Captain’s good-for-nothing friend; Mrs Maisie Madigan; Jerry Devine; and Charles Bentham, a schoolteacher, as well as Mary’s lover.

In spite of the countless differences between the two plays, one could argue that the one of the most prominent contrasts is, without a doubt, the characters of Michael Gillane and Johnny Boyle. While Michael embodies the ideal rebel and freedom-fighter, Johnny represents the soldiers damaged by the brutality of war. The soldiers, to whom the aforementioned nationalist ideology is oblivious. In regards to personality, Michael and Johnny are like night and day. While the former is courageous, tenacious as well as altruistic, the other is cowardly, petulant, and – worst of all in views of most nationalists – a traitor. His character is likely to cause a rift between individuals of opposing attitudes. Some may state that he deserved his fate,

for he betrayed everything he vowed to protect and stand for. These individuals tend to consider treason one of the greatest crimes one could possibly commit. Others may argue, that – although treason is an undeniably reprehensible wrongdoing – no traitor should be punished by death, since one’s desire to stay alive frequently proves to be more powerful than whatever principles they believe in. Indeed, the will to live generally overpowers one’s integrity in life-or-death situations. It is an essential part of human nature hence it is safe to say that Johnny did not deserve to die for merely acting upon his instincts.

Another fascinating aspect of *Juno* – which differentiates it from *Cathleen* – is the character of its heroine, Juno Boyle. In this play the focus shifts from the heroic soldiers going to war to the women staying behind, more specifically, to the mothers and the hardships they have to endure. Mrs. Boyle not only has to take care of her now physically and mentally handicapped son, as she is forced to watch his condition worsen as days go by, she also has to fulfil the role of the sole provider of her household, owing to the fact that her husband is tremendously reluctant to seek work. In other words, both the tasks of managing a household – which in the beginning of the twentieth century was still the responsibility of women – and the duty of providing financial stability – which was the responsibility of men – stand as burden upon Juno’s shoulders. Her character is genuinely commendable, seeing as she does not fall into despair when facing the obstacles of living in a time of such immense uncertainty as well as poverty, but does everything she is capable of for her family. Although her self-sacrifice is not in like manner to that of Michael, it is an enormous sacrifice nonetheless. Moreover, this shift from the male perspective encapsulates exquisitely the ordeals women had to face during the time of Civil War. Nevertheless, the figure of preserving heroine was not a typical feature of O’Casey’s dramas – regardless of the fact that the “Dublin Trilogy” may lead one to believe otherwise. According to Grene, O’Casey can scarcely be considered a feminist in view of the fact that, some of his pieces of writing his female characters are either “predatory wives,” or

“sex-object girlfriends.” Furthermore, in other works of his it is “male sexuality” together with “male-led activism” that become associated with liberation (125).

Now, let us turn our attention to the ideology and its portrayal found in both of these plays; that is “dying for Mother Ireland.” In *Cathleen*, – as it has been stated before – it is rather glorified. The hero of the play, Michael, is painted as a valorous, strong young man who – along with many others – will restore Ireland’s former glory; similarly to how Cathleen’s youth and beauty is restored in the play itself. This view upon the subject matter is highly idealised. On the one hand, it completely ignores the fact that Michael will plausibly either die on the battlefield or suffer the same fate as Johnny – that is, become mentally and physically impaired. On the other hand, it disregards the anguish of his family, especially that of Bridgette. One of the most painful things a mother would possibly have to endure is losing her child. In addition to this, the family has to face severe poverty in view of the fact that the only income provider left the household. However, none of these factors are taken into account in the play, for that would tarnish the virtuousness of the ideology. Conversely, *Juno* portrays its characters, as well as the subject of war, in a significantly more realistic light. For instance, the character of Johnny. The way his dialogue is written paints him as a fearful, deranged cripple. The trails of war crushed him and made him a hollow shell of his former self. Which unfortunately illustrates the state many soldiers are in after they return from the battlefield. Additionally, Johnny is anything but a hero. On the contrary, he is a traitor, immensely despised by nationalists. After all, many of them view treason as something worse than death itself. One could argue that O’Casey made a conscious effort to paint the character of Johnny as woeful as possible in order to refute the stereotypical, heroic soldier characters found in other Irish plays. Consequently, Johnny is not the hero of the play. As it has been mentioned prior, it is Juno Boyle, a character truly deserving of admiration.

In conclusion, the subject of war will always divide people due to their contrasting standpoints. Individuals of a nationalist perspective will likely consider it a noble sacrifice for one's home country and its people (as portrayed in *Cathleen*), whereas realists will probably see it as blindly plunging oneself into their own death, causing nothing but misery for their loved-ones (as portrayed in *Juno*.) Still, irrespective of the highly nationalist attitude found in *Cathleen*, or the heroines of the "Dublin Trilogy," it is fascinating to see that neither of the playwrights upheld the same values they incorporated into their dramas. This illustrates how crucial it can be to separate the playwright – or, as a matter of fact, any type of artist – and their work, for the latter is not necessarily representative of the beliefs and views of the former. Individuals, as well as their standpoints change as their life progresses, thus it would be foolish to label Yeats as an unyielding nationalist, or O'Casey as a progressive feminist icon based upon knowledge of merely one of their plays respectively. One must always consider the complexity of human nature, and not simply designate a title to a given artist. But, to return to the topic, both *Cathleen*, as well as *Juno* showcase two tremendously different perspective upon the subject of war; and both of them are excellent plays in their own, unique way.

Works Cited

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