

'Hurl yourself upon a willing bayonet?': Sacrifice or Suicide in Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*.

Ahead of the centenary of the Easter Rising, in an interview with Mail on Sunday, Dublin-born Bob Geldof controversially claimed that the perpetrators of the Easter Rising were no different from present day Islamic suicide bombers. He questioned the traditional heroic narratives of the rising, violently exclaiming 'If it's a grievous mortal sin to commit suicide, why is it a lesser sin to hurl yourself upon a willing bayonet? Why is that a martyrdom? (...) How many murders have been sanctioned in its name?' (Hastings, 33).

'Why is that martyrdom?' is not only a question posed, and often incredulously opposed, in modern discourses surrounding the Rising, but is also a central ethical conflict raised by O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. The notions of martyrdom that form the basis of this question are seen to be founded in a staunchly Christian context. O'Casey's men are roused to their deaths by 'The Figure in the Window', ostensibly a representation of Pearse (McLoughlin, 349), who recalls 'the Christian language of sacrifice' (Wills, 56). As the men's deaths are thus seen to have been both inspired and validated by Christian ideology, it is important to frame the martyrdom debate within this Christian context.

Pearse was known to be familiar with the work of prominent novelist and Christian philosopher G.K Chesterton, and is said to have utilised the philosophies from 'Orthodoxy' in his oratory (Heaney, 310). It is therefore useful to use Chesterton's notions of martyrdom to analyse how, and to what extent, O'Casey undermines the narrative of heroic sacrifice that prompted the men's deaths. In 'Orthodoxy', Chesterton asserts that a martyr is 'a man who cares so much for something outside of him, that he forgets his own personal life. (...) He dies that something will live' (65-66). He asserts that a martyr demonstrates a 'strong desire

to live' but a 'readiness to die' (86). Conversely, suicide is defined by Chesterton as 'the opposite to a martyr' (65), the suicidal individual intending death and thus being a 'mere destroyer, spiritually, he destroys the universe' (66).

The primary distinctions between sacrifice and suicide, according to Chesterton and subscribed to by Pearse, thus appear to rest on three criteria:

- 1) 'A strong desire to live' but a 'readiness to die'.
- 2) A strong belief in a cause, as he 'cares so much for something outside of him'.
- 3) A conviction that death will positively aid this cause: 'he dies so that something will live'.

In this essay I will argue that O'Casey engages with, and undermines, these ideological standards to dispute notions of martyrdom. I will examine firstly how O'Casey unpicks and critiques attitudes to sacrifice by querying to what extent his men demonstrate both a 'strong desire to live' and a 'readiness to die'. I will then analyse how O'Casey undermines the strength and validity of their political convictions and thus the notion that they died 'so that something will live', questioning whether anything will 'live' at all. O'Casey was a Nationalist and thus I do not believe he is critiquing the aim of an independent Ireland, O'Casey instead revealing how a reckless glorifying of martyrdom made a mockery of the Nationalist cause. In short, I aim to prove that in *The Plough and the Stars* continually asks 'Why is this martyrdom?'

Before I examine how O'Casey challenges the criteria laid out by Chesterton, it is important to note how he staunchly and rapidly asserts the autonomy of his characters' decisions.

O'Casey thus ensures that their individual intentions and claims to martyrdom can be justly and effectively queried. In the opening scene we see Peter laboriously 'adornin' himself for

th' meeting tonight', whilst being continually mocked by Mrs Gogan and Fluther as 'like somethin' you'd pick off a Christmas tree!' (139). O'Casey thus asserts that Peter's affiliation with the Foresters is not a culmination of social expectation or societal pressure to conform, his commitment to the organisation instead rendering him vulnerable to ridicule. Whilst we do hear the 'clang of tools being thrown down' as the workers abandon their work for the march (142), implying a potentially pressurising group mentality, this is only after Peter's affiliation has already been established and received as autonomous. Moreover, by quickly presenting a political alternative in the form of the 'red flag socialist' Covey (144), O'Casey emphasises that Peter's affiliation is not a product of necessity and a lack of political alternative. Indeed, his fear that he 'won't be able to do meself justice when I'm marchin'' (153) conveys his genuine adoration for, and pride in, the organisation.

O'Casey similarly undermines any sense of obligation in Jack's decision to re-join the ICA. Although Connelly's message to Jack has the appearance of an order, Brennan's presence does not appear intimidating or coercive, O'Casey twice emphasising that he is 'young' in the stage directions (156-7). We therefore perceive that Jack could conceivably refuse the commandant role, should he have wished to. Indeed, Nora vocalises this alternative, telling Jack to 'send him away an' stay' (158). Moreover, Jack's violent outburst against Nora, telling her 'you deserve to be hurt' after she burnt the original order (158), stresses to the audience how fiercely Jack desires the role, swiftly reinforced by the how readily accessible he has kept his gun, as he quickly locates it in 'the chest of drawers' (158). This demonstration of Jack's evident desire to belong to ICA enables the audience to perceive Jack as freely and independently choosing to re-establish his membership and thus freely choosing to partake in the Rising. This sense of Jack and Peter's political autonomy is crucial

for O'Casey's subversion of the heroic narrative, as by establishing their independent volition, O'Casey is able to unpick and challenge their individual intentions.

Intention is crucial to Chesterton's perception of martyrdom. Chesterton states that a martyr must exhibit a 'strong desire to live', but O'Casey presents both Jack and the 'Figure in the Window' as displaying an inclination towards death. The Figure proclaims bloodshed to be 'cleansing and sanctifying' (162), insinuating that death is not simply a necessary component of armed conflict, but an aspirational, desirable form of salvation. This glorification of death is furthered in his later speech, as he commands the crowd be 'ready to pour out the same red wine in the same glorious sacrifice, for without shedding of blood there is no redemption' (164). Here bloodshed is seen to be a prerequisite for salvation, death thus ceasing to be a by-product of political revolution but conversely becomes the aim. This is largely representative of Pearse's writings as a whole, Townshend asserting that Pearse's poetry reveals that he was 'actively looking for a sacrificial death' (114). Political and military strategy do not feature in the Figures speeches. O'Casey arguably selected writings that draw emphasis to Pearse's apparent death-wish, undermining the serious military and political intentions of the rising and thus the 'strong desire to live' of the leadership.

Indeed, O'Casey presents the organisation of the Rising as inherently flawed. Jack holds a leadership position as commandant, but his efficacy at the role is countered by his initial description in the stage directions, as O'Casey introduces Jack as a man who has a 'desire for authority without the power to obtain it.' (149). His failure as an authoritative military leader thus seems doomed from the outset, making death, not military or political success, the expectation. This is furthered when Mrs Gogan describes the men walking a 'procession

round place in th' city sacred to the memory of Irish patriots' (139). By referencing the physical retracing of history, O'Casey emphasises that the uprising is focused on re-creating the sacrifices and martyrdom of the past, not on securing the independence of Ireland.

O'Casey further undermines the narratives of martyrdom by insinuating that this aspiration for death wasn't limited to Pearse and the organisation of the Rising, but festered in the minds of all involved. 'Death' is the subject of Jack's rallying cry 'Death for the Independence of Ireland' at the culmination of Act Two (178), the subjugation of Independence to death stressing the greater value attached to the prospect of personal heroism than political success.

Moreover, Jack and Peter's strong association with the tradition of martyrdom subtly but powerfully questions their 'strong desire to live'. The Clitheroe's home features 'a picture of Robert Emmet' (135), an 'Irish nationalist leader who inspired the abortive rising of 1803, remembered as a romantic hero of Irish lost causes' (Britannica). Emmet will have been very familiar to the original audience and thus his image in the opening setting acts as a powerful signifier of the inhabitants' political orientation, contextualising their actions within this ideological framework. The prominence of the portrait's positioning 'in the centre breast of the chimney' not only conveys its significance to the owner (135), but also indicates an admiration of, and therefore plausibly an aspiration to follow, Emmet's sacrifice. Whelan claims 'Emmet did not wish to die' merely 'treading a fine ethical line between knowing his death was coming, embracing it and not embracing it.' (50). Yet by aspiring to replicate Emmet, the owner of the portrait be that Peter or Jack, is unavoidably aspiring to their own death.

This aspiration to replicate the martyrdom of the past is further asserted by the evident prestige Peter attaches to his 'gold braided' uniform (150), commonly known as 'Emmet Uniform' (Shrank, 54). Mrs Gogan describes how the uniform makes Peter and his compatriots appear as if they were 'hangin at the end of a rope (...) gaspin' an' gaspin' for breath while yous are thryin' to die for Ireland' (167). This not only asserts their desire for death, even if they appear incompetent at achieving it, but also insinuates the apparent futility of the groups' ideology. They are being strangled by their own costume wilfully killing themselves with, and for no other cause than, tradition. O'Casey presents men striving to become martyrs for the sake of past martyrdom, which undermines the very premise of the Christian martyr.

Ironically, whilst O'Casey queries his characters' 'desire to live' by indicating a disquieting aspiration for death, he also questions another of Chesterton's standards of martyrdom: their 'readiness to die' when rhetoric becomes reality. Nora claims that Jack and his compatriots are 'afraid, afraid, afraid!' (185), undermining the masculine façade of invincibility and their apparent heroic indifference to death asserted in Act Two. Logan is demonstrably unwilling to die, crying 'if I'd kept down only a little longer, I mightn't ha' been hit!' (195). This remorse discredits the traditional Irish narrative of the 'male warrior' who gains 'strength from his own suffering' that White claims is 'one of the most powerful ideals of masculinity (195), O'Casey instead presenting a man who is scared and embittered by the prospect of his own death. The men in O'Casey's play thus cannot be seen to fulfil Chesterton's definition of a martyr as someone who displays a 'strong desire to live' but also a 'readiness to die'.

However, O'Casey can be seen, to a degree, to attribute this failing to their reliance on an empty rhetoric, as he questions the political convictions of his characters. The extent to which Jack 'cares so much for something outside of himself' is dubious, as he seemingly has a minimal interest in politics, despite his leadership status. Clarke argues that Jack 'rarely engages' with Peter and The Covey's political debates (222), and 'has little interest in the political implications' of his uniform (221). O'Casey thus undermines the political impetus of the uprising, as he suggests even those in leadership positions possess little political awareness.

In our first introduction to his character, Mrs Gogan comments that Jack left the ICA 'Just because he wasn't made a captain of' describing how he'd already 'bought a Sam Brown Belt an' was always puttin' it on and standin' at th' door showing it off' (140). Not only does this suggest, as Clarke argues, that Jack's politics are subordinate to his selfish desire to 'be at the head of the theatricalized procession' (222), but it indicates that Jack does not simply subordinate his politics, he doesn't understand them. Jack's dressing up and 'showin' off' of his outfit is mimetic of a child roleplaying, who understands the basic concept but not the complex intricacies of his role. This sense of childish ignorance is accentuated by the juxtaposition between Jack's rhetoric and the stage directions at the end of Act Two. Jack declares his willingness to die for the independence of Ireland, but O'Casey implies in the stage directions that he and his comrades are 'unaware of the meaning of what they said' (177). Again, Jack is performing the language and appearance of the martyr, without the political understanding to support it. Indeed, O'Casey presents the men as undermining and making a ridicule of Nationalist politics. Mrs Gogan's farcical image of men being knowingly suffocated by their own fine 'ostrichness plume' makes a mockery of the Foresters (167), in turn making a mockery of the Nationalist values the uniform and Emmet represent.

This undermines O'Casey's characters' claims to the last, and perhaps most important, of Chesterton's criteria of martyrdom; a martyr must die 'so that something must live'. It is this requirement that O'Casey stages the biggest challenge to, as he effectively invalidates their cause, implying nothing will 'live' as a result of the Rising. Schrank argues that *The Plough and the Stars* 'as a whole is critical of the Rising because the Rising ignores the need for fundamental social changes' (16), but O'Casey critiques not only a denial of the need for social change, but a total ignorance of this need among the leadership. In his only mention of any motivating oppression, the Figure declares 'There are many things more horrible than bloodshed, and slavery is one of them' (162), yet makes no mention of the economic hardships that O'Casey presents as the real suffering of the play. As The Covey says, 'if they were fightin' for anything worthwhile I wouldn't mind' (185), but they do not appear to be fighting for anything that will create palpable change, what will 'live' as a result of their death is elusive.

Consumption is one of the principal dreads facing the characters in the play. Fluther is initially described in the stage directions as 'rarely surrendering to thoughts of anxiety' (136), and he isn't overtly fazed by the violence of the Rising. He willingly risks injury to find Nora and to organise Mollser's funeral (181, 209), and less nobly to steal alcohol, the unnecessary of the latter action conveying how little disturbed he is by the violence (198). Indeed, this indifference is well demonstrated by his response to Peter's fear of the volunteers 'firin' on them' as he replies simply, 'well?' (188). Yet, this apparent indifference to danger is juxtaposed by his reaction to Mrs Gogan's insinuation that he may have consumption in Act One, as he begins 'fermentin' with fear' (141). The strength and immediacy of this fear compared with his ease with military violence stresses that poverty is a greater threat to the general population, exemplifying The Covey's point that 'more die o'

consumption than are killed in th' wars' (208). Mollser is a victim of this terrible disease, the image of her coffin in the 'poverty verging on destitution' of Bessie's flat invoking a harsh criticism on the lack of social economic change being orchestrated by the Rising (200).

The Rising's failure to address or even identify these socio-economic problems suggests a disassociation with the population they are supposedly dying to liberate. As McLoughlin argues, Jack is 'so caught up in a romantic notion of saving Ireland he has not paused to consider who or what really needs saving' (354), although I perceive that O'Casey presents this recklessness as endemic of the entire Rising. At the end of Act Three, Jack and Langon declare that 'Ireland is greater than a Mother' and 'greater than a wife' (178). Irish independence has historically (and theatrically) been associated with femininity, Mother Ireland and Cathleen Ni Houlihan commonly embodying the nation in Nationalist literature. The sudden disregard for women thus implies that they have collectively lost sight of the domestic sphere they are supposedly striving to protect and liberate. Again, what they are fighting for, and what will 'live' as a result of their deaths is unclear.

O'Casey not only queries what will live, but whether anything will live at all, presenting the Rising as intrinsically destructive. This thus not only queries the men's claim to martyrdom, but also links them to Chesterton's perception of suicide. Nora's earlier berating of Peter and The Covey 'Are yous always goin' to be tearin' down th' little bit of respectability a body is tryin' to build up' (147) feels acutely applicable to the Rising, the violence 'tearin' down' the community we see being built up in Act One. The play opens with images of societal progress and healing as the workers are 'repairing the street' (136), but closes with the decimation of the community, the 'glare of the burning buildings' framing the final act (200).

Social progress is seen to be abandoned in favour of the Rising, directly and undeniably culminating in the destruction of society.

This regression is echoed in the trajectory of the domestic sphere. In Act One, Nora's home 'suggests an attempt towards a finer expression of domestic life' (135), and she secures her own personal space, and thus personal freedom, by fitting a lock (136). But by the end of the play, this is all but lost, the whole tenement house trapped in the 'compressed confinement' of Bessie's flat as Nora's own home is destroyed by 'machine-gun fire' (200, 201). The domestic stability of the first act is destroyed, rendering the characters even more vulnerable and powerless to their economic plight. Just as the street light 'diminishes' in the first act (142), hope for the future has been extinguished across the course of the play.

This deterioration is ultimately embodied by Nora herself, 'life thyrin' to force its way out' of her in the same manner in which she and her neighbours are forced out of their homes (206). She, like Dublin, once 'swift and alert' (147), is now dysfunctional and broken.

Nothing has lived as a result of the men's sacrifice, but much can be seen to have died.

Yet, for all the visual power of these images, it is the shift in the presence on stage that most palpably condemns the Rising. Act One opens with a cacophony of voices and personalities, the characters asserted as autonomous free agents, albeit economically oppressed. This is starkly contrasted by the end of the play, the final voice given to the British who invade both home and stage, expelling the Irish voice. Far from liberating the Irish people, the Rising is seen to facilitate the enforced silence of the Dubliners and the strengthening of their oppressors' influence.

The Rising, and thus the play, ends with the 'Plough and stars fallin' like a shot' (204); the children dead; the city burning and Nora in a state of 'incipient insanity' (204). Meanwhile, the British sing and drink tea (218). O'Casey presents the ideology upholding the rising as having collapsed, destroying the people it was trying to save. The men's claims to martyrdom thus appear invalidated, their belief in a cause outside of themselves is dubious, but even if accepted, this cause is seen to be ill-founded, leading to the destruction, not salvation, of Dublin. O'Casey repeatedly asks 'why is this martyrdom?', ultimately suggesting that his men are not martyrs, however innocent. As for the Figure, 'Spiritually, he has destroyed the universe'.

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