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IRONY THROUGH SIMILARITY (And Vice Versa)

An Analysis of Sean O'Casey's *Figuro in the Night*

by

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This work examines the play, *Figuro in the Night* by Sean O’Casey. An analysis is undertaken that considers the general themes and signs that are revealed in light of the author’s beliefs and intentions. A similarity in structure with the theological system held to by O’Casey is also discussed.

*Figuro in the Night* has worth as a play for study because of its placement at the end of the chronology of O’Casey’s work. It also is valuable because of the inherent connection to the author and his life experience.

The analysis identifies important themes of casting off oppression and the denigration of the Church for its role in the causation of oppression. These themes are evidenced in the specific dialogue and actions in the play. Specific point by point analysis of the play evidences these signs and also shows similarities to the theological background of O’Casey and his culture.

The older generation of the people of Dublin live miserable lives and are bound by the restrictions that have been placed on them, especially in the area of sexual freedom. The younger generation seeks to have this freedom. The younger generation is propelled into freedom and revolution by the appearance of a provocative statue and a later manifestation of the Figuro, in the form of a birdlike youth.

The Figuro represents O’Casey, who is telling the people to cast off the fetters placed on them by the Church. O’Casey’s life experience of conflict with the authoritative body of the Church is exhibited in *Figuro in the Night*. Ironically, the manner of escape from oppression which O’Casey suggests in this play has, in itself, many similarities to a religious system of belief and faith.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

When Sean O'Casey was asked about his play Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, one of the things he mentioned about the theme of his writing was that there was a “fight made by many to drive the joy of life from the hearts of men” In identifying the outcome he also identified the source, “the clergy booh and bluster against this joy of living in dance, song, and story; ... who interfere in the free flow of thought from man to man. [The clergy] have had, are having, a share in squeezing the mind of man into visions of woe and great lamentations.” Another one of the plays that he wrote, Figuro in the Night, bears a similar vision. O'Casey cries out against the absurdity of an Irish Church which restricts the natural sexual desires of its people and at the same time wonders why the membership is withering away. This outcry has numerous reflections in O'Casey's own life and his dealings with the Church. O'Casey fought against what he saw as the unreasonable puritanism which the Church imposed in all areas of life. He did this by writing plays. This work examines the play, Figuro in the Night, and looks at how this short comic attack on forcefully imposed chastity connects to O'Casey and his relation with the Church in all areas of life.

The publishing of Figuro in the Night in 1961 as part of a three-play volume represents the last publication of dramatic works by Sean O'Casey. The play debuted in 1963 as part of a University tour in the United States due to continued conflicts with Irish theaters. He continued to write in other forms including essays and reviews, but this was the last series of plays ever to come forth into the public forum. In this way, Figuro in
the Night, along with the other plays in the volume, Behind the Green Curtain and Moon over Kylemanoe, has a privileged position within the canon of O'Casey's works. The play represents the culmination of a vast breadth of dramatic work.

O'Casey's work as a whole is frequently characterized by the evolution that seems to take place. Many contemporary scholarly works on O'Casey and his plays focus on this development. The Experiments of Sean O'Casey by Robert Hogan and Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work by David Krause are examples of works that address this. The general course of change that is usually cited involves the alteration in style that is apparent. The first group of plays, including Shadow of a Gunman, The Plough and the Stars, and Juno and the Paycock, which are also the most famous of his works, are identified as starkly realistic visions of Irish life and issues. Later on O'Casey utilizes a much more expressionistic and symbolic mode of communication that is often characterized by plays such as Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, and The Drums of Father Ned. While much can and has been said about the reasons behind this evolution, the fact that there was such a change adds an additional level of interest to the task of examining the last works of the playwright. Where was O'Casey's vision headed? How did the passage of time affect that vision? What was the final stop on the journey of evolution that Sean O'Casey lived out? All of these questions are addressed by examining the final works of the artist. The fact that Figuro in the Night represents the final stop or product of O'Casey's artistic vision, makes it of particular interest.

The other aspect that makes Figuro worthy of further investigation is the thematic connection to O'Casey's own life. Specifically this concerns the views he had toward his native land which were frequently the driving force behind the plays O'Casey wrote. The
link appears when you look at the similarity of themes in O'Casey's work. In Figuro in the Night, O'Casey is attacking in a semi-humorous way (a characteristic of his normal modus operandi) the Puritanical oppression of the Church upon the youth of Ireland in the specific area of sexual freedom. The targeting of oppressive structures, especially those of the Church of Ireland and of political systems is rampant in O'Casey's work. The Silver Tassie, finished in 1928, attacked the hypocrisy and the damaging policies, which the Church enacted on her very own people. The Drums of Father Ned literally attacked the subjugation of a Tostal festival which was attempted by the Church hierarchy and then showed how a free-thinking group of youth could overcome these encumbrances.

This general movement of attacking and ridiculing oppressive organizations is common in many of O'Casey's plays and Figuro in the Night is no exception.

What is the source of this pattern of attacking injustice? The answer lies in the life experience of the author. O'Casey's own life was spent fighting these injustices. Much of his writing before concentrating on specifically artistic works such as plays was produced in order to support and communicate the views of the Labour Party of Jim Larkin. O'Casey in his early years was intimately involved with attempts at revolting politically against those societal structures which were seen to be oppressive, especially the government and later the Church. In many instances, O'Casey himself was the victim of these injustices. Having grown up in the Dublin tenements, which had notoriously high death rates and unimaginable living conditions, O'Casey saw first hand injustice and identified the source. O'Casey made the connection between the Church and the business leaders who controlled the slums and the living conditions of so many people. The Church was unwilling to move against these leaders because they supported the
Church's economy. All these factors lead to the conclusion that plays like *Figuro in the Night* relate to O'Casey's personal history in fighting the societal injustice and also his work in accomplishing those goals through drama.

One aspect of *Figuro in the Night*'s theme of attacking oppressive structures that makes it of particular interest is that theme's connection to religious belief and the Church. The fact that this play deals with O'Casey's views of the Irish Catholic Church is not exclusive of other works by O'Casey, but the specific manner, which is used in this instance, has unique characteristics. This includes, but is not limited to, the general topic of sexual liberty which *Figuro in the Night* concerns itself with. O'Casey addresses the issue of sexual freedom in a short story and indirectly in other works, but never so purposefully in a drama. In doing so, O'Casey really addresses not just the Church's view on this one issue of sexual impropriety, but the whole of the relationship between the Church hierarchy and the Church's members. It is worthwhile to note that for O'Casey there is a clear distinction between the people who believe and engage in religious practice and the hierarchy of leadership, which O'Casey is really referencing when he addresses the Church. The big failure that O'Casey consistently accuses the Church of is the fact that it has ignored the practical needs of the people in seeking to retain some sense of an unchanging ideology. This is the context from which the connection of O'Casey's own system of belief emerges through the play.

The theological beliefs of the characters are very evident in the play. The revelation of these beliefs comes partly from the simple fact of having a context of Irish characters speaking about their lives and also from O'Casey's manner of description. In O'Casey's world, theology and the Catholic Church were preeminent. The Church
dominated all aspects of life.\textsuperscript{8} Everything from political law making and the
appointment of officials, to the accepted mores and behavior of individuals passed
through the defining eye of the Church's influence. This contextual fact colors the
background in which the characters exist. In this play especially, O'Casey places this
aspect of his characters at the forefront. This is done in a way which defines the old
system of thought which the Church holds and that helps to place that system in the
negative light which O'Casey desires. This literary mechanism of context and description
also serves to clarify O'Casey's own beliefs and helps to bring the reader to O'Casey's
desired conclusion. The chastity dictated by the Church leadership in the area of sexual
liberty is wrong and it is illustrative of the overall relationship between the people of the
Church and the Church's leadership. Referring back to O'Casey's life and some of his
plays, specifically those acts of revolution which he engaged in and supported, gives a
hint as to what his solution will be.
Chapter 2
Introductory Texts of the Play

From the very outset, the structure of Figuro in the Night reveals that the reader, especially one concerned with semiotics, will encounter a high level of "frustration." The frustration, in the form of semiosis, comes from a high frequency of cases where the mimetic or "literal" meaning of a text is subverted and a "figurative" or referential meaning must be generated. Semiosis then is a characteristic of the structure of the text and distinguishes the type of signs that can be present in the piece. This kind of subversion occurs early and often in Figuro in the Night.

O’Casey accomplishes his goals by using this subversion and by the specific codes that are part of the background of this author and this particular work. The ultimate result of this analysis will reveal that O’Casey delivers a wealth of information on a variety of issues, including theological views. This information reveals a great deal about O’Casey’s views on the relationship between the people of Ireland and the Irish Church. O’Casey accomplishes his task of speaking out against the wrongdoings of the Church primarily through providing misinformation or subversion of what is communicated normally and literally through words.
The overthrow of traditional forms of communication begins immediately in the play, *Figuro in the Night*, with a brief subtitle that occurs in a poetic form.

In Two Scenes eloquently and humorously related, but vilely and maliciously inspired and created by dangerous and unseemly influences emanating from, and begotten in, the pernicious confines of atheistic and communistic lands.

This poetic introduction reveals a number of things about the approach O'Casey will take in the play. Just the simple rhyme structure of this opening piece signals what is to come. The first two lines, out of five, occur in equally resonating syllabic counts and rhymed conclusions. This is a very orderly beginning in terms of overall poetic structure. However, this neat start very quickly begins to deteriorate. The syllabic count varies unceasingly, beginning with the third line. Any sense of rhyme sequence has been discarded by this point and a sense of disorder is clearly evident in the piece in terms of general structure. This movement from traditionally understood order to disorder can be seen as a model for the entire piece. O'Casey starts out on a plane of communication which is immediately understood because of its traditional mode of expression, the simple rhythmic poetic text. He then undermines that communication by altering the mode of expression and subverting the subject matter; the poetic piece moves toward chaos.

In terms of concepts, this poetic introduction also relates to the act of subversion that takes place in this work. The initial concepts referenced are eloquence and humor. This then jumps to vileness, maliciousness, and danger. The origin of such undesirable qualities is revealed in closing. The origin is atheism and communism. In the mind set of the figurative Irish reader of the time, communism and atheism represented perhaps
two of the most dangerous and even evil philosophies that were known. Thus the initial pleasant qualities are undermined by unexpected sources of depravity.

Now does this represent a sudden conversion by O'Casey from his own communistic beliefs? This is unlikely. What is more likely is that besides the first level of subversion that we have uncovered there are other deeper levels of subversion through the use of irony. This representation gives an initial clue to our analysis of the rest of the play. The layering that takes place in the simple poetic introduction foretells the type of communication that will take place in the text of the play. Over and over O'Casey will use an ironic mode to talk about issues. In this way, this poetic introduction again shows a model of the types of subversion that take place in the play itself.

With this auspicious beginning, we move to the 'Deadication'. The initial part of the Deadication references a historic event. The event involves a postage stamp.

To a Postage Stamp, one printed by an Astonished Hungary of a Young Lad, in the Form of a Statue, doing an Obscene and Most Indecent Action under the Guise of an Innocent Fountain, seen, apparently for the First Time by the Embarrassed Hungarians, near the Grand' Place of Brussels, Capital City of Catholic Belgium, when they attended the International Exhibition there in 1958. Historically the stamp, when revealed at the exhibition in Brussels, which O'Casey describes as the "Capital City of Catholic Belgium," caused an outcry especially by the Catholic hierarchy. The outcry was caused by what the officials considered to be the vulgar content of the image. The response by the country of the stamp's origin, Hungary, was to purport their own shock at the release of the stamp.

There are a number of possible ways to understand the significance of this part of the text. In this case, the simplest is probably the best. O'Casey is clearly continuing the
biting, sarcastic mode which began in the poetic subtitle/description. The focus of this particular "deadication" lies on the internal irony that the country of Hungary, which produced the stamp, is now showing shock at its discovery.

In connection to this, and of supreme importance here, is the fact that the source of the vulgarity or the evil is the same people who are decrying such perceived ugliness. This simple ironic claim can be seen to be a signifier for one of the main themes of O'Casey's writing in general, and specifically in Figuro in the Night. The hypocrisy that O'Casey constructs from this situation is generally applied to the authoritative structure of the Catholic Church. By showing this weakness, O'Casey works at his task of attacking the current state of affairs within the Catholic Church.

The second portion of the deadication continues with O'Casey's established modus operandi. He makes the initial connection to the known codes, cultural and otherwise, and then subverts them.

This Work is prayerfully and solemnly dedicated to what is known as 'The Ferocious Chastity of Ireland', and has been written and printed for the one and only reason of warning to Gael, Gall-Gael, and Gael-Gall, including those decent and law-abiding members of that section of the Irish Community who live, work, and worship within a religion and political belief contrary to, and at enmity with, the life, worship, and political activities of those domiciled within what is regarded as the twenty-six counties of Southern Ireland; in the abiding hope that all, North and South, will combine against, fight, and destroy this communist and insidious effort to overthrow the age-long virtue of the Irish People; to prevent this rock-built chastity from corrosion, so that it may outlive all red-like attempts to frighten or weaken its determination by a godless and ruthless ridicule. Amen.12

This section consists of a very familiar structure, that of a prayer. This structure is signified, in a traditional sense, by the literal reference to the work being "prayerfully and
solemnly dedicated" and, by the clear sign of a prayer in almost any category of codes, the fact that it finishes with the word Amen.

With this setup, O'Casey begins the task of establishing the original connection through the use of familiar signs. Such key phrases as "Gael, Gall-Gael, and Gael-Gall," "chastity," "virtue of the Irish people," "twenty-six counties," and "North and South" are all examples of signifiers within a specific cultural code system. The historical considerations are obviously important in this context. Any mention of "North and South" gives reference to the division of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and the phrase "twenty-six counties" references a unified Ireland (another example of O'Casey mixing signs). However the fact that these signs had a specific and even somewhat different signification to an Irish reader at the time of the writing of the play does not remove the signs from the contemporary historical perspective. This is especially true when we consider the current state of Irish politics and culture and the continuing struggles there between North and South.

In tension with these unifying signs, are the ways in which O'Casey undermines the initial connections. Once again, in a literal reading of this, one comes to the conclusion that the author has taken up the banner of those clerical leaders who are pushing the importance of the personal and corporate chastity of Irish citizens in the face of the attacks of communistic, atheistic evil-doers. However it is, of course, these attitudes which are the target of O'Casey's comedic sarcasm. This targeting becomes evident on many levels of signification and shows the work's driving intent.

The passage states that it is a warning to those who are "at enmity with, the life, worship, and political activities" of the virtuous citizens of Ireland. In all reality, this
text has a message for both parties involved in this conflict. The work as a whole
condemns those who are seeking to protect the all-important "Ferocious Chastity of
Ireland" as O'Casey calls it and delivers a call to action to those who are being oppressed.
The roles of oppressor and oppressed are in all actuality reversed from the literal reading.

The actions that this "prayer" calls for are authentic. O'Casey writes for the
"reason of warning," and in the hopes that they, the targeted audience, "will combine
against, fight, and destroy." This purpose is of key importance in our attempts to, first
interpret the text and, second, to examine what communication is taking place. While
O'Casey mockingly identifies the cause of the warning as "dangerous and unseemly
influences" which are tied to atheism and communism, he really is giving warning to
those who would be honestly concerned by such a notification. The irony is of course
that these same people (Church officials) would probably describe O'Casey's work as an
example of one of these 'influences.' Thus the real warning is that the only real danger is
to those who would seek to censor and oppress. Those who would want to take such
limiting actions should not bother reading this piece. Those who are a little more open-
minded should read on. By presenting so forthrightly the purpose of writing this work,
O'Casey has divorced the text from some of the more traditional notions of the type of
communication that takes place in a drama. He has also placed the work in a very
specific context from which the interpretation will take place.

By O'Casey's own setup this drama will not passively ask the reader to consider
certain issues, instead it will speak authoritatively. The play has laid claim to instructing
and making clear declarations on what is proper to do. This step is very important
because it shows that O'Casey understands his reader. The source of authority, moral and
otherwise, for the Irish people is very simply and completely the Church. This is even true to a lesser degree today. What O'Casey has attempted to accomplish by first going through the steps previously outlined, of establishing a connection through familiar codes and then claiming and establishing authority, is to place the voice of the text in the same role that is traditionally occupied by the Church. Established authority, giving instruction, denouncing evil, what are these, but the self-established tasks of the religious hierarchical system? This introductory piece then serves a crucial role by establishing a familiar context within which the drama is to be placed and by securing the voice of that text within the same authoritative role as the Church.

The last part of the introductory texts consists of two quotations and an "O'Casey Question." This practice of using introductory quotations is not a new one to O'Casey's writings. He includes them in another of the plays in the volume of one acts in which Figuro in the Night is found, Behind the Green Curtains. This inclusion of another type of textual object requires yet another new perspective in examination and interpretation. There are a number of possible traditional (in other words codified) usages for quotations. On a very simple level, quotations often give credibility to a position or show a connection between an author and the ideas and values associated with that author and the concept that the user of the quotation tries to establish. In the first quotation, it is the connection that is of obvious importance.

‘There is no greater curse on the good spirit of any parish than a collection of old maids and bachelors living in homes, and living the disappointed lives that these people live, doing no good for themselves and for the Church and for the future of the parish.’ -- A Roman Catholic Bishop, reported in The Irish Press, Labour Day, 1959.
The quotation comes from a Catholic bishop citing the problem of "old maids and bachelors" who are having a negative impact on the Church. The development of the argument that is present continues in the second quotation. This quotation connects the existence of all of these bachelors and single people to the "unreasonable Puritanism" that is being enacted by the Church. Once more there is an attempt to reveal the hypocrisy and lack of insight on the part of the Church. The internal argument here shows that the problem of the Church is being caused by the proliferation of bachelors and old maids. The proliferation of bachelors and old maids then is caused by the sexual oppression practiced by the Church. In addition, the credibility of the quotations comes into play because the fundamental structures come from a Catholic bishop and from The Irish Press, which is a journal, among many others in Ireland at the time, known for the influence enacted upon it by the Church. O'Casey uses the words of the Church, the practices of the Church, and the reasoning of the Church to show that some of the problems the Church is complaining of are caused by their own actions.

This group of introductory texts delivers us to the body of the drama with a great deal of information about the approach, the context, and the codes that are being utilized. With this information, and the analysis of the signs that appear in the drama, it becomes clear that O'Casey frequently uses an ironic mode of expression. This mode of expression also frequently undermines familiar signs. The analysis of these works also shows the direction in which O'Casey is heading. The fact that the Irish Church enacts oppression upon the people in this area of sexual liberty is representative of the relationship in general between the two.
Chapter 3

Scene Analysis

The description of the setting for Scene One is useful in terms of the imagery that is expressed. The geographically opposed Obelisk and Keltic Cross have a number of possible referents. The division of memorials dedicated to "men who fell in the Great War" and "men who fought and fell for Ireland" provides for an interesting commentary on war. The historical divisions of Ireland and England extend to monuments placed upon the main thoroughfare. Upon regarding the monuments, the Young Girl comments that one is "to the memory of three heroes who died for Ireland." (the Keltic Cross), and the other "to the memory of the twenty men who died for England" (the obelisk). The historical implications are obvious and have a specific reference when placed within the context of the author's views. Those Irishmen who went to the Great War were often scorned for fighting the war of England. In opposition to this was the hero worship, which was heaped upon any Irishman who had died for the independence of Ireland. The geographic opposition of these monuments signifies the spectrum of loyalty, which was applied to these dead warriors. The additional reference comes when considering the facts of O'Casey's own actions in the independence efforts of Ireland. Historically, as a member of the Irish Citizens Army, among others, O'Casey was an important participant in the independence efforts. He had close relationships with important figures such as Jim Larkin. O'Casey fought, with words in many cases, for Irish independence along with many other Irish nationals. These views and other commentaries on the nature of war find expression in other works by O'Casey including The Silver Tassie. In this case the juxtaposition of these two war monuments placed prominently in the first images of
the scene, signifying the discord in Irish citizens and in O'Casey himself, also references
the hypocrisy, which O'Casey felt was inherent to Irish society.

Another visual sign is the darkness of the street. This dimness is not just the
effect of poor lighting but also of the condition of the people and the place. The street is
described as "lonely;" the houses are "dark," and the Young Girl, "worried." This is not a
happy, energetic place. It provides a stark contrast to the fair, which "all have gone off
to." Attached to these characteristics is Dublin and, essentially, the condition of the
whole of Ireland. The cause for this state of darkness will soon be revealed.

The first scene begins with several monologues, perhaps necessitated by the
condition of the neighborhood which seems to be very "lonely" and solitary. These
monologues have several similarities which are useful for our purposes. Each of these
monologues, one each from the Young Girl, the Old Woman, and the Old Man, is highly
introspective. Their monologues reveal the issues, which possess them and thus produce
this unrestricted flow of thoughts and concerns. It is this flow that, because it is
unrestricted, provides keen insights to the characters' desires and intents. This insight
happens because we as readers do not have to sift through several levels of intention and
convention to get at the authentic meaning of what the characters are saying. There is
consideration of social interaction or motivation between other characters because they
are voicing their internal thoughts. In future situations in the play, in dialogue with other
characters, this kind of direct insight does not occur.

For the Young Girl, the immediate literal concern is the imminent return of her
young male friend with whom she has made specific plans for "Kissin', good kissin';
With nothin' that's lively an' lovely left missin'." The significant part of this is the
course her unencumbered mind takes. The girl and her mind are free in this case, because of the absence of her parents and anyone in the street or house, at least in her perceptions. The course of action reveals itself as she reflects on the monuments that are on the ends of the street. From reflection of her memory of the monuments' distinction, she moves to the young men they remember and then to the thought that none of them "got a chance to whip a girl off her feet and lay her down flat in a silent nook to - "21 enjoy the same pleasures she is hoping for. While her thought process is then interrupted by her trained response to think of the Saints, "Saints above, what am I thinkin', what am I sayin'?"22 the free associative process she was engaged in brought her to this subject naturally. The naturalness is the key clue in determining why she winds up thinking about the topic she does and how she corrects herself. The fact that the state of naturalness revealed the opposition of the imposed restriction by the Church against the natural state of free flowing thoughts shows the most important tension in the play. The struggle between a person's natural tendencies and the artificial imposition of a rigid structure by the Church is the specific conflict O'Casey uses.

The Old Woman's entrance comes with the singing of a song.

Oh dear, what can the matter be?
Dear, Dear, what can the matter be?
What the hell does it matter what the matter is...
now! Over an' done with.23

This song shows a clear evolution from the scene with the Young Girl, who expressed some of her thoughts through song.

Dear me, what can the matter be?
Dear, dear, what can the matter be?
I wish Johnny was back from the fair!24
The song the Old Woman sings is a direct continuation of the one the Young Girl sings, but the context alters the impact. The Old Woman is described as "badly bent," wearing drab brown and black. Her face is "pale, thin, bony; her eyes sunken, her lips cracked, her cheeks hollow; like a face that has been fondled by the hand of death." Through this evolution, the Old Woman represents what the Young Girl could become. "They [the Old Woman and the Old Man] stand for what "the ferocious chastity" of Ireland does to people." The connection of song identifies the two women in desire, and O'Casey will use this to show and predict the outcome of maintaining the status quo.

It is also important to note at this time the introduction of the sign of the blue ribbons, which initially appears within the first song of the Old Woman. These ribbons communicate a number of different significations, one of the most important of which is the reference to the culmination of sexual desire. The actual physical image of ribbons used to tie up the hair signifies this and is evidenced by the words of the Young Girl.

Oh, when he comes back with the bonnie blue ribbons,
Oh, then will my love be all bright and a-daring,
A clasping, a kissing, an' a bosom a-baring,
When he ties up my bonnie brown hair!

Along with this understanding of the sign, the traditional views confuse the meaning, especially for the characters. The clear representation of this confusion is given in the first speech of the Old Man. "Buying blue ribbons for to tie up her bonnie brown hair. Imagine it! ... Wanted to make out it meant marryin'. Tryin' t'o tie me to her forever be a bunch of blue ribbons." This image has continued importance, but the connection to desire, and the culmination of that desire, is the crucial reference that is given by the sign.
The two initial monologues of the Old Woman and the Old Man do bear many similarities in structure and content to that of the Young Girl. However, once again these similarities give route to the subversion that takes place. In direct comparison of the Young Girl and the Old Man and Woman, it is clear that the naturalness, or the tendency to move toward thoughts of love and the bliss of physical pleasures, has been artificially covered over or even removed. When the Old Women is singing she winds up singing an exact repetition of the lyrics the Young Girl sang. The repeated phrase is "Oh dear, what can the matter be? Dear, dear, what can the matter be?" However, instead of continuing on with the song and wondering why love has not come, in the same manner as the Young Girl, the Old Woman stops. "What the hell does it matter what the matter is... now! Over an' done with." is the Old Woman's response.

The reasons for this absence could include time, bitterness, and despair. The Old Woman enters singing a song about her past experience of and desire for the blue ribbons. Her song ends in an outburst of despair as the memory and present reality of her disappointment return. The Old Man appears to cover his disillusionment with the trappings of religion and service. He thanks his father and God for the fact that his love was sent "leppin'" and that he could work the family land. His lack of touch with reality is comically shown by his perceptions of himself and his reality. He still thinks of himself as "a fair young man still," despite his decrepit description, and the sum of his view of life can be found in a cast-off remark given right before he literally runs into the Old Woman for the first time: "[making several efforts before rising stiffly]. Might as well put another mile behind me." Clearly there is something lacking in the Old Man and Woman that once was there in the young girl. This description and the contrast
between the people make up O'Casey's prophetic prediction. This description, albeit humorous, represents the final result of this oppression in the area of sexual liberty.

O'Casey's mode of attack in many places within this play is to show in a variety of forms, the outcome that will emerge and is emerging from the current set of conditions in Ireland. It is not enough to merely say 'this is wrong.' O'Casey shows why. This process relates back to the authoritative role that O'Casey established for the piece and from which the voice of the text emerges. The juxtaposition of the images of the Young Girl and those of the Old Man and Old Woman is an example of O'Casey revealing the consequences of this oppression.

Our first taste of conversation involving more than one person comes when the Old Man and Old Woman bump into each other. While both are somewhat disconnected from reality (their difficulty in determining the way to town), they both have their own personal histories very well prepared. The impression is that this comes from years of practice and simple repetition. Any internal conflict or dispute with the situation they are in or the outcome of their previous choices has long since passed away. When something happens, it is placed into an established category of response and the appropriate thought and word is given. The only thing that might possibly have any hope of shaking them ever so slightly from their comfort zone might be the very thing that happens. They meet someone like themselves.

The first exchange between the Old Man and the Old Woman suggests the thought that the two are actually the long-separated young lovers. They both recall past experiences where they loved another at a young age, but their parents prevented them from following that desire (something they are supposedly thankful for now).
Old Woman: Yis; me mother stopped me from wearing them [the blue ribbons].
Old Man: Me father stopped me once from fixing blue ribbons in a girl's hair.
Old Woman: Me mother; your father.
Old Man: Your mother; me father.
Old Woman: {together} {May they rest in peace, the both of them. They saved us both from trouble and satisfied reflections.}\[33

After reveling in their own holier-than-thou attitudes and past experiences, this conversation turns back to the blue ribbons. Both have had experience with them and, upon mentioning this fact and finding a sudden similarity, a sparkle of hope emerges. For a second, and for the first time in who knows how long, they teeter on the edge of the figurative precipice at which they stood during their youth. What then is their response to being brought to this all too familiar location? They break into a simultaneous, identical state of thanks and memory to their dead parents who "saved" them from such an awful outcome. The liturgical nature of their response is a stark awakening when it comes out of the rough, arrhythmical dialogue that occurs throughout the rest of the play. Any hope that the two characters might break out of their conditioning goes by the wayside as they revert back to the training from the Church that they have received all their lives. You can almost see them crossing themselves as they recite the only response they know to give. Their natural responses have been completely repressed.

It is at the culmination of this testing of their responses that another signifier jumps out at us. The sound of a crow "comes down clear from the sky\[34 and sounds three times. The sound of a blackbird has been previously associated with choosing the blue ribbons in the words of the Old Woman, but this is something very different. In the constant stream of Biblical allusion that O'Casey provides, the obvious signification in
terms of this literary act is to the event of Jesus' warning to Peter. Peter was told he
would deny Christ before the crow or cock sounded three times. The action of the play
provides a similar setting. The Old Woman and Old Man have denied their natural
desires. In a sense they have denied themselves by reverting back to the traditional,
programmed responses they have been taught. They have also denied a mode of escape
which was presented to them. The Old Man himself sets this action up as one of
warning. "So the caws [of the crow] came out of us, warning, warning, without us
feeling them come, but our ears open to the sounds seemingly outside of us, up above,
but really through our own ears seeking out our souls."

This is an important turn in the action. No longer is the author in a solely
prophetic state. Instead there is now an aspect of moving from describing the conditions
the past has and will elicit to an examination of what can be done now. This slight
change reveals itself more clearly as the action progresses.

The discussion of the significance of the crow to the characters continues until the
emergence of the Young Girl. When the Old Woman sees her for the first time the spell,
so to speak, is broken. The image of herself brings her back to the memories and feelings
of the past. "Old Man: There 'tis! The girl in the house waiting; the boy at the fair to
buy her ribbons of blue. Old Woman: [dreamily chanting]. To tie up her bonnie brown
hair." With the temporary transformation, O'Casey has set up a discourse for the
discussion of not only the state of oppression on this issue, but also the ultimate origin of
the problems. The origin in this case is taken back to its religious foundation.

Following the reemergence of the Young Girl is the discussion between the Old
Man and the Old Woman that breaks out concerning the subject of Adam and Eve in the
Garden of Eden. Theologically, the fall to sin in the garden has a primacy of importance within the Roman Catholic theology that is part of the code system of the author and the original Irish reader of O'Casey's day. Without it, there would have been no need for the sacrifice of Christ, forgiveness of sins, or anything else within the current human condition, as humans would still be in the garden. Even this, however, does not escape the scrutinizing designation of hypocrisy. The gist of the Old Woman's arguments is that the actions that occurred in the Garden were quite beneficial, but not for the traditionally thought of reasons. She actually argues on the side of taking "another step away from where we once were," and "Letting trousers down and lifting skirts up.\(^{37}\) The Old Man wants to return to the Garden, even though it is impossible, because that is perceived as the perfect state. "Back to the Garden, I say; with hasty steps or slow, it's all in all to go back to the Garden!"\(^{38}\) Meanwhile the Old Woman views the current state of humanity as improved because humans escaped the Garden and were allowed a chance to grow.

The fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil set us free from coddling, and gave us the pain and the power to do our own thinking, walk on our own feet; clap our own hands at what ourselves had done. The lush laziness of the garden lovely was sappin’ our life away.\(^ {39}\)

The hypocrisy in the Old Man's thoughts is that he would try to return to the Garden, thereby eliminating the basis for the life he lives right now. Even though the state of living in the Garden is long gone, the Church enacts policies and teaching as if that original condition were the goal. This very comically written portion of the dialogue helps to reveals the logic and the justification for retaining the oppressive structures, (the Church) and the hypocrisy and foolishness that really characterize those beliefs.
As the conversation culminates, and the two debaters turn to the prospect of going to Dublin, the Old Woman reverts back to her traditional modus operandi. Her sudden concern over the impropriety of a man and woman walking together at night illustrates this. After the Old Man states that he will accompany her, she says, "At this time o’ night? No, John, no. Seen together under the darkened stars, what would they say about us only that there was no good in our minds?"

She goes from one line stating that the lifting up of skirts and letting down of trousers should take place "Under the berried bushes or under the bamboo tree." to the next lines stating that it would be improper to be seen walking together with a man at night.

It is also interesting to note that, for the very first time, she refers to the Old Man by a name, John. This simple inclusion totally reinvents the perspective from which we, as readers, are regarding the conversation. Elements of randomness, hostility, and unfamiliarity are removed. She names her would-be young lover as Jimmy, but it still brings up the notion that these two have known each other for some time. Also with the use of a unique personal name, the stark, cold categories, which served as distinctions for the characters before, are subjugated. While the impact of dealing categorically with people for the purposes of O’Casey’s prophetic declaration still exists, the aspect of a personal touch provides a new outlook.

This new standpoint becomes important with the final lines of scene one in which the Old Woman seems to wake as if from a dream. "My God, 'what was I sayin' a minute ago! Dhreamin' I was -- a bad, bad dhream!" She would thus appear to revert to her original state of being except for the hint of modification. She exits singing her song.
The personal identification with another character occurred for a moment, but then was gone.

It is in the second scene, with the background context of the introductory texts and the first scene, that the outcomes become apparent. The 1st Old Man and 2nd Old Man think of the conditions of the day in an apocalyptic manner, with the 1st Old Man explicitly referring to the Day of Judgment and calling it "worse than the Black 'n Tans." The description of the setting is a complete turnaround from the first scene. Bright lights, colors, and the fact that "Everything seems wonderful" characterize this day. This is in opposition to the initial darkness and gloom that characterized the beginning of the play. Another internal irony comes from the situation of and descriptions given by the two old men who decry their forthcoming doom, including a "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" reference. They describe horrendous environmental conditions which are associated with "the end" that is coming and that is caused by a lurid mob of girls.

1st Old Man: The moon's afraid to come out, and the night's as dark as it would be with the lost in the Day of Judgement.
2nd Old Man: The heart of the summer is in it, yet the leaves all fall from the trees, and the branches shiver and shrivel up.
1st Old Man: The birds is dumb, their bakes agape with a husky gasping.
2nd Old Man: The solid earth beneath us bumping up and down.
[Later] 2nd Old Man: Bringing disaster. The sea stays where it is, never coming closer, never going farther away.
1st Old Man: The ships on it standing still, without a stir or motion.
2nd Old Man: Like painted ships upon a painted ocean.

The two men, already physically injured by the strife of the wild mob of women who are seeking pleasure and sex, still maintain the consistency of their desire to avoid, at least outwardly, improper behavior by not even mentioning aloud the things which these wild
people are seeking. Even though they were injured by crazed young women seeking bodily pleasure, they refuse to even explicitly discuss what just happened to them out of fear of indecency.

1st Old Man: The girls lurid with longing, racing away from decency, out to see a sight temerarious.
2nd Old Man: To see what they blush to name and love to handle.
1st Old Man: Hush! Don’t let the handle of its name defile our minds.*

This comic censorship continues later when they refuse to even state aloud the name of the mysterious Figuro who is causing the mayhem.

What is the cause of this dangerous situation? Could it be this evil thing which is bringing disaster and which is "the end of all things here."?" It is "the figuro of the laddo weaving a fountain outa him in a way that was a menace to morality."*

When they do describe Figuro and the mob situation, 1st Old Man mentions that the crowd was chanting, "Behold, them who were lost have been found, and them who were dead have come to life again!" This is a specific Biblical quotation, which describes the situation after salvation and after the work of the Savior. This provides another connection to the previous designation of the day of judgment and the theological system of Christianity. An additional fact is that these women are "paddling gay" in a fountain. In a pure sense of imagery this gives cause to think of a baptismal scene because of the connection to the previously mentioned phrase of salvation.

As the action progresses these two old men and the other members of the older generation are continually shown to be out of touch with reality.

Blind Man: When we heard the rumour, we guessed it was a hydrogen bomb.
2nd Old Man: Would to the good God it was only such an innocent thing!"
This reality extends from their immediate surroundings to the application provided by O'Casey. The old men, representing the establishment and even the older generation, are out of touch with the current situation of the youth and the issue of sexual liberty. They can only view these actions in terms of their own destruction. Explaining his view of the occurrences to the Young Man, the 1st Old Man states:

Do try to realise, Jimmy, lad, what we’re all facin’. The unholy figaries of this Figuro is doing all an evil thing can with its bellycose sinuosities to set the souls of young men and young girls jockeying together away from where they are to the point of no return.  

The next step of application for this sign of the men being out of touch is that the establishment, the originators of oppression, does not understand the realities of life and, correspondingly, the suffering that they inflict upon others.

Following the dialogue of the old men, the Blind Man and the Deaf Man appear. In their description O'Casey throws in the fact that they are reporters from two mythical newspapers, the Irish Horn and the Dublin Flute. In two ways, the journalistic edifices of Ireland are slammed. The obvious one is that the reporters are blind and deaf. Also, the names of the newspapers give the image of light noisemakers, which have little or no significance other than making noise.

Besides this setup, and the described dramatic action of the frenzied mob of women, there are two major signs in scene two. The first is found in the description of the transformation of a couple of lovers. When the bodice slips, and the two embrace, the old man describing the scene states that they burst into flames. From the ensuing smoke emerge two owls or birds. With this the significance of repeated sounds of hooting and bird calls emerges. Those who escape the oppression are literally and
figuratively transformed. In this case, birds, who are free to escape by flying away, represent the salvation of the lovers from their oppressive state.

The bird image becomes crucial as we look at the title character of the play, Figuro. A "Birdlike Lad" appears to the old man, and, while not explicitly stated, he seems to be another manifestation of Figuro. Figuro, the originator of the entire uprising, comes to the old men looking very much like a crow bearing a green cap. It appears here that Figuro, within the systems of signs of the play, is a Christological figure. Through the work of Figuro, the young people are saved from oppression and emerge in a form similar to Figuro, that of birds. We can look at the descriptions of events as secondary sources to support this idea. The crowds of women seeking to see Figuro were so immense that, "the women who couldn't get close, ran into the higher buildings, up the stairs, and made for the windas to get a bird's-eye view of the Figuro's." This situation is very reminiscent of several encounters Jesus had with crowds, including one healing of a blind man and the woman who stretched out to touch Jesus through a crowd. In addition the 2nd Old Man points out the purpose of Figuro's actions. He says, "The unholy figaries of this Figuro is doing...to set the souls of young men and young girls jockeying together away from where they are to the point of no return." Setting the souls away to a point of freedom is the concern of Figuro.

It is also important to point out in the examination of Figuro O'Casey's own connection to the character. O'Casey's nickname over the years was the Green Crow. The appearance of Figuro, described as a lad appearing as a crow wearing a green cap, is too direct to ignore. Does this mean that O'Casey equates himself as a savior figure in some way? This is unlikely, but the connection of normal people doing what O'Casey is...
doing by writing this play, (denouncing the oppression) is very important to the more
general relationship between the Irish Church and the people of Ireland.
Chapter 4

Conclusions

Sean O'Casey is one Irishman who could hardly be called a 'good Catholic.' Having left Ireland after a series of uproars about the patriotic content of some of his plays, he continued to belittle and mock the Irish Church and other institutions, which sucked the life out of the people of Ireland. While personal interviews with O'Casey revealed that he still maintained a highly individualized system of religious beliefs late in life, he had clearly cut himself off from the conservative Irish Church. Like the Irish government, the Church could not hope to deal with change and therefore resisted it at every opportunity. It is therefore very interesting to note similarities in a play like *Figuro in the Night* and the theological system of belief held by the Irish Church. The irony that any such similarity would exist is particularly striking.

O'Casey decries, often in a comic manner, the oppression that takes place in the area of sexual morality. He sets up the oppression as a type of sin. Like sin in terms of an Irish Catholic theological outlook of the type present in O'Casey's time, the oppression prevents the natural order of things and leads to a type of destitution of the people. This destitution is illustrated by the repressed speech forms, which the characters exhibit, and the interruption of their natural tendencies (toward exercising sexual liberty) by ingrained religious responses and thoughts. The oppression results in the bent, broken examples of the Old Man and the Old Woman in scene one who were robbed of the chance to pursue their young loves by their parents. Sin causes death, ultimately. The description of the older generation, who has been denied progress toward their natural desires, reveals a
type of death. Their withering state of life is contrasted with the young people who still have not felt the long-term effects.

One of the sadder bits of irony that connects to the expression of this belief system is that the people who are holding to the views of oppression did not originate those views. The old men and women, who are so concerned with decency and the sense of morality that O'Casey attacks, are not the bishops and priests who enforce them. The characters are merely followers, towing the line of the Church into which they were born. The doctrine of original sin held by the Catholic Church is also something humans are born into.

O'Casey provides for a savior from this 'sin' in the form of Figuro, who allows people to seize their freedom. The presence of Figuro initiates the mob activity by the women who are seeking to reach a state of sexual freedom. The human condition, or at least the condition of the people living in Ireland, is very similar. The condition is one of being oppressed and needing freedom in order to avoid impoverishment and a lack of connection with their natural selves. Figuro responds and supplies this by inciting the people to a frenzy and causing them to take action in the form of ignoring traditional mores (the crowds of young women) or by merely talking about items which are normally repressed (the Old Woman in scene one). Besides the Christological implications of the character of Figuro noted in the analysis, O'Casey's own views of Jesus (whether he viewed him as the theological savior or not) have a similar feel. O'Casey saw Jesus as a revolutionary and thought he would make a good communist. He felt this way because Jesus helped the disadvantaged and poor, and thus was a 'revolutionary' figure. Obviously O'Casey does not adhere to the more traditional views
of Jesus held by the Church. However, within the bounds of the play, Figuro accomplishes the same essential task that Jesus did; he provides a way out of sin.

The last aspect of this general similarity is that O'Casey is in a sense calling his readers to follow the steps of Figuro. He wants them to break away from these age old bonds and experience life. There are real life implications beyond just experiencing sexual desire. The ironic warning that occurs at the beginning of the piece gave us a map of where O'Casey was going all along. Warning: if you don't escape now, you might wind up taking the literal words of this notice seriously. That is the same type of call the Church gives. If you do not follow the teachings of the Church, you will be hell-bound.

The other aspect of the irony that occurs here is that O'Casey would write a play in which the source of evil is the Church. The people need to escape from their oppression by disregarding the Church's commands and seizing their freedom. It is extremely ironic that O'Casey suggests that his reader escape from the bonds of the Church by writing a play in which there are distinct similarities to the course of salvation offered by the Church. Whether this was directly intended or not, O'Casey adds another layer of irony to this piece by creating the similarity between the Church's course of salvation and the play's sense of 'salvation'.

O'Casey claimed a prophetic, authoritative voice for the text of this play. The comically-based subversion that O'Casey utilized is not difficult to see through. Again, a literal reading is a waste of time because the obvious contention is that O'Casey is making fun of these out-dated mores. Now if O'Casey had just spent his time poking fun that would be one thing, but he goes on to show some serious outcomes of these beliefs and also how to change them. This is where a prophetic voice appears. O'Casey
denounces the oppression that takes place and identifies with the "spiritually poor." He does this by mocking the Church and showing the impact of its policies on the normal citizenry. O'Casey's personal identification with the themes of the play comes through in the values that are evidenced in the drama. One example is the fact that the solitary oppressed life created by the Church and their oppressive beliefs are attached to the dark, dismal description of scene one. A negative value is also attached through showing the outcome of these conditions upon the Old Man and Old Woman of scene one. The positive identification comes through in such elements as the bright celebratory description of scene two, where the action of revolt is taking place. Also, O'Casey identifies a personal image, that of the Green Crow, with a figure who literally speaks out on behalf of those who are revolting and helps to incite the revolution. O'Casey denounces the oppressive structures, the sexual dogmas, by subverting the connections that he establishes to the reader through irony and comedy and by attacking the hypocrisy of the Church. As he assumes the role of the Birdlike Lad and negates the activities of the old men who are still attempting to hang on to the old school of thought, O'Casey takes his own advice. He takes action.

The play, Figuro in the Night goes beyond a simple mockery of some old backward characters who try to control their youth. It can go even beyond an indictment of the Church and its enforcement of sexual prudence and oppression of all things prurient. Figuro in the Night attacks oppression by authoritative bodies and the results thereof. It does so, not merely by mocking, but also by prophesying about the eventual outcomes and by showing the way out. In so doing O'Casey does not just point his finger. He comes in, laughs at the buffoonery taking place, and leads you to the door.
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