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Câmpus de São José do Rio Preto

CLAUDIA PARRA

BUILDING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DRAMA: SEAN O'CASEY'S FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS IN *THREE DUBLIN PLAYS*

São José do Rio Preto
2020

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Tese apresentada como parte dos requisitos para obtenção do título de Doutora em Letras, junto ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, do Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas da Universidade Estadual Paulista "Júlio de Mesquita Filho", Câmpus de São José do Rio Preto.

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ABSTRACT

Irish female imagery and its connection with aspects related to power and gender expectations during the period of Ireland's independence is an interrelation which requires further examination, particularly regarding those women who lacked any special social status and attention. In Sean O'Casey's first three productions for the Abbey Theatre, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), the dramatist surprises the audience by staging representations of Dublin tenement women from different backgrounds, which subvert the prevailing image of powerless females in Irish drama, conferring visibility and an appropriate representation to those marginalised, but strong individuals. These characters are represented as empowered subjects as they undergo a process of strengthening which enables them to surpass domineering structural forces and challenge conservative and oppressive gender expectations about power. From a broader perspective, the thesis shows that O'Casey's female images also contribute to a reassessment of social roles, since the Three Dublin Plays may be regarded as a rehearsal of issues surrounding the empowerment of Irish women.

Keywords: Sean O'Casey. *Three Dublin Plays*. Female Representation. Empowerment.

RESUMO

A imagen da mulher irlandesa e sua associação com aspectos relativos a poder e questões de gênero durante o período de independência da Irlanda é uma relação que requer um exame mais aprofundado, principalmente no que diz respeito às mulheres pobres. Nas três primeiras produções de Sean O'Casey no Abbey Theatre, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) e *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), o autor surpreende a plateia ao levar para o palco representações de mulheres em diferentes contextos das *tenement-houses* em Dublin, subvertendo a predominante noção de fragilidade do feminino no drama irlandês, conferindo visibilidade e uma representação apropriada dessas mulheres marginalizadas, mas empoderadas. Essas personagens são representadas como mulheres fortes à medida que passam por um processo de empoderamento que lhes permite enfrentar e sobreviver a forças estruturais dominantes e desafiar presuposições conservadoras e opressivas sobre gênero no que diz respeito a poder. De uma perspectiva mais ampla, a tese mostra que as imagens femininas de O'Casey também contribuem para uma reavaliação de papéis sociais, uma vez que as peças de *Three Dublin Plays* podem ser consideradas como um ensaio das questões que envolvem o empoderamento das mulheres irlandesas.

Palavras-chave: Sean O'Casey. *Three Dublin Plays*. Representação Feminina. Empoderamento.

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INTRODUCTION

I was elected by the women of Ireland, who instead of rocking the cradle, rocked the system.
Mary Robinson, Ireland's first female president, 1990.[1]

An obvious inference about women and men is that distinct hormones and sexual organs make them possess diverse abilities and experience the world differently. However, gender expectations tend to exaggerate this distinction. In fact, gender as it functions today prescribes how individuals should be rather than helping us to recognise and respect how people are. The result is a system of inequality which dictates the social rules between the two sexes, subordinating the female figure to the male one as if such a 'logical' model was a notion of what would be best for humanity and for the good of society. The inconsistency of this scheme resides in discriminatory social conventions created from a raw assumption based on biological arguments. Thus, contesting the prevailing gendered scheme does not entail suspending or repealing recognition of men's general superiority in relation to physical force; for instance, Mary Wollstonecraft, a pioneer of women's right and often considered to be one of the first feminists, recognised "that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. This is the law of nature"; however, she questioned whether such a physical prerogative could justify conceiving of women as inferior "human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties…" (7).[2] Reinforcing Wollstonecraft's allegation, almost eighty years later, John Stuart Mill stated that the adoption of social order comes from the reason that "laws and political systems always begin by recognising the relations they find already existing between individuals", which, in relation to appropriated roles for women and men, converts a mere physical fact into legal rights (3). On account of this, a matter of biological difference becomes a question of power.

Stereotyping gender roles has a direct interrelation with power because the process of transforming a natural advantage into a social privilege ends up conferring on a single group the right of controlling and setting standards for legal matters. In the current patriarchal system, despite women's considerable achievements in different social spheres throughout the last two centuries, the male figure still represents the active force of humanity. Most controlling and influential positions are occupied by men, as if there was an invisible

[1] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/30-great-quotes-about-ireland-and-the-irish/30-great-quotes-about-ireland-and-the-irish21/
[2] This dissertation uses the rules contained in the 8th edition of MLA Handbook (2016).

demarcation obstructing women from moving forward. In short, power has become a troubling aspect on the consideration of female identity because if only men own it, they rule the world in every respect.

Powerlessness results in a range of limitations upon women. Power centralisation in the male subject has caused the female to live an overshadowed existence. When it does not exclude them entirely, the lack of active participation, as well as the socio-cultural subordination to the masculine subject, imposes upon them unfair conditions that just contribute to perpetuate existing disparities. For instance, the higher a woman gets in her professional trajectory, the fewer female faces she will see, and, as if this fact were not enough, when a woman occupies a higher position, in most cases, a man doing the same job and being equally qualified, is paid more than her. This is the proof that the career ladder has been controlled, far and wide, by a hierarchical classification system which still seems to classify human beings according to their level of muscular strength; so, the stronger the individual is, the more authoritative the position she/he will reach.

Likewise, history has been almost entirely written in masculine terms. For Simone de Beauvoir, men made the world and represented it from their own point of view alone, which they deemed to be the absolute truth. Portrayed as merely supporting actresses, women have been excluded from the historical accounts, which focus upon men and their deeds. The basic explanation for this trend is that historians, invariably men, have access to materials, documents, biographies, and other sources, which are produced by men (Perrot 198). Catharine Alice MacKinnon observes that "men create the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described.... Power to create the world from one's point of view is power in the male form" (*Toward* 23, 24). This is not just a question of what might have been overlooked or left out from the woman's perspective; even when there is female participation in the process of writing History, the content and how it is addressed, originates from male interests and standpoints of the universe. Since everything initially written has mainly come from masculine hands and is based on male impressions, much of what is produced nowadays has been indirectly perceived, structured and ordered by men. Much sociology in Britain is focused primarily on public issues of relevance to men, such as work, production, the class and belief systems, and when it concerns to women and private matters, important aspects such as housework, motherhood and sexuality are still ignored.

When it comes to politics, it is a complicated task to explain the phenomenon in which almost half of the human race is ignored by the other from involvement in policy- making, whereas it is supposed that all the discussion involved in this process is for the sake

of mutual interests. The truth is that women have been excluded, even from partaking in matters about their natural rights. They are, instead, forced to be confined to domestic concerns or "as portrayed in the press, in the new popular literature and even in the courts of law, the perfect woman was the perfect mother. Her place was at home — never, of course, in the sphere of politics" (Davis 23). Accepting and reproducing the female image according to this purely domestic social role contributes to the maintenance of an identity politics which creates more and more a hostile difference among the sexes.

The literary canon, similarly, has drawn the feminine pervaded with assumptions of inferiority. For a long time, most female characters were constructed as being typically docile and domestic, mostly mothers and little else. These fictional constructions assumed almost exclusively the role of domesticated women, educated companions of men, doll-people, adorned and submissive (Bonnici 220). Great classics and most popular pieces of literature perpetuate such ideas which preclude women from taking action and having a voice. For instance, the three-thousand-year-old Homer's *Odyssey* is considered to be a classic work because it brings into question human activities and relationships. The narrative of Odysseus' ten-year journey home after the fall of Troy is not exclusively about war, adventures and the tribulations of a male protagonist, but it also provides the reader with a detailed picture of a society in which female characters exercise important roles in the action. However, what is interesting about this text it is the fact that it is considered to be the first record (in Western literature) of a man telling a woman to 'shut up' since she was not to be heard in public (Beard 3). The episode is in the first volume, when Telemachus, son of Odysseus and Penelope, is listening to an inspired bard singing about the difficulties the Greeks are having in reaching home. Then, his mother comes down from her private room and asks him: "But cease from this woeful song which ever harrows the heart in my breast, for upon me above all women has come a sorrow not to be forgotten" (Homer, trans. Murray, 29). Telemachus answers:

> Nay, go to thy chamber, and busy thyself with thine own tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid thy handmaids ply their tasks; but speech shall be for men, for all, but most of all for me; since mine is the authority in the house. (29)

In a more recent edition, Ian Johnston translates:

> […] Go up to your rooms and keep busy there
> with your own work, the spindle and the loom.
> Tell your servants to perform their duties.
> Talking is a man's concern, every man's,
> but specially mine, since in this house

I'm the one in charge. (Homer, trans. Johnston 22)

Comparing both translations, it is evident the interdependency between the act of speaking (in public) and the idea of supremacy. The speaker controls and influences others. The prerogative of speech confers authority on the subject power. Robert Fagles version of Telemachus answer is closer to this standpoint: "So, mother, go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks, the distaff and the loom, and keep the women working hard as well. As for giving orders, men will see to that, but the most of all: hold the reins of power in this house" (409). In short, Telemachus says that his mother has no power over him, nor the house, which means she cannot act outside the behaviour-package proposed for women. He argues, as though it were an incontrovertible premise, that only men are to be heard in public. When he forbids his mother's voice, he undermines her agency and removes her from places of power. Contrary to what history, literature, politics and other cultural mechanisms have formulated about the role of women, as the world has evolved, it has become easily understandable that they are neither powerless nor inferior subjects, but just different from men. Although it seems a rational observation, unlearning the internalised contradictory lessons of gender has proven to be a demanding task. The difficulty lies in the existence of deeply embedded cultural structures, which disassociate women from10powerful representations. "When it comes to silencing women, Western culture has had thousands of years of practice" (Beard 11). However, in cultural terms, it may also represent a form of oppression. It is necessary first to raise awareness of the reasons women's lives, views and perspectives have remained largely hidden, in order to be able to challenge and oppose inequalities and subordination. In short, women's studies and gender issues are still important. As never before in history, literature and arts have contributed to meaningful debates on the topic. This thesis, therefore, advances the discussion through an examination of drama, which has always been a powerful tool to illuminate tough questions on human

existence, as Martin Esslin observes:

> Much of the current debate about the equality of women, for example, is concerned with showing that little girls are often brainwashed into an inferior position by learning a certain type of female role in their childhood, largely through being made to play differently from boys. If this is so, it is equally evident that society continues to instruct (or, if you prefer the term, to brainwash) its members in the different social roles they have to play throughout their lives. Drama is one of the most potent instruments of this process of instruction or brainwashing – sociologists would call it the process by which individuals internalize their social roles. (20)

From that assertion, the present study intends moves beyond a simplistic sociological debate in order to construct a 'bridge' between female criticism on empowerment and drama theory in the analysis of three plays written by the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey at the beginning of his career. In some sense these texts work as portraits of Ireland during its revolutionary period in the three first decades of the twentieth century when the author was concerned with the poor women who faced and overcame so many adversities, but whose stories were largely obliterated from history.

The empowerment of women is one of the distinguishing features of our times. It is an issue intrinsically connected with the existence of unequal power structures and relations. Despite the *Oxford English Dictionary* registers the first use of "empowerment" in 1849, as 'The action of empowering; the state of being empowered', what has happened with the word is that a whole critical apparatus has grown up around it. Due to the increase of references to the term during the 1970s, in different fields, it has ended up acquiring a multi-purpose interpretation and a significant number of definitions have arisen. The use of the term in the areas of sociology, psychology, administration, economics and public health, approaches the meaning of autonomy and agency, as it is defined as a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping system, and proactive behaviours with regard to social policy and social change (Rappaport). Such an idea may be extended to the concept of an individual's autonomy, in association with social and political environment, which leads to community-level self-reliance and change. The present study takes as its starting point the foremost approach on the topic developed by the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire, continuing with the more recent studies of Julian Rappaport and E. Summerson Carr, authors who emphasise, respectively, empowerment in the individual sphere and its feminist approach. According to this line of thinking, the focus on empowerment is its assumption as a personal process, since its definition as such provides a basis for examining and understanding how it enables a woman to make decisions and take greater control both of her life and the community she lives in.

Bearing in mind the prominent and increasing usage of this concept in Irish contemporary discourse as a form of grappling with the controversy surrounding women's affairs, this study draws together the relationship between the feminine subject and the process of empowerment and the female imagery in Irish drama in order to better understand and to clarify the experience of marginalised women in the context of twentieth-century Ireland. Regarding theatrical form, the research examines constructs about dramatic character and drama as a form of art for social transformation. The study begins with an outline of the

process of individual empowerment in actual female experiences and then utilises this real- life mechanism to examine the construction of O'Casey's feminine theatrical representations.

Centuries of conflict between the Irish and the English preceded the revolutionary years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within this turbulent environment, prior to and after Independence, various aspects rendered the life of the working-class Dublin women one of hardship. According to the National Archives of Ireland, Dublin had the worst housing conditions of any city in the United Kingdom in 1911. Inner-city Dublin was filthy, overcrowded, disease-ridden and teeming with malnourished children. There were extensive slums which were not restricted to the backstreets or to impoverished ghettos, but which took over existing buildings on fashionable streets and squares, such as the abandoned Georgian houses, on account of the migration of affluent families to the suburbs. These areas were known as tenements, and a considerable number of Dublin's residents lived in these pitiful shelters.[3]

Apart from the "darkened" conditions of their residences, poverty, social inequality, gender issues and scars left by armed conflicts in the pursuit of freedom for Mother Ireland resulted in a massive wave of oppression against these women, which contributed to diminish the role of the female individuals and maintain them in a powerless status. Innumerable factors made their life harder than that of men and restrained them from economic independence: lack of work opportunities, lower salaries, lack of 'recommended' abilities, pregnancy, health, divorce, dependent children, among others. However, many women challenged these misfortunes, since, engaged in real-life functions, they were able to demonstrate their force and escape the confining restrictions of this dictatorial system by taking part in the public world of work and politics in order to maintain themselves and their families. Even the poorest women played a vital role in the family economy. Although "life was difficult and harsh for poorer women, who had neither the time nor the inclination to abide by a code of femininity that bore no relevance to their lives", it is clear that "Irish women were active agents of change, not only in their own households but also in the wider world" (Luddy 4). Regardless of their social status, even amid difficult circumstances, they empowered themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, through different mechanisms which allowed them to pass from an overpowered state to one of effective representation. For example, "Many Irish women emigrated independently of husbands or fathers…. Almost 82,000 more females than males left Ireland between 1885 and 1920, with almost 700,000

[3] http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/exhibition/dublin/poverty_health.html Accessed 15 Mar. 2019.

women leaving" (Ferriter 47). Already in the nineteenth century female emigration was of considerable significance and revealed an "unconventional" profile of traveler: unmarried women travelling alone. As Luddy observes about the post-Famine period until 1911 when the number of male emigrants (86,294) was inferior to that of women (89,407), the "pattern of migration for Irish women differed from the normal European pattern in that they tended to emigrate as single women rather than in family groups" (6).

Even though economic factors and the search for better working conditions were important factors in taking the decision to emigrate, the opportunity to do so meant the chance to remain single or even to exercise their own will in choosing a marriage partner, since it was not unusual to find women who did not accept arranged marriages. "Their emigration signified their active choice to regain lost social and economic power, while domestic service speeded the process of assimilation" (Nolan 92). In short, it was one of the resources many women used to achieve a certain level of independence and to gain greater control of their lives. They struggled to find their own way in Irish society in order to gain the possibility of living as the human being they were and wished to be, but not according to a predetermined configuration imposed by others.

In the revolutionary Irish environment of the early twentieth century, much of what was officially written concerning the recognition of women's importance for society was not developed in practice. For instance, the *1916 Irish Proclamation of Independence* was just such a theoretical endorsement of equal rights. Addressed to all "IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN", it declared the establishment of a Provisional Government for Ireland, "elected by the suffrages of all her men and women":

> The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally. [4]

However, the manifesto (signed by seven men) proved to be a false dawn for women because it did not mean real equal conditions for them; on the contrary, the configuration of this new phase of the Irish politics prioritised their domestic role. As Marie Coleman ("How Women") remarks, "Restrictions on divorce, the availability of contraception, the right to serve on juries, and continuation in employment after marriage were introduced in the Free State in the 1920s and 1930s." In her view, the leaders of the new government, even those

[4] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8235fe-1916-proclamation-of-irish-independence/

strongly supportive of questions of gender inclusivity incorporated in the proclamation, failed to deliver on its promises to Irish women.

The neglect of the female individual was not restricted to the guidelines of the new Irish politics; the omission of the feminine subject is also registered in historical records, especially those referring to the experience of women during the armed events which were part of the independence process. Only a few women are mentioned as being participants in such an important moment in Ireland's history. For instance, "as the Citizen Army was the only military force that accepted women members – the Irish volunteers had formed a women's non-combatant auxiliary, Cumann na mBan (Women's League)", and it has been said that between 100 to 250 women took part directly in the Easter Rising (Kostick and Collins 29). However, it is not an easy task to find out information about this group. The most prominent name is that of Countess Markievicz, who was the Honorary Treasurer and was recognised for being the best shot in the army.

Without question, Markievicz is one of the most relevant female names in the historical accounts of the political context of the 1920s. While other nations were still fighting to secure voting rights for women, Markievicz had become one of the first women in the world to hold a cabinet position, as Minister for Labour in the Irish Republic from 1919- 1922. Her active engagement in armed clashes, especially during the 1916 Easter Rising, has been frequently mentioned in the records of the period. Kostick and Collins state that

> Countess shows that nothing could deter her from her chosen path, and that she had no worries about shooting her large Mauser-rifle-pistol. Two rebels informed her that a policeman was refusing to remove himself from the front gates of the park. She ordered her men to shoot him, but as he was a Dubliner, they were extremely reluctant to do so. Markievicz went to the gate herself and had no qualms about taking aim alongside two other Volunteers and shooting constable. Very few people, observing the Countess in polite upper-class society, would have seen the militant determination that lay within her.
>
> James Connolly and Countess Markievicz formed a powerful team with mutual respect despite their widely differing backgrounds. They spoke often together on the same public platforms on both popular and unpopular issues. (75-76)

Just a few other names, such as Helena Molony[5] and Margaret Skinnider,[6] appear when researching for female engagement in such events. Although the combat experience

[5] Helena Molony, an actress and journalist, had smuggled guns to Ireland from England for the Rising. Her witness statement, taken in 1950, told of her feelings on the seismic events of 1916. "I had an Irish tweed costume, with a Sam Browne (belt). I had my own revolver and ammunition," (http://www.easter1916.ie/index.php/people/women/). she said. Molony served alongside Dr Kathleen Lynn at City Hall during Easter week and epitomised the revolutionary female nationalist of the Inghinidhe na hÉireann era.

was not so common for the vast majority of the women, because they were relegated to roles supporting male decisions,[7] the proper recording of these female experiences would certainly displace the recurrent idea of generally passive and powerless female behaviour, demonstrating that this 'controversial' female behaviour could lead them to a state of resilience and empowerment to overcome unfair disparities. According to Ferriter, "during the 1920s and 1930s there were repeated references to the 'former dignity' of Irish women" which "reflected a desire of reimposing acceptable boundaries" (328). What these women actually did was concealed by an inverse narrative to the role they actually played in society, but it was compatible with the national rhetoric which prized the traditional image of the family in which the female role was, above all, inferior to the masculine. In this ideal hierarchical portrait of Ireland's society, the female figure could never be juxtaposed with the male. Consequently, the work and real activities performed by many Irish women remained hidden in order to maintain the familiar pattern of the Irish Free State.

> Although women were formally deprived of political power it is trite to assume that complete powerlessness was the hallmark of a woman's life in Ireland early in the new (20th) century. Religious orders of nuns had established hospitals, schools and orphanages on an unprecedented scale, managing their own institutions and finances with considerable skill and independence. In the changed economic circumstances of the post-Famine Ireland, women had to display the same traits in the home place. Changes in female labour, and a decrease in the demand for women working outside the home, was certainly a feature of the post-Famine economy, and expected at times of peak agricultural demand, women toiling in the fields was not a major element of the paid employment market. There was, however, more capital in circulation, much of which found its way into the domestic household. There is therefore much merit in the arguments of Joanna Bourke that women were able to assume a greater control over domestic finances and expenditure, as housework became more specialized and skilled, aided by the increasing number of courses being offered to women by such groups as the Board of National Education. The autonomy experienced by women in this regard, and the attendant exclusion of men from this sphere, was perhaps a subtle, though important change, and while in no sense a complete assault on patriarchy, did

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[6] Margaret Skinnider, who was born in Ireland and grew up in Scotland, told of her Easter Rising experiences in the book *Doing My Bit For Ireland* (1917). She served as a scout, despatch-rider, sniper and raider and told of hair-raising experiences as she served Commandant Michael Mallin near Grafton Street. She wrote, "As I rode along on my bicycle, I had my first taste of the risks of street-fighting. Soldiers on top of the Hotel Shelbourne aimed their machine-gun directly at me. Bullets struck the wooden rim of my bicycle wheels, puncturing it; others rattled on the metal rim or among the spokes. I knew one might strike me at any moment, so I rode as fast as I could. My speed saved my life, and I was soon out of range around a corner". (http://www.easter1916.ie/index.php/people/women/ Accessed on 17 Mar 2019).

[7] "Éamon de Valera refused to allow women into his garrison. Brigid Lyons, a medical student at the time, who would later become the first woman to serve in the Irish army after independence, recalled that she "spent a lot of time making tea and sandwiches" at her post in the Four Courts – Ireland's main court building" http://theconversation.com/how-women-got-involved-in-the-easter-rising-and-why-it-failed-them-55771 Accessed on 17 July, 2019.

> provide some women with an alternative to emigration and marriage abroad. (Ferriter 73)

All Irish women had to live under such unfair impositions of Ireland's new politics. Reassessing the examples of women who had their names recorded in history for their heroic deeds in recognition of their achievements is a significant task in uncovering their real image. However, we can no longer discard the trajectories of women forgotten by History. The ones who lived miserably in the tenements, surely faced many more oppressive occurrences. It is vital to look attentively at the narratives of these marginalised individuals since they reveal the real circumstances of the struggles of Irish women. These reports demonstrate how most women lived and how they empowered themselves in order to face difficult situations during those times, far beyond the few records of a small number of female figures who did not represent the reality of the vast majority of Irish women.

Although the focus of the present research is exactly poor women in the turbulent context of the twentieth century, a more expansive look at Irish history reveals that gender equality and women's empowerment are not a recent challenge for the country. Nonetheless, these topics have usually been addressed in political agendas, not only reasserting the feminist struggles that followed in the twentieth century and continue to the present, but also revealing that solidarity and collectivity on a global and local level are important and necessary aspects for an improved Irish community. The idea of images of empowered women has been articulated as a solution for other problematic Irish questions. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade listed gender equality and women's empowerment as one of the key focus of Irish Aid in 2015.[8] Its agent, Minister Charlie Flanagan, said that Ireland has played a leading role internationally to promote progress on empowerment of women, adding that "Empowering women and girls and promoting gender equality are critical in tackling maternal and child mortality, reducing poverty and ensuring that countries develop sustainably". Furthermore, in the 2014 seminar, organised by the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence (ICGBV), the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, asserted that "Women's empowerment is vital to stop man-inflicted violence," and she added "We have to address the equality and empowerment of women as part of this. We have to value women's rights in every country," the world has to give "a sense to the girl child that she is as important as her brothers." On the same occasion, Sean Sherlock, Minister of State

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[8] https://www.dfa.ie/news-and-media/press-releases/press-release-archive/2015/march/gender-equality-a-key-focus-of-irish-aid/

at the Department of Foreign Affairs, announced that it was at the core of the Department's work to prioritise gender equality and women's empowerment.

To illustrate the different discriminatory fields women have to deal with, Gerardine Meaney (77-78) comments on the incongruous aspect women's writing has confronted in Ireland.[9] She talks about the apparent lack of precedent for this writing in Irish literary history, commenting that "this lack is merely apparent, in the sense that a great mass of material written by Irish women exists. Irish women have written more novels, poetry and plays than the most dedicated literary archaeologist can trace", but, unfortunately, "this work is only available to specialists, in academic libraries, and to those with the time and skills to seek it out". As a result of that, Meaney observes the creation of an assumption "that women have been the objects not the authors of Irish writing, which has impoverished critical debate and specifically feminist critique of Irish literature and culture" (77). Although it is difficult to decipher a reasonable justification for questions like this which involve the status of women throughout history, a field of Irish studies has provided room for debating the valorisation of the feminine. Margaret Kelleher, in her article "A Retrospective View on Irish Women's Literary Studies" (2003), presents a good overview of women's literary studies in Ireland as well as of the development of the Irish Feminist Criticism, more particularly from the second half of the twentieth century on. Mentioning the timely publication in 2002 of Volumes 4 and 5 of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*,[10] under the title *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions,* which brought increased attention to female representations, she highlights the importance of continuing debate on women's experience. Although she

[9] Tina O'Toole's *The Irish New Woman* (2013) is a valuable study which supports the existence of women's active participation in the Irish literary context. The author concentrates her analysis on the works of female writers from 1880-1922, such as George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne), Sarah Grand, L. T. Meade, Katherine Cecil Thurston, Hannah Lynch and Anna Parnell. O'Toole demonstrates how this "new generation" of writers resisted the hegemonic discourse of those in power, subverting gender and sexual identities and challenging regulated roles in the family.

[10] Field Day began in 1980 in Derry as a cultural and intellectual response to the political crisis in Northern Ireland. Playwright Brian Friel and actor/director Stephen Rea set out to identify and develop a new audience for theatre. (…) From its beginnings as a theatre company, Field Day also developed into a publishing company. Its founding members, Brian Friel and Stephen Rea, were quickly joined by Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane, Tom Paulin, Tom Kilroy and Davy Hammond. Since the mid-1990s, Field Day has become synonymous with the development of Irish Studies. It has acted as a focus for scholars seeking to question the paradigm of Irish history and literature, and in so doing, it has contributed to international debates on postcolonial theory and various strands of cultural history. In 2005, Field Day, in association with the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame, launched *Field Day Review*, an annual journal of Irish political and literary culture. The following year, it initiated several book series, the contributors to which include key figures in history, literary criticism, art, music and cultural studies. Field Day currently exists as an intellectual copyright under the joint directorship of Seamus Deane and Stephen Rea. It is a limited company with registered addresses in Dublin and Derry. (http://fieldday.ie/about/)

recognises this publication as the culmination of many years of work and waiting, she also says that the volumes raised many new questions.

Additionally, two Irish campaigns have recently shone the spotlight on debates concerning female desire to break free of conventions which have restrained women for ages: "Waking the Feminist" and "Repeal the 8th". The first, a 2016 grassroots movement for gender parity in Irish theatre, started in opposition to the male-dominated group in charge of "Waking the Nation", a theatre season to mark the 1916 Easter Rising centenary. The members called for a commitment by Irish theatres to promote gender equity throughout their organisations. The campaign has mobilised women and men from different areas who have striven to reveal how female participation has been excluded from the Irish dramatic agenda. "Repeal the 8th", a 2018 campaign, dealt with the right to abortion. Its members aspired to a more liberal regime, arguing for women's right to choose over their body and healthcare. They wanted a replacement to the Eighth Amendment,[11] which assured provision and regulation for termination of pregnancy. The referendum on 25 May 2018 was in favour of the repeal side, since the decision was to overturn the abortion ban by 66.4% to 33.6%. These impressive achievements are the culmination of many years of effort and waiting, and, unquestionably, they represent how Irish women have exercised power throughout Irish history in different domains, such as in politics and the arts. Although gender equality cannot be considered a matter resolved for Irish society, such progress reinforces the necessity and the relevance of maintaining the debate about the experience of Irish women and the process of empowerment.

In order to comprehend and contribute to the continuity of the debate on the active female involvement in Ireland's social life, it is significant to examine the past and discuss some aspects of Irish culture which sustained an incongruous perspective about women. This was the case of twentieth-century Ireland in which both politics and art made attempts to maintain conservative, yet imaginary, stereotyped social gender roles. In this sense, the literature of this period provides information helpful for assessing the experience of Irish women in such a context. Interestingly, with regards to dramaturgy, the drama appearing onstage would turn into drama offstage and vice-versa. Thus, Irish theatrical representations at the beginning of the twentieth century had a huge effect on real-life women, but tended to reinforce a powerless image. A consideration of these works, which followed a patriarchal-oriented path, such as the well-known Yeats' and Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902),

[11] The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Act 1983 granted an equal right to life of the pregnant woman and the unborn.

strengthens one's awareness of the existence of an essentially conservative line followed by most theatrical productions in the early twentieth-century Irish drama. Such representations suited the cultural nationalism of the period in representing gender roles, basically reproducing patriarchal models. Plays containing conceptions of gender equality, or which represented an inversion of the fixed gender roles, were, in great part, refused. The Abbey Theatre was likely to ignore playwrights who displayed any different female stereotypes from that imagined and promoted by the patriarchal-nationalist values. Only one such dramatist was not rejected by the Abbey, and this was Sean O'Casey, who rejected the traditional dramatic sketch of the Irish family. As a matter of fact, his first three productions in the Abbey can be read as texts which bear a concern with gender unfair disparity, and at the same time they reveal O'Casey's feminist vein.

Far from understanding a play as entertainment alone, the present thesis emphasises the importance of all dramatic activity for the well-being and development of human beings. Drama matters because it has the power to engage creatively and meaningfully with a wide range of issues, such as the topics addressed by this research. "In the last half-century the theatre's part in destroying the taboos surrounding the frank discussion of sexual matters, homosexuality, the use of strong language regarded as blasphemous, etc., has been spectacular in the English-speaking world" (Esslin 102-3). Furthermore, it can bring together different people and divided communities, transforming theatre into a place of eloquence and social development, which contributes to establish a connection between theatrical aspects and issues of social order. Drama has a strong relation with the real and exerts a great impact on its spectators, as Esslin asserted: "The manners and life-style shown in the theatre inevitably become a potent influence on the manners and life-style of the times. Unconsciously we tend to reflect in our own life the attitudes, the accepted modes of behaviour, we have seen in the theatre" (104). In this respect, the present analysis does not focus on a specific performance or production of O'Casey's plays, but reads them in relation to their significance for Irish society, since "everyone involved in theatre, in whatever capacity, amateurs, professionals and dedicated spectators, all turn to or return to the text as origin or reference", since the "performance is an instantaneous thing…. The text alone lasts.
… and [is] forever fixed" (Ubersfeld xxi, xxii, 3). So, among the three possible modes of approach to drama, textual analysis, art of interpretation and reception aesthetics, the present study deals with the first form: the text. I use this classification only for purposes of delimiting the focus and organisation of the research, since, even when one mode is chosen, it is impossible to completely ignore the other two. Even though the thesis is based on reading

of the theatrical texts, it does not reject other forms of analysis of representation when necessary.

O'Casey produced his early plays during an exceptional moment when the politics of Irish society were being incorporated in performances. The playwright's first three productions on the Abbey stage, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), depict female characters at variance with the dominant powerless model which constituted typical theatrical portrayals of women. These three texts are collected in an edition organised by Christopher Murray called *Three Dublin Plays*. O'Casey's female representations configure a presumed deconstruction of the Irish traditional order considering that, to some extent, these female characters work as subversive elements since they undergo a strengthening process in which they overtake conventional masculine representation and the place of men.

O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* introduced the dramatist into the artistic circle of the Abbey Theatre. Set in 1920s working-class Dublin, it involves the urban guerilla warfare of Ireland's War of Independence. In this initial period, O'Casey's concern was to portray Irish people as he saw them in Dublin tenements, a place where he himself had been born and raised. O'Casey saw the needs of the excluded ones. In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Minnie Powell is an example of these forgotten individuals. She is a "courageous character and is worthy of the audience's esteem, while the men, especially Donal, are not" (Wilson 324). She flirts with Donal Davoren, a man who has poetic aspirations whilst the other tenement residents believe he is a terrorist. In an attempt to protect Donal from false accusations, she is killed in a gunfire while shouting in favor of the Republic. According to Wilson, "Minnie's death is the main event of this play, bringing to light a different view of nationalistic sacrifice than we have seen in any other playwright" (323). Minnie is a powerful representation since her unhappy end tells us about the irony of the idea of sacrifice, helping the audience to rethink the concept of martyrdom. The possibility of reassessing the problematic question of sacrificial deaths through Minnie's representation allows us to define her in an empowered way since her death challenges Irish stereotypes of sacrificial losses, resignifying the traditional concept of self-sacrifice for the national cause.

Juno and the Paycock (1924) was O'Casey's next play for the Abbey after the success of *The Shadow of a Gunman*. The play drew such large crowds in its first week that its run had to be extended. It depicts the Boyle family living in the tenements during the Irish Civil War in 1922. As the patriarch, Captain Boyle is constantly unemployed, and Juno, his wife, is in charge of the family. The other family member in employment is also a woman, Mary, the

couple's daughter, although she is on strike. Johnny, the son, is almost always in bed because he has been crippled during the war. It is the mother, Juno, who does everything to hold the family together. She is the character who, besides doing all the housework, must provide for the family's daily income. In a sense, she represents all tenement mothers who fought for their family's survival. At the end of the play, with the news about Mary's pregnancy, she is the only support her daughter has, since her father rejects her. Juno is undoubtedly a gendered representation. She is strong, assertive, and capable of tremendous devotion to her family, the representation of "moral authority above any of the men" (Murray, *Sean O'Casey* 67, 70). Although her domestic and maternal actions correspond to the traditional stereotype thought of the Irish working-class woman, her role is not limited to these spheres. The representation of Juno is an empowered one because it goes beyond what was expected from a woman, demonstrating that real heroism may emerge where it is least expected, frequently in women like her (Kiberd 222). Juno's behaviour breaks the traditional order of the Irish family and might be equated with what Perkins and Zimmerman (575) classify as intrapersonal empowerment which is when the subject acts confidently and competently in a specific situation. "Juno is not a stand-in for Ireland, but a character who represents real Irish women" (Wilson 325).

The last play in the trilogy, *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), shows a cast of characters in a Dublin tenement experiencing the Easter Week in 1916. Unlike most plays set in the uprising, O'Casey did not focus on male figures who had become martyrs in the eyes of many Irishmen but, rather, depicted a wasteful war, whose combatants are shown to be cowards, displacing the commonly held view of the heroic male image. *The Plough* may also be viewed from a gender perspective if we see it as a character-based play, focusing on the role of Nora Clitheroe, newly married to Jack, a commander in the Irish Citizens Army. "In this play, Nora is an Irish woman unwilling to sacrifice her husband to the cause of national freedom. Through her, O'Casey rejects any notion that women encourage their men to fight to the death" (Wilson 326). Nora's dismay over the hostilities brought about by nationalistic ideology interrogates the idea that heroes are powerful representations since they are the only ones who suffer for being directly involved with the war, whereas women are a mere presence in these men's lives ready to send them to die. She is "the central character who reveals a reversal of the common sense of the male figure as the main image of the Easter Rising for, although Jack clearly aspires to a heroic performance in joining the fight, it is Nora who is actually the heroine of the story" (Parra 100). Regarding her characteristics, Nora's description has elements which challenge the idealised national female stereotype of

passivity and weakness. “O’Casey elaborated Nora’s description with adjectives which helped to construct a strong female image. Expressions which indicate strength… are intermingled with other characteristics which demonstrate femininity, such as her facial features” (Parra 100). Once again, as in the case of Juno, Nora has characteristics related to domesticity and family, but, in her case, these are symbols which produce an antagonistic effect since the way she conducts the family’s affairs has nothing to do with the nationalistic project. Her role in the play surely exposes an alternative meaning to the Irish concept of sacrificial war, as well as a female image differing from that represented in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. As Wilson observes: in *The Plough*, it is the “masculine war destroying the feminine” opposing the contrast *Cathleen Ni Houlihan’s* idea “of the masculine war saving the feminine Ireland” (327).

Taking these opening remarks on the female protagonists into account, my research consists of an analysis of these plays from sociological, historical and drama perspectives, which are discussed in Chapters One, Two and Three. Chapter Four presents the analyses of the plays’ female characters in the light of those aspects and, finally, I conclude demonstrating the present-day relevance of O’Casey’s works for the representation of Irish women.

The first chapter, “Empowerment Theory”, is a systematisation of the construct in a multifaceted perspective providing a framework for Ireland’s historical context and the subsequent analysis of the Irish theatrical texts. The chapter traces the origin of the concept of empowerment and of its methodological usage, starting with the work of the Brazilian author Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), with the purpose of drawing a theoretical connection with women’s studies on the topic. As it is a multidisciplinary term, the focus is to construct a specific framework, assuming Rappaport’s systematic premises on empowerment (“In praise of paradox”, “Studies in empowerment”), to analyse and understand its personal process as experienced by female individuals involved in the struggle to become empowered. One current of thought is that empowerment is an applicable construct only in cases that its processes and outcomes achieve a collective effect; however, a contradiction resides in the fact that this reasoning inhibits the multifaceted dimension of the concept. Thus, this chapter seeks to ascertain the importance of separating process and outcome and, secondly, to show the relevance of recognising the distinct levels of the concept and how each of them operates, in order to propose a feasible approach for the examination of theatrical texts.

The following chapter, “Empowerment and Irish Women”, presents an overview of early twentieth-century Irish history, bringing out the complicated circumstances women

faced during the turbulent years before and after Ireland's independence, not only those included in historical records, but, above all, those who lacked special social status and are seldom remembered by literature and drama. As there is so little documentation available on the lives and activities of these female subjects, this section makes use of oral history in order to reconstruct a possible framework of their experiences. The chapter presents a number of testimonies and accounts about Irish women recorded in Kevin C. Kearns' *Working Class Heroines: The Extraordinary Women of Dublin's Tenements* (2018), to demonstrate the vital role played by these lost heroines. Kearns' study shows who these women were, how they lived, and how they were represented as well. It examines three specific moments of this revolutionary period, the Easter Rising insurrection in 1916, the 1920s War of Independence, and the Irish Civil War in 1922. These conflicts are of fundamental relevance since they represent an eventful moment in Irish history where the involvement of women was of unexpected significance. "What is noticeable about the reality of these Irish women is that they did not limit their participation to the revolutionary struggles, but they also actively acted in areas generally controlled by men", breaking from the traditional feminine role imposed by the patriarchal society and being no longer minor individuals (Parra 15). Many women even overshadowed their male counterparts, a fact that empowers their image and role. Furthermore, such a timeframe is the background of the O'Casey trilogy.

Chapter Three, on "Drama Considerations", deals mainly with the intrinsic connection between drama and humanity, taking into consideration theory-based elements which facilitate the reading of the theatrical texts in parallel with the propositions about empowerment. In this sense, two approaches are formulated, establishing a connection with the sociological perspective. The first, which assumes an individual dimension, lays an emphasis on an examination of the theatrical character and those elements a playwright uses in its creation. According to Boal's explanation on drama consistent with the Brechtian approach, the distinction between subject and object character is then presented, demonstrating how the latter as a subject controlled by structural forces can be associated with the female individual who, in an initial state of powerlessness, needs to manage resources and mechanisms of power to alter oppressive circumstances imposed by cultural systems. The second approach to drama bears a more collective dimension and focus on the power of drama for social transformation, bringing drama closer to the issue of women's empowerment. For Esslin, "there are always social implications in any dramatic situation and in the resolution of any dramatic conflict because all human situations, all human behaviour patterns, have social – and therefore – also political – implications" (103). In this regard, the

reading and analysis of the female protagonists of O'Casey's plays also reveal a concern with the oppressed Irish women who lived in the revolutionary period, but who are blurred figures in the history of Ireland. Through the observations of Bertolt Brecht and Martin Esslin concerning drama's inherent capacity as a catalyst for discussion, this section addresses how theatre plays an important role as a transforming resource which may induce its audience to take a possible course of action. In summary, I argue that the transformation of characters on stage led the spectators and readers to reevaluate their view about the image of women.

In line with the theoretical chapters, Chapter Four, "When Empowerment Meets Drama", initiates the analysis of the theatrical texts. It begins with a look at O'Casey's early plays, revealing his concern with the working-class, especially with respect to the poor. Diverging from the nationalist and patriarchal tone adopted by most playwrights during the first decades of the twentieth-century, O'Casey wrote plays which exposed the life of the women from the slums. A careful look at his first three plays produced by the Abbey Theatre demonstrates the playwright's priority in depicting female representations of real subjects who seemed to have been hidden in that Irish revolutionary scenario. In addition, some details about his life, as memories from women who lived directly with him, support the idea that O'Casey had a feminist vein and, in this sense, was a playwright ahead of his time already in the first phase of his career. Instead of making moral judgments about women or reproducing gender difference in terms of power, as most male Irish authors did, O'Casey constructed powerful feminine figures capable of transcending tragic circumstances. In agreement with that, a close reading of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars* reveals that the female characters of these texts are representations of empowered women. Although they are portrayed in different scenarios and circumstances, Minnie, Mary, Juno, Nora and Bessie bear subversive narratives of personal empowerment. In connection with the perspective on empowerment, after the analysis of the three plays, the chapter engages in a consideration about O'Casey's theatrical figures as object characters, since all the representations of the tenement dwellers suffer and have to deal with a variety of social problems. Such examination serves to demonstrate how the plays' backgrounds as well as their historical and political connections place these characters in a situation of oppression since they are represented as objects controlled by structural and economic circumstances, aspects which may hamper empowerment process. Eventually, aiming at a broader consideration, the chapter tackles a collective approach which demonstrates how O'Casey's plays have worked as stories that influenced identity behaviour, personal and social change at

the same time they strengthened community narratives in a period that drama exerted a great impact on the formation of the Irish identity for women.

In the “Conclusion”, I compare the different forms O’Casey approached empowerment in the portrayal of the *Three Dublin Play’*s female representations, seeking to prove the relevance of these fictional stories to the development of an expanded narrative which contributed to give a voice to those forgotten Irish heroines from the tenements. Additionally, I underline the rebirth of the play *Nannie’s Night Out* performed as *The Lost O’Casey* in 2018 during the Dublin Theatre Festival as another proof of O’Casey’s long- standing and current connection with feminine representations. The play from 1924, produced between *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, was taken on a new dimension as an immersive performance by ANU Production. It is also about the people and episodes of transition and chaos from the playwright’s own range of experiences in the world of the Dublin tenements in the 1920s. In this respect it is possible to agree with Bertha Buggy’s observation that “Nannie is of the same family as O’Casey’s three great early dramas… The one-act “Nannie” is the least of these plays, but it is cut from the same cloth. And, to this reader, within the narrower scope, it has the same excellences” (qtd. in O’Casey, *Feathers* 301). *Nannie* emerges as O’Casey’s contemporary echo of reflection on contradictory aspects about women’s condition.

In the study of O’Casey’s works, a number of academic texts deal with the three plays through cultural studies, and these critical works on O’Casey’s life and production have been of fundamental importance in the constitution and development of this doctoral project. Nevertheless, the present research asserts its singularity on account of different aspects, but, first and foremost, because of its attempt at reading such twentieth-century theatrical texts through the contemporary perspective on women’s empowerment in its current connotation. In addition, through such approach on the construction of his female characters in *Three Dublin Plays*, the present dissertation argues that O’Casey could possibly be one of the first dramatists to introduce the idea of empowerment associated to poor Irish women. The research shows how the revolutionary Irish context offered O’Casey a suitable scenario for creating the theatrical figure of “new women” and reshaping the fixed narratives of nationality, class, gender and sex. In tandem with the historical context, O’Casey’s three plays are shown to encapsulate a revolutionary challenge to female fixed identity boundaries in turn-of-the-century Ireland. “Interestingly, O’Casey portrays women as either those most opposed to or most influenced by any sort of idealism” (Wilson 322). Such female figures embody the idea that “life is more sacred than patriotic slogans; human realities are more

meaningful than fanatical abstractions, particularly when in the name of the national honour the revolution devours its own children" (Kilroy 93).

Against the grain of nationalistic theatre produced in Ireland during the independence period, Sean O'Casey wrote his three plays whose framework was the real armed conflicts which occurred during the first three decades of the twentieth century, and he surprises the audience by placing women from different backgrounds, as subversive elements of the prevailing image of the powerless female in Irish drama. He makes a crucial inversion: the heroic figures in *Three Dublin Plays* are not men, but women. Thus, the present study argues that O'Casey's process of construction of dramatic representations of powerful women closely resembles the real female figures who, having their consciousness raised by a process of individual empowerment, gained the confidence to voice their wills and to fight for control of their own lives. Eventually, this empowered image of the Irish woman provided a means of challenging the traditional female stereotype that had been imposed for centuries.

1. EMPOWERMENT THEORY

1.1 Empowerment: The Origins of the Term

Empowerment is everywhere. From the online social networks to the United Nations' boardrooms, there is no escape from this fashionable construct. On the other hand, there has been a virtual chorus of discontent regarding the haziness with which it has been defined in the literature (Carr). Some scholars have even called it an illusionary concept (Albers and Polini) and a buzzword (Lord and Hutchison). There is a flood of definitions, covering its diverse applications across different fields, including business administration, economics, public health, community development and politics. For instance, in the booklet "Empowerment: What does it mean to you?", issued by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development for the International Conference on "People's Empowerment and Development", in Dhaka, in 2012, there are at least fifty definitions by people from different fields of activity. However, the lack of consistency in the ways the literature has defined it constitutes an obstacle to any meaningful synthesis of findings and consistent applications in practice. All the same, particularly over the past thirty years, there has been a surfeit of interest in the topic which has become an important approach for researching identity questions at the individual, organisational and collective levels. Enthusiasm for the term has markedly increased, as shown by the number of occurrences and references to it in the literature. A look at psychological studies reveals that from 1974 to 1986, 96 articles included the root word "empower", and over the following seven years, the number increased to 686 journal articles and 283 edited book chapters. A significant growth has also occurred in the other social sciences, with 861 articles on empowerment published on the Internet between 1974 and 1994 in sociology-related research and an astounding rise in printed publications between 1966 and 1994 from 66 to 2,261 articles (Perkins and Zimmerman 571). Despite the interest in empowerment, there is compelling evidence that the concept is not well understood. The lack of agreement concerning its meaning reverberates in the everyday use of the word. Like every emerging issue, its usage has become fashionable and the term has been adopted indiscriminately at whim:

> Of all the buzzwords that have entered the development lexicon in the past thirty years, "empowerment" is probably the most widely used and abused. Like many other

> important terms that were coined to represent a clearly political concept, it has been "mainstreamed" in a manner that has virtually robbed it of its original meaning and strategic value. (Batliwala)

For this reason, the application of the term in the academic studies has been much criticized, not only because of the demanding task of explaining such a multifaceted concept, but also because of the uncritical way in which it is employed. Regarding its use in contemporary discourse the term is often distorted and misunderstood, deviating from the roots of the proposed theory. "[M]uch of the writing done about empowerment often neglects to connect theory and research, and often leaves empowerment-focused interventions without a framework for organizing our knowledge" (Perkins and Zimmerman 572). In addition, there is a shortage of literature which provides conceptualisations and a solid historical basis for this polysemantic word. Even though the current online edition of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* dates the first known use of the term (as the state of being empowered to do something/the power, right, or authority to do something) in 1651, the lack of a formalised definition can still be detected in many other dictionaries. A brief look at the terms "power", "empower" and "empowerment" in an online search system[12] illustrates a disparity, revealing ninety-three English dictionaries with entries that include "power", as against only thirty- eight including "empower" and thirty-one for "empowerment":

Table 1 – Quantity of "power", "empower" and "empowerment" dictionary entries

Area/Dictionary	Power	Empower	Empowerment
General	32	30	18
Art	2	1	-
Business	13	2	6
Computing	5	1	1
Medicine	4	2	2
Miscellaneous	8	2	2
Science	15	-	-
Slang	1	-	1
Tech	11	-	1
Total definitions	**108**	**40**	**32**

Source: Data organised by the author based on information from the *OneLook Dictionary Search.*

Definitions of the verb appear chiefly to be confined to the rudimentary notion of 'giving or transferring power to someone', and many thesauruses associate it exclusively with the idea of a subject acting on an object. A deeper examination of the term empowerment

[12] The OneLook Dictionary Search, founded in April 1996, is a virtual search engine for words and phrases. It displays results from several web-based dictionaries. https://www.onelook.com/ accessed on 16 September 2018.

reveals that it can assume a double meaning, according to whether it is used as a transitive verb (subjects acting over objects) or an intransitive one (subjects acting over themselves). However, as shown in Table 2, none of the sources researched mentions the entries as a reflexive action, which appears to be a limited and conservative definition. When used transitively, empowering means conferring power to others, which implies the existence of an agent of empowerment granting power to a receptor (disempowered individuals or groups), which remains an object of the relation, in a passive attitude. This way of understanding implies the notion that these individuals or groups are considered incapable of their own actions of power. Unlike the transitive-based concept, comprehending the word in its intransitive sense connects with the idea of making others capable, or helping others to develop/gain power through their own efforts. In fact, "from the point of view of critical education, educators cannot 'empower people', but they can make them capable of increasing their skills and resources to gain power over their lives" (Baquero 179). Accordingly, its reflexive configuration leads to a perception of empowerment in an emancipatory perspective, which reveals a considerable contrast to the first point of view.

Table 2 – Noun/Verb definitions

Source	Noun	Verb (transitive)	Verb (intransitive)
Cambridge Dictionary	Not included.	To give someone official authority or the freedom to do something; to encourage and support the ability to do something. To empower is also to give legal authority for something.	Not included.
Collins Dictionary	The empowerment of a person or group of people is the process of giving them power and status in a particular situation.	To give or delegate power or authority to; authorize; to give ability to; enable or permit.	Not included.
Collaborative International	Not included.	To give authority to; to delegate power to; to	Not included.

Dictionary of English[13]		commission; to authorize (having commonly a legal force) transitive v. To give moral or physical power, faculties, or abilities to. transitive v. to enable or permit; to give more opportunity for independent action.	
Merrian-Webster Dictionary	The act or action of empowering someone or something: the granting of the power, right, or authority to perform various acts or duties	To give official authority or legal power to; enable; to promote the self-actualization or influence of.	Not included.
Mnemonic Dictionary	The act of conferring legality or sanction or formal warrant.	Give or delegate power or authority to; authorise, authorize; give qualities or abilities to.	Not included.
Oxford Dictionary	Not included.	Give (someone) the authority or power to do something. Make (someone) stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their life and claiming their rights.	Not included.
The American Heritage Dictionary	Not included.	To invest with power, especially legal power or official authority. See Synonyms at authorize. To equip or supply with an ability; enable.	Not included.
The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia[14]	Not included.	To give power or authority to; authorize, as by law, commission, letter of attorney, verbal license, etc.: as, the commissioner is empowered to make terms. To impart power or force to; give efficacy to; enable.	Not included.

[13] http://gcide.gnu.org.ua/?q=empower&define=Define&strategy=. accessed on 16 September 2018
[14] https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt/search?q1=empower&id=mdp.39015036876939&view=1up&seq=2 accessed on 16 September 2018

The Free Dictionary	The same definition as Collins'.	To invest with power, especially legal power or official authority. To equip or supply with an ability; enable:	Not included.
Vocabulary.com	Empowerment is the power granted by one person or institution to another. The government can grant empowerment to a department to effect change, or a person can grant empowerment to her lawyer to sign contracts on her behalf.	Give or delegate power or authority to; give qualities or abilities to.	Not included.
Wiktionary	The granting of political, social or economic power to an individual or group. The process of supporting another person or persons to discover and claim personal power.	To give permission, power, or the legal right to do something. To give someone more confidence and/or strength to do something, often by enabling them to increase their control over their own life or situation.	Not included.

Source: Data organised by the author based on information from the *OneLook Dictionary Search.*

It can be seen that dictionary definitions alone are insufficient to provide the necessary clarity for a methodological application of the concept.

The difficulty in defining the term is well summarised by the American psychologist Julian Rappaport ("The Power of Empowerment" 17)[15] when he says that "Empowerment is a little bit like obscenity; you have trouble defining it but you know it when you see it. It seems to be missing in people who feel helpless". In addition to pointing to the limitations of any single definition, Robert Adams (6) also underlines the danger that academic definitions might take away the word and the connected practices from the very people to whom it is supposed to belong. The difficulty in establishing a single definition occurs because empowerment is a complex and multifaceted process which may achieve a variety of outcomes and has occurred in a number of contexts focused on the individual and collective dimensions of power. Thus, its definition requires a consideration of different aspects and an understanding of its varied levels as well as its functions and intents. Empowerment is

[15] Professor Rappaport is recognised for having introduced the concept within a methodological perspective into social work and social psychiatry.

defined by Rappaport ("Empowerment Meets Narrative" 797) as a strength-based multilevel construct. According to most theoretical and international agency definitions, it is connected to the idea of having the power and control to change (at different levels) a given set of conditions.

A number of definitions within a more theoretical approach have emerged, each one with specifications and characteristics oriented to its area of application. For instance, based on the readings of Rappaport ("In Praise of Paradox", "Studies in Empowerment"), Perkins and Zimmerman (569), also from the psychology area, formulate it as "a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change". From a more collective standpoint, for the Cornell Empowerment Group (2), it is increasingly being understood as an intentional, ongoing process of change "centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources". In the business domain, it is described as "a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal" (Conger and Kanungo 474). Concerning international development, poverty and sustainability, the World Bank Group (39) asserts empowerment as "enhancing the capacity of poor people to influence the state institutions that affect their lives, by strengthening their participation in political processes and local decision-making".

There is wider agreement about when the term first arose in the literature. Although the principles underlying the idea of empowerment precede its current correlational issues, including feminism, psychology and the Black Power movement, all these writings point to the second half of the twentieth century as being the period when the concept was systematised. Just to name a few, Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès, in the essay "Empowerment: The History of a Key Concept in Contemporary Development Discourse", talks about pioneering works in the 1960s and the 1970s, and stresses that the publication of Barbara Solomon's book, *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities*, which coined the concept of power blocks and indicates the need of reducing powerlessness of stigmatised groups, is the first formal use by social service providers and researchers. Another relevant work, particularly concerned with the personal level of empowerment for women's studies and feminist social work practice, "Rethinking Empowerment Theory Using a Feminist Lens: The Importance of Process", by E. Summerson Carr, mentions a large number of authors who developed methodological research in the area, According to Carr, Solomon's work is the

oldest reference which quotes the term directly. Like Calvès, Rodrigo Rossi Horochovski indicates the early 1970s as the moment of the first references to the term in a discourse of alternative development particularly by civil rights movements, headed by feminists and black activists. Among other founding writings, Horochovski also mentions Solomon's work as the first. Elisheva Sadan, whose writings are a continuation of Rappaport's ideas, points to Barbara Solomon, Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus, and Julian Rappaport as the most influential authors presenting a systematical development of the concept, arguing that Rappaport is the writer who developed the concept theoretically and presented it with the most comprehensive approach to the solution of social problems stemming from powerlessness. "This is a progressive democratic world-view which resolves to live in harmony with the other approaches and attempts to create an integration of them" (Sadan 74). Joice Berth, author of *O que é empoderamento?*, also refers to Solomon's and Rappaport's writings to justify and elaborate her ideas regarding empowerment within a feminist approach. Her discussion of the importance of the collective rise and achievement of black female strength also includes important works by Batliwala and Baquero.

According to these scholars, Solomon's is the first book which makes a direct and methodical use of the word. On the other hand, even though there is no mention of the word empowerment in his text, recent studies (Calvès, Carr, Cattaneo and Chapman, Baquero, Berth) have demonstrated that the vast majority of authors make some reference to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1980), first published in 1969. Much of what has been said about empowerment intertwines with Freire's idea of "conscientisation". Although his study refers to the population in Brazil's rural areas, he proposes, as do subsequent empowerment theories, that the development of a critical consciousness and a consequent engagement in social change would be possible through a (teaching) process which would enable individuals to understand the dimensions of their personal problems. From the ideas developed in the pioneer studies of Solomon and Freire, one can detect the emergence of a debate on the concept of empowerment and its theoretical application.

As it has gained increased attention among researches and practitioners, even though there is still resistance from many scholars, the concept has acquired gradual visibility in other academic contexts. For example, the Cornell Empowerment Group (1989), a constant name among the researches of the area committed to a comm unity-level approach, has been mentioned in a considerable number of subsequent works which in association with the group address empowerment in purposeful frames, such as Donald Barr's *Transforming Power* which is centred on the local community and aims to enable facilitated groups to initiate and

sustain a community process in order to create a democratic environment. For Horochovski (3), although not specifically using the term, the ideas of the American political scientist Robert David Putnam are a proof of the term's visibility in the economic domain, since he has inspired a series of studies on empowerment through the associated concept of social capital, asserting this to be essential for the strengthening of civil society and, consequently, for the economic and social spheres. Despite the fact that Putnam was not the first to speak of social capital, the development of his ideas helped to promote research and interventions which, between the 1980s and 1990s, enabled the acceptance, appropriation and re- semantisation of empowerment to take place within a discourse focusing on development (Horochovski 4). Among other relevant works, including those by Gutiérrez, Kieffer, Perkins and Zimmerman, Friedmann and Carr, Julian Rappaport's writings figure most prominently because they provide introductory methodological assumptions that were later exploited and developed by the abovementioned authors. Rappaport's works demonstrate an awareness of the lack of a consistent theoretical approach and a deeper commitment to provide a competent methodological trajectory for the successful application of the concept of empowerment in the academic studies. For Perkins and Zimmerman (577), the North-American psychologist "has been a leader in the conceptualization research, and practical application of empowerment and related ideas". The effort to develop a more extensive analytical examination of the topic is also reflected in the writings of these two authors who are largely inspired by Rappaport. Although Perkins and Zimmerman utilise the concept of empowerment in order to conduct a coherent synthesis of community psychological theory, research and application, they argue that academics must be

> [M]ore precise about the construct and research it as thoughtfully as other psychological constructs or it will forever remain a warm and fuzzy, one-size-fits-all, concept with no clear or consistent meaning…. It is our aim, however, to advance our understanding of empowerment by specifying theoretical models of process by which empowerment may develop, by providing research examples of the many contexts and levels of analysis in which empowerment may take place, and by analyzing some very promising empowerment-based approaches to community and organizational intervention…. Our goal is to push the field to think more clearly about empowerment theory, research and intervention…. The construct in one form or another appears in academic circles, the political arena, the community development and public health professions, the therapeutic community, and organizational management, to name just a few. At the same time, the construct is often inadequately and loosely defined. We believe, however, that this means we need to tighten our thinking and get to work on specifying the construct. (571-2)

Although there has been an emphasis on the use of the concept in recent decades, its essential ideas are not new in the socio-political context. The emergence of the word seems to

be rooted in a process motivated and influenced by a number of social and contextual factors. Even though it is not considered to have been the earliest appearance of the concept, the Second World War stood out as a period of deep and accelerated social transformation in the Western world which marked by all the consequences of the war and the new international political divisions, witnessed the emergence of new political and cultural trends as well as the founding of groups of social actors with alternative ways of understanding the world. Particularly in the United States of the 1950s and 1960s, there were a number of groups that sought to fight against oppression, each working to gain power for the oppressed, such as the Civil Rights Movement. Especially in the 1960s, there was an enhancing of the public perception and the awareness-raising of the differences in the lives of individuals and their communities.

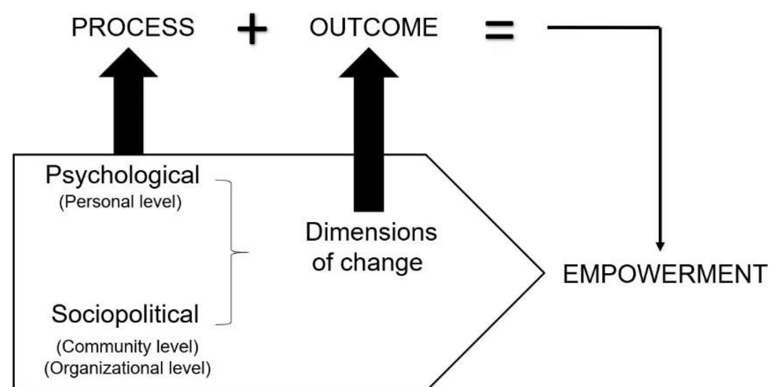
As stated by Rappaport, "empowerment suggests collaborators" ("In Praise of Paradox" 16); thus these social movements drew the attention of the society to the class struggle, incorporating into their agendas themes such as social rights, environmental issues, and racial and gender questions. The ideologies of 1960s counterculture, an anti- establishment cultural phenomenon that developed first in the United Kingdom and in the United States and then spread throughout much of the Western world between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, recall many of the aspects included in the current understanding of the word empowerment, because they bloom

> wherever and whenever a few members of a society choose lifestyles, artistic expressions, and ways of thinking and being that wholeheartedly embrace the ancient axiom that the only true constant is change itself. The mark of counterculture is not a particular social form or structure, but rather the evanescence of forms and structures, the dazzling rapidity and flexibility with which they appear, mutate, and morph into one another and disappear. (Goffman and Joy 9)

The behavioural elements so close to those embedded in the notion of empowerment, most notably a longing for change, fostered the process which culminated in the blossom of counterculture. Groups and individuals that had existed in the shadow of the subordination of power for centuries began to search for greater control over their lives in opposition to the systems that produced forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Such a revolutionary environment served as the cornerstone for the debates around the ideas which later made it possible to conceptualise the term.

1.2 Theorising the Concept

Before outlining my own considerations about empowerment it is important to stress that given the composition of this multidimensional concept, I neither intend to cover the whole extent of the literature, nor to advocate a single form of application, but rather to develop the theory in order to integrate it into literary studies. The present study seeks to provide an empowerment-based approach integrating the concept into drama theory relating to methods of character construction as a basis for new and consistent reflections about Sean O'Casey's plays. In terms of sociological framework, which is the core of this chapter, the present study is based on empowerment as a process, precisely focusing on the individual or, as understood by some researchers, the psychological level (Kieffer, Rappaport, Perkins and Zimmerman, Carr, Sadan, Cattaneo and Chapman). First and foremost, it is crucially important to understand that the idea of being empowered or empowering oneself can be understood in two different aspects: process and outcome.



This division (process/outcome) suggests that "action, activities, or structures may be empowering, and that the outcome of such processes result in a level of being empowered" (Perkins and Zimmerman 570). From the earliest reports, most scholars have described it primarily as a process (Kieffer; Rappaport "Studies in Empowerment", Staples, Gutierrez, Carr, Sadan, Cattaneo and Chapman), which may vary depending on the context in which it occurs. Both empowerment components diverge in the way they function because it is unreasonable to expect that all people and their circumstances will be framed in a single theoretical account, as Rappaport recalls,

> The content of the [empowerment] process is of infinite variety and as the process plays itself out among different people and settings the end products will be variable and even inconsistent with one another**.** The inconsistency is in the end rather than the process; yet the form of the process will also vary. ("Studies in Empowerment" 3)

Staples (31-32) further develops this diversifying notion describing the process as dynamic and ongoing, arguing that, "just as there is no final synthesis, there is no final state of empowerment. Rather the empowerment process strengthens the ongoing capacity for successful action under changing circumstances". In this sense, contrary to what is suggested by some authors, who reduce the existence of empowerment to a phenomenon marked by political and social achievement, the development phase must be of relevance to the whole mechanism, regardless of the result achieved through it. The empowerment process constitutes a challenge to previously established and spontaneously incorporated social relations. For Sadan, it happens firstly through the development of a critical consciousness. It is

> the most significant personal experience in the empowerment process. Critical consciousness is the process by means of which people acquire an increasingly greater understanding of the cultural-social conditions that shape their lives, and of the extent of their ability to change these conditions. (82)

It is during this phase that the individual or group confronts what is imposed upon them as the only legally supported way of living, opening up the way for the re-signification of these preconceived "models of excellence" for themselves and for those who share their narratives.

Thus, in an attempt to operationalise an empowerment-oriented discussion, it is indispensable to identify and understand how such a process unfolds. For didactic purposes, theories have divided empowerment into three categories (levels): individual, community and organisational. Based mainly on Rappaport's early thoughts on the theme, Sadan, Perkins and Zimmerman agree about such a classification. Sadan explains,

> I have chosen to divide the discussion into three categories, or levels, which in the literature on empowerment sometimes appear on their own and sometimes together, though not always in a differentiated way: individual empowerment— which focuses on what happens on the personal level in the individual's life; community empowerment— which emphasizes the collective processes and the social change; and empowerment as a professional practice— which sees empowerment as a means of professional intervention for the solution of social problems. (75)

Perkins and Zimmerman agree with this model of organisation, defining the particularities about the process and their respective outcomes,

> Empowering processes for individuals might include participation in community organizations. At the organizational level, empowering processes might include collective decision making and shared leadership. Empowering processes at the community level might include collective action to access government and other community resources…. Empowered outcomes refer to operationalizations of empowerment that allow us to study the consequences of empowering processes. Empowered outcomes for individuals might include situation-specific perceived control and resource mobilization skills. When we are studying organizations, outcomes might include development of organizational networks, organizational growth, and policy leverage. Community-level empowerment outcomes might include evidence of pluralism, and existence of organizational coalitions, and accessible community resources. (570)

Broadening their consideration on notions of empowerment specifically concerned with the individual level, the authors remark that,

> [A]s an open-ended construct, psychological empowerment takes on different forms in different contexts, populations, and developmental stages and so cannot be adequately captured by a single operationalization, divorced from other situational conditions. [Rappaport] argues that efforts to develop a universal, global measure of empowerment may not be a feasible or appropriate goal. He begins with a theoretical discussion of the differences between empowerment values, empowering processes, and empowered outcomes, which may provide the clearest and most specific criteria for measuring empowerment. This general framework cuts across individual, organizational, and community levels of analysis. Zimmerman recognizes the interdependence of these levels but emphasizes (individual level) psychological empowerment because it is a goal common to all levels of intervention. (573-4)

Different authors attempting to create a methodological framework for the concept do not expunge individual process from the wider process of empowerment. For instance, Maton and Salem's ideas emphasise individual motivations and collective actions as being inherent mechanisms of empowerment, arguing that, in general terms, the proceeding firstly enables individuals, in collaboration with others, to achieve primary personal goals. Although the present study is related to the subjective operation of empowerment, its premise is based on two of Rappaport's definitions in which he approaches the aspect of the process. First, he asserts that "It is a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organisations and neighborhoods; it suggests the study of people in context" ("Terms of Empowerment" 121), and he adds that "empowerment is a process, a mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs" (122). According to Rappaport, empowerment has distinct forms of being expressed since it manifests content for different people and organisations, and both strategies are equally relevant to the process in order to achieve its outcome. While some theorists ignore or even deny the importance of the personal phase of this process, according to the author, the construct conveys both

psychological and social connotations, applicable to the individual in terms of personal control and to the community regarding social influence. Furthermore, Rappaport argues that qualitative studies of psychological empowerment analysed at multiple levels can be used to extend an understanding of the processes by which social and personal change occur, stressing the need to create strategies which promote the empowerment of both communal and personal stories in order to give greater consideration to the voices telling these stories ("In Praise of Paradox"). The author goes beyond and even proposes two (didactic) branches of action concerning individual and collective operations to better comprehend what is involved in the entire process:

> There are at least two requirements of an empowerment ideology. On the one hand it demands that we look to many diverse local settings where people are already handling their own problems in living, in order to learn more about how they do it. This demand is obviously consistent, indeed requires, divergent reasoning. On the other hand, it demands that we find ways to take what we learn from these diverse settings and solutions and make it more public, so as to help foster social policies and programs that make it more rather than less likely that others not now handling their own problems in living or shut out from current solutions, gain control of their lives. (15)

According to Lord and Hutchison, "people understand their own needs far better than anyone else and as a result should have the power both to define and act upon them" (3). This line of thinking rests on the observation that when it is necessary to learn new strategies and competencies that challenge the traditional orders aiming to achieve any level of change, these skills are best learned in a context where the individuals themselves live and face their oppressive reality rather than in created and conventionalised associations where this subject just hears and discovers about subjugation. Experiencing oppressiveness personally fosters the process of change because it offers the most powerful stimulus for change. Since it is a gradual process, the critical thinking which emerges first in the reality of the individual, inserted in an oppressed group, will be developed in a more structural, organised and collective dimension.

Based on an examination of empowerment literature, it is apparent to say that some theorists argue that a real process of emancipation can only be recognised if it becomes a collective benefit or achievement. This reflection of the idea of an individual aspect is sometimes supported by the argument that the possibility of empowerment at the subjective level is linked to liberalist and capitalist ideals, and is not in line with the basic precepts of the struggle for equality and the emancipation of marginalised groups. According to Berth (40), understanding empowerment as the individual overcoming of certain oppressions, but

without breaking with oppressive structures, is a superficial and self-centred view. Berth highlights the considerations of Madalena Léon (97), who concludes that the personal perspective, with an emphasis on cognitive processes, is limited to the sense that individuals self-confess, affirming that this leads to a sense of mastery and personal control, "to do things for oneself", "succeed without the help of others". The Colombian author affirms that an individualistic view rules out the relations between power struggles and the daily life practices of individuals and groups, as well as disconnecting people from the broad socio- political context, from notions of cooperation and the importance of caring about others. As far as I am concerned, transcending individual barriers and continuing to reproduce the logic of oppression towards other groups has absolutely nothing to do with the essence of empowerment; on the contrary, legitimising and attaching importance to individual emancipation does not imply the abolition of its encompassing and collective characteristic, nor does it eliminate its potential to achieve more global and political dimensions.

If it seems myopic to discuss individual empowerment when the root of much oppression is societal, similarly, it is not enough to concentrate exclusively on societal oppressions since the building blocks of social change are committed individuals. It is beyond doubt that the 'personal is political', but, when dealing with empowerment I believe that the political is (first) personal. The expression of transformation on the personal level becomes for other individuals (and consequently for a group) the symbol that helps in identifying and overcoming the mechanisms of exclusion and oppression. In other words, it is from minor (power) relations that wider power relations are constituted; the collective reproduces these micro relations at the macro level. As Berth (42-43) herself states, empowerment is an element resulting from the union of individuals who rebuild and deconstruct themselves in a continuous process which culminates in practical instruments of the community. Although only one subject alone cannot produce an immediate achievement at the social level, it is from this stage that the possibility of re-signification of values and roles, pre-conceived as immutable, derives. It is from the personal awareness of the possibility of challenging the order of social structures that the process has the means to continually feed back through countless other individuals and reach a higher state. Berth and others assert that empowerment only occurs if it reaches a collective outcome, undervaluing its individual approach. But, according to the ideas of Michel Foucault in *Power/Knowledge*, the notion of power associated strictly to the political and social domain is

> [A]n idea transposed from Marxism, from a faded Marxism indeed. Just as the proletariat, by the necessity of its historical situation, is the bearer of the universal (but its immediate, unreflected bearer, barely conscious of itself as such), so the intellectual, through his moral, theoretical and political choice, aspires to be the bearer of this universality in its conscious, elaborated form. (126)

In the light of this, Marx's ideas, to some extent, failed to take account of individual issues and differences. Understanding and legitimating empowerment through its political and social results alone is a perspective influenced by Marxist discourse centred on the collective, egalitarian question, ignoring plurality and individualities.

A concern with empowerment leads us to look for solutions to problems related to the subjective experience of oppression, rather than in the centralised solutions of a monolithic "helping" structure, where help is considered to be a scarce commodity (Rappaport, "Terms of empowerment" 122). Investigating the personal features embedded in empowerment theory provides a more immediate and concrete awareness of the struggles and mechanisms utilised to resist oppression. It means meeting not only those questions which are universal or related to the masses, but also those specific problems of individuals who may share the same narrative as minor and marginalised groups. When an individual experiences the process of empowerment, the narrative of alienated groups gains visibility as does the possibility of being known by others. Nonetheless, when Foucalt talks about power and the forms it can operate, he emphasises the importance of being cautious with the discourse employed to discuss it, arguing that "a new mode of the 'connection between theory and practice' has been established" and that it is a garbled thought to insist only in the modality of the 'universal', the 'exemplary', the 'just-and-true-for-all', instead of highlighting "specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them" (126).

Thus, since I believe that empowerment necessarily stems from a personal perspective, we must verify the existence of an interrelation between this relatively new term and its semantic correlation with the idea of power associated with the interpretation of personal control, which is located in the decision-making process, just as much as in the idea of conflict and force. To try to come closer to an understanding of the functioning and outcomes of the process of empowerment from an individual perspective, it is important to examine the concept of power itself.

The Cornell Empowerment Group's article defines power as the "capacity of some persons and organizations to produce intended, foreseen and unforeseen effects on others" (2), but even before the existence of the notion of empowerment, some authors had already addressed the issue of power in the private dimension. It may therefore be helpful to present a

brief overview of specific theorists whose considerations on power provide a necessary background for developing my subsequent examination of personal empowerment.

One of the reasons for the confusion around the concept of empowerment is that the root concept 'power' is itself disputed. Power has long been a subject of debate. Even though the origins of the concept are grounded in political theory and political philosophy, interest in it has penetrated into many areas of knowledge, as attested by the works of Karl Marx in political sciences, Alfred Adler in psychology, Friedrich Nietzsche in philosophy, to name but a few. Nonetheless, as reported by Sadan, two classics of political writing are authoritative works in modern thinking about power and have given rise to the two main streams of thought on power today: Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), and Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651). Although these two authors, respectively in the early sixteenth and mid- seventeenth century, developed key ideas on the matter, they did not share the same approach. Whereas Machiavelli held a strategic and decentralised view, seeing power not as a resource, but as a means, Hobbes set out a centralised standpoint. Whilst it may be true that, Sadan aseerts that "in the mid-twentieth century it appeared that Hobbes's view was triumphant" because "his language and his images, … were more appropriate to the modern scientific approach than Machiavelli's military images" (34), and she goes on to explain that the social sciences began taking an understandable interest in power after the Second World War, and it became necessary to explain power within a logical and schematic framework, defining a form of observing, measuring and quantifying it, a perspective which matched Hobbes's rational line of thought:

> At that time, the work of Max Weber (1947) served as a point of departure for thought about power because it continued the rational Hobbesian line and developed organizational thinking. Weber's approach to power connected with his interest in bureaucracy, and linked power with concepts of authority and rule. He defined power as the probability that an actor within a social relationship would be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance to it. The activation of power is dependent on a person's will, even in opposition to someone else's. (Sadan 35)

After the Second World War, the idea of power was central to politics, so, while Machiavelli's and Hobbes's thoughts on power were entirely concentrated in the notion of a single unit (the State) from which power stems, in Weber's view the construct starts to gain subjective proportions. In addition to Weber's, the works of Steven Lukes and Antony Giddens were of fundamental relevance in establishing the concept in contemporary sociological discourse, but it was Michael Foucault who was responsible for expanding the debate on power beyond the fields of social sciences. Although the philosopher recognises

that hegemonic interests of some social groups are behind generalised power situations, he argues that this is not the only possible manifestation of power and that consequently "The way power was exercised concretely and in detail with its specificity, its techniques and tactics, was something that no one attempted to ascertain; they contented themselves with denouncing it in a polemical and global fashion" (Foucalt 116). Even though, from the viewpoint of political science, the monopoly of power is articulated within a juridical framework, it is an instrument that pervades all scenarios of human life, all levels of society, even "among those whose fight was located in the fine meshes of the web of power" (116). In this regard, the philosopher opened up new ways of reflecting on the idea of multiple and differentiated realities of power because he sees it within a minutely-detailed perspective, focusing on the micro-operation of this instrument, which he calls the microphysics of power, arguing that the consideration of the individual is "undoubtedly essential to the general functioning of the wheels of power" (116). Furthermore, his idea challenges the assumption that power is merely a negative and repressive force operating exclusively through the means of law, prohibition and censorship. He argues that,

> [T]he notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of such power, one identifies power with a law which says no, power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition. Now I believe that this is a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power, one which has been curiously widespread. If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (119)

As in empowerment, power does not have a single source or form of manifestation. Moreover, Foucault does not talk about power as something to be gained, but rather, in terms of power relations because, from his perspective, power is something to be exercised and practiced. For Foucault, when the subject is placed before relations of production and signification, she/he is at the same time placed in relations of power. Therefore, just as empowerment has not been understood only according to its community and organisational approach, it is not enough to think of power only at its macro level, without worrying about the multiplicity involved in individual relations, because its nature seems to be connected primarily to real and effective practices and direct narration with its field of application. Thinking about power beyond the political field with a focus on daily life, which means to

think outside the collectivism's box, inaugurates innumerable paths for its application. All in all, power is generated and first established in varied personal relationships, providing significant elements for the development of a theory of empowerment centred on the subject.

In thinking about the discourse and practice of power one must also think of relations of domination and subordination. Gaventa (3) argues that "the social elite makes use of its power principally to prevent the rise of conflicts… and to attain social quiescence". In other words, a situation of apparent lack of "conflicts is identified as both a sign and a consequence of deliberate use of power mechanisms". The power present in a situation of oppression is a repressive force because it operates to prevent people from doing what they prefer to do, transforming them into subordinate subjects who follow the ideals of those who possess the power. In this case, power produces obedience, making an individual do something that otherwise he or she would not have done. "Instead, the process of empowerment takes place in a context where power is unequally distributed and where structures exist to perpetuate the advantages of some over others" (Cattaneo and Chapman 647). It is plain to see that the aim behind this idea is to weaken a person or a group, preventing them from participating in decision-making processes and obtaining passive agreement, which leads to the marginalisation of the multitude.

Many writers have developed the ideas about empowerment based upon the multiple forms of power and oppressiveness. Since the process is fundamentally about gaining power, identifying and examining the individual's powerless status is crucial because it is from this stage, amid the context of lack of power and the awareness-raising of this condition, that individuals recognise the necessity of mastering their skills to change. In attempting to map the cyclical nature of empowerment and describing its various constituent elements, Carr argues that the stages of the process are circular and mutually reinforcing, adding that,

> Although cyclical, for analytical purposes, the process of empowerment can be thought to have an origin: a "position". It is widely assumed that the point of departure in the empowerment process is a position of human misery, whether it is termed *powerlessness*, *oppression*, or *deprivation*…. [T]heorists of empowerment… have sought to explicate this starting position by considering socioeconomic factors, on one hand, and psychological factors, on the other hand. (13)

The nature of powerlessness does not seem to be associated with a single political or psychological feature, because, although it is closely related to the lack of personal strength, it may derive from different factors, both external and internal ones, such as the lack of self-esteem, the absence of external supports, the existence of former, almost ontological, forms of constraint internalised into a person's behaviour (Solomon), incorporation of past

experiences, ongoing behaviour, and continued patterns of thinking (Rappaport, “Studies in Empowerment”), manifestation of institutional and structural sexism and the resulting alienation from oneself (Mackinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory*). Supporting the idea of multiple sources which lead to a state of lack of power, Solomon wrote that being in a state of subjugation is conceived as being more complicated than lacking the material reality of power; it is, instead, “the inability to manage emotions, skills, knowledge, and/or material resources in a way that effective performance of valued social roles will lead to personal gratification” (16). Additionally, Lord and Hutchison assert that a context of subjugation may be understood into two distinct variants: real and surplus powerlessness. Real powerlessness would be the result of economic inequality and oppressive control exercised by others, a group or individuals, but surplus powerlessness refers to an internalised belief that nothing can change, producing a state of apathy and unwillingness of the person to struggle for more control and influence (2). Seen in these terms, an examination of these variants at the individual level is significant since the subjects who lack power do not necessarily have the same chance or use the same methods to gain it. In addition, experiencing oppressiveness personally fosters the process of change because it offers the most powerful source for change. Accordingly, “despite the insidious nature of powerlessness, theorists of empowerment… agree that it is a position that can be overcome” (Carr 14), and the artifact to activate efficient resources of resistance against these mechanisms and their implications is power itself.

A state of oppression and the consequent awareness of powerlessness is the propitious valve that activates the process of empowerment because, as Rappaport explains, since it “implies that many competencies are already present or at least possible, given niches and opportunities”, it is possible for the existing competencies to operate and one understands that “what you see as poor functioning is a result of social and lack of resources” (“In Praise of Paradox” 16). This dimension that involves identification of the forms of exercise of power may trigger a shift in the power relations: a loss of power by the oppressor or a gain of power by the oppressed. Carr argues that

> In terming powerlessness a position, I evoke the idea of multiple possible locations that correspond with the diversity of different people’s lived realities and suggest the inherently changeable nature of positionality….. [T]he cyclical nature of empowerment ensures that this position shifts as people move through the empowerment process, gaining psychological power through conscientization and political power through engagement in social action and the resulting change. However, considering the “dual nature” of the position of powerlessness, it is imperative that individuals free themselves of the inner and outer hindrances. (14)

It is thus possible to conclude that since the processes of personal empowerment possess a variable and inconsistent nature, their roots, likewise, may evoke multiple positions of powerlessness. There is no rule that dictates a particular form of oppression as an initial mark that forges the path for this personal process, as people live different realities and will be inherently in a changeable nature of positionality.

All this considered, as the literature suggests, the empowerment process comes about amid a backdrop of resistance and struggle against oppressive patterns, and this is what has led many scholars to apply its main ideas to women's studies. Given this, feminist contemporary discourse has constantly made use of the term.

1.3 Empowerment: A Methodological Approach for Women's Studies

Well before empowerment entered the socio-political agenda, the ideas of gaining control and participating in making decisions concerning their own lives took hold of women's imagination so that, for over two centuries, they have claimed the right to be what they really are and not what society expects them to be. Understood as one of the fruits of the French Revolution (1789), the issue of the emancipation of women became increasingly frequent in political and social discussions. The civil rights movements of the last decades of the twentieth century, especially for women and blacks, were important agents in the systematic formulation of the concept and decisively contributed to its inclusion in the official agenda for women's issues. In addition to that, a turning point in the theoretical systematisation of empowerment and its association with women's rights culminated in the publication of *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: The Third World Women's Perspectives*, by Gita Sen and Caren Grown, the result of feminist reflections which introduced a new perspective to the issue, later labeled by Caroline Moser, in the essay "Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Gender Needs", as the "empowerment approach". In short, this seminal publication offered a new insight into female resources used to transform and break down gender subordination as well as other forms of oppressive structure (Sen and Grown 22). It proposed a revolution in the mechanisms that perpetuate gender domination and prevent egalitarian relationships in society. Subsequent years witnessed several feminist publications on gender and development which employed the new term, trying to formulate analytical principles for further studies in the area. These feminist writers address empowerment from a methodological perspective

which differs from the narrow overall understanding in dictionary definitions. They discuss and elaborate their theoretical hypotheses mainly establishing the interconnections between power and empowerment, while highlighting the many-sided features embedded in these polyvalent constructs. More importantly, this literature particularly concerned with the feminist studies focuses on the process of empowerment for women, engaging in a debate that goes beyond female victimisation, but which procures forms of challenging male control, conceiving of power from a more comprehensive and political perspective, without overlooking the subjective feature integrated in the process of defying subjugation.

For the purposes of analysis, I propose to use such literature together with some formulations about the construction of character in the dramatic text in order to develop a coherent reading of O'Casey's plays in which it is possible to articulate and discuss notions of the process of personal empowerment. The female characters in these plays exist in a specific community and in a troubled historical context, and are, in fact, the representation of real neglected Irish feminine individuals who lived their lives against a background of nationalism, poverty and sexism. In addition to the prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination against them on the basis of sex, Ireland's particular national culture shaped an imaginary incongruent identity for them. Furthermore, the incidence of poverty for Irish women was clearly greater than that faced by other European women. Thus, they were hampered by a more oppressive social environment than that endured by English women. They were more likely to be restricted to low-status occupations and levels of education, insufficient food and clothing, and inadequate access to health services. For this reason, as the focus of this thesis is the dramatisation of these particular poor Irish women, it is important to address how their powerless position in society contributed to individual problems. It is therefore pertinent to investigate alternative models of development which apply the idea of empowerment because some of these experimental approaches are not restricted to macro forms of power (state, market), but they also comprise ignition systems for change and improvement from a more private context, such as the emancipation of the poor and small communities. To this end, the considerations of John Friedmann are of fundamental importance since they match the present study's propositions about the empowerment process in a microcosm. The author does not understand the absence of power as being equivalent to the insufficiency of resources for the oppressed to overcome such a situation, but rather as the existence of a vast and longstanding process of exclusion from powerful structures. He argues that the individual has the tools to overcome a condition of

oppression and that ‘being empowered’ is a self-generated process, which sharpens the psychological form of empowerment.

Whether empowerment is intrinsically connected to both the existence and lack of power, female individuals have the resources to empower themselves because their experience has been one of lack of power, which means, among other things, that they have not been able to decide about their own lives. However, this movement from powerlessness to a condition of control of oneself is not a simple or linear trajectory: the story of women’s resistance has been a long journey of work and struggle,

> The way in which women reversed this situation of masculine oppression and symbolic annihilation that was imposed was through the attempt to break the silence by a progressive process. Whether through the writing of scattered writers, or in actions for a society more equal to the sexes, these women started a process of transgression of the norm. Even though they were initially curtailed and punished, they insisted on the project in search of freedom and the space to be signified. Thus, women engaged in a project whose purpose was to define their identity from their own point of view and not according to the words of the other, in this case, of men. (Tokita 47; my trans.)[16]

The present study, through the analysis of female dramatic representations in the Irish drama, will suggest that the women’s personal process of empowerment is a multifaceted progressive phenomenon which occurs on a non-linear trajectory. In recognition of the importance of this level as well as of its contribution to a broader and more political context, the present thesis relies on the arguments of Friedman who “indicates that empowerment begins with the mobilization of civil society around local issues, before the movement gains ground and takes on oppression at the national and international levels” (Calvès 6). The theatrical portrayal of these poor, marginalised Irish women, even though underrepresented in positions of power, demonstrates that they managed personal resources to overcome, or at least, to control and deal with difficult situations. For Gutierrez (“Working with Women” 149), powerlessness has the effect of reducing the ability to exercise personal control, developing negative stereotypes of women and minorities; on the other hand it makes us recognise a ‘phenomenon’ in the representation of these female characters, since they acted

[16] “[A] forma encontrada pelas mulheres de reverter essa situação de dominação masculina foi por meio da tentativa de se romper o silêncio e o aniquilamento simbólico que se impunha – processo que ocorreu paulatinamente. Seja [por] meio da escrita com os trabalhos, no início, de esparsas escritoras, ou em ações em prol de uma sociedade mais igualitária para os sexos, estas mulheres iniciaram um processo de transgressão da norma. Foram, inicialmente, cerceadas e punidas, mas insistiram no projeto em busca de liberdade e do espaço de se significar. Sendo assim, as mulheres se engajaram em um projeto que tinha como propósito a definição de sua identidade a partir de seu próprio ponto de vista e não de acordo com as palavras do outro, no caso, dos homens.”

beyond what was expected from them. It is therefore my intention to outline the assumptions of the empowerment perspective and the internal processes that it involves.

It is helpful to define the concept from the perspective of authors who deal with it from a feminist empowerment-oriented perspective. In line with Rappaport's more general characterisation ("Terms of Empowerment"), which indicates the existence and the relevance of the empowerment process at the individual level, I propose a closer formulation of this construct which delimitates its application to women's question. I shall take as my basis Gutierrez's interpretation that,

> Empowerment is a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations…. This definition of empowerment includes combining a sense of personal control with the ability to affect the behavior of others, a focus on enhancing existing strengths in individuals or communities, a goal of establishing equity in the distribution of resources, an ecological (rather than individual) form of analysis for understanding individual and community phenomena, and a belief that power is not a scarce commodity but rather one that can be generated in the process of empowerment. ("Working with Women" 149-50)

In reaching this conclusion, the author suggests three different currents of thinking. First, the macro-level standpoint which envisages a process of increasing collective political power; secondly and alternatively, a micro level insight which consists of the development of personal feelings of increased power or control, but without an actual change in structural systems; thirdly, there is the proposition of an articulation of these two views through the argument that individual empowerment may contribute to group empowerment while the power of the group may also enhance the functioning of its individual members. Although Gutierrez focuses on women of colour, her considerations are relevant to the present study since they are developed through the essential notion that, for any form of empowerment, the process involves a stage of the emergence of a sense of personal power, and the skill of interaction which leads to social change. It is also worth taking into consideration the ideas Gutierrez developed in psychological change concerning a female subject who moves from an apathetic state to an active one.

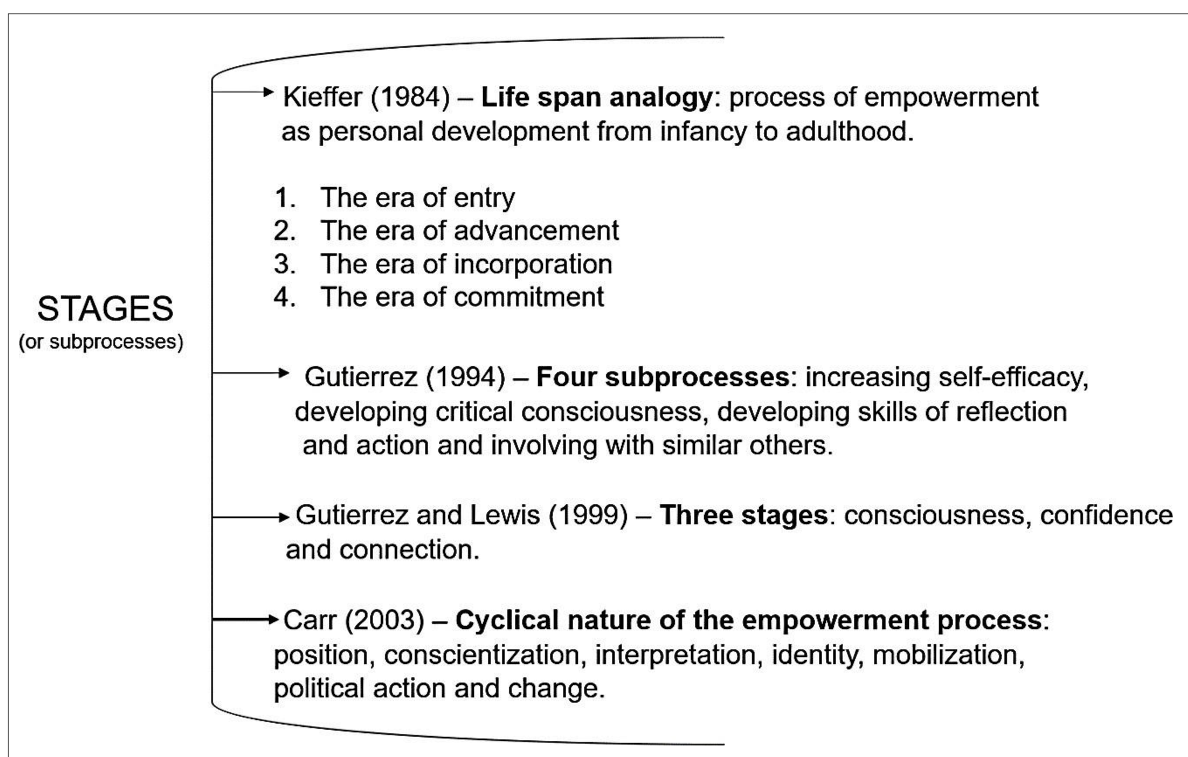
In addition to Gutierrez's formulations, Carr also theorises and maps empowerment without ignoring the importance of social, historical, and political context. Based on authors inspired by Freire's ideas (*The Pedagogy*) concerning conscientisation and its relation to engagement in social change, she elaborates a schema of personal development, using theories from social work and developmental psychology, which proposes a course for the "soon-to-be empowered individuals as they relate with their peers and their environment" (9).

For Carr, these theorists have focused on a mental stage during which "individuals come to understand the political dimensions of their personal problems and act accordingly", a reflection that reinforces the connectedness of empowerment with both the psychological and sociopolitical dimensions of change (9). Sustaining the relevance of developmental psychology theories to describe the process of empowerment, the author mentions several authors who suggest,

> [T]hat people move through stages of empowerment, developing skills, understandings, and resources in a more-or-less linear and progressive way. All these scholars have used developmental psychological theory to clarify the process of empowerment, believing that such clarification will help social workers and other practitioners develop an empowerment praxis that facilitates and nurtures this important process.
>
> Although developmental psychology can contribute to understandings of empowerment, it is ill-equipped to explain the process of empowerment as it relates to the dynamic interplay between conscientization and social change. (9)

Even though they envisage distinct classifications, in an attempt to elucidate the concept from this processual perspective, some of these theorists have proposed a deeper and more detailed explanation by suggesting subprocesses of empowerment, as can be seen in the table below.

In his life span analogy to describe the four stages of the empowerment



operation, Kieffer demonstrates a tidy and linear process of adult learning and development, in which individual participants mature from socio-political infancy to sociopolitical

adulthood (9). However, according to Gutierrez ("Working with Women"), these subprocesses do not unfold in a sequential arrange, because

> Although these changes have been described in a specific order, the empowerment process does not occur in a series of stages. Instead, the changes often occur simultaneously and enhance one another. For example, individuals develop self-efficacy, they may be more likely to assume personal responsibility for change. Researchers who have studied the process also suggest that one does not necessarily achieve empowerment but rather that it is a continual process of growth and change that can occur throughout the life cycle…. Rather than a specific state, it is a way of interacting with the world. (150)

In addition, it does not capture the cyclical nature of the empowerment process, Kieffer's model asserts it to be an intrapsychic phenomenon that comprehends the contextual and structural factors but does not integrate them into its developmental paradigm. Essentialised notions of consciousness, identity, and agency are analysed without considering their historical and cultural contingencies (Carr 12).

Amongst these systematic models of classification, Carr's is that which proposes the most detailed schema. While Gutierrez's last formulation presents three subprocesses, consciousness, confidence and connection, Carr's model introduces seven stages: position, conscientisation, interpretation, identity, mobilisation, political action and change. Thus, in order to avoid the shortcomings of a purely developmental standpoint, Carr's and Gutierrez's hypotheses seem to be the most appropriate route of inspection. Their models support the belief that "personal is political", while their idea of circular, mutually reinforcing and interconnecting subprocesses also highlights the core of empowerment definition, which is to identify a cycle of reflection and social action. I shall therefore utilise their theories in the section of this thesis dedicated to the in-depth reading of O'Casey's first three plays performed in the Abbey Theatre, focused on the theatrical representations of poor women placed in 1920s Dublin, demonstrating how these characters were constructed according to a notion of empowerment, since, through them, O'Casey portrays a subversion of the smothering aspects of Irish society.

2.0 EMPOWERMENT AND IRISH WOMEN

From a twenty-first-century perspective it is difficult to imagine an Ireland in which women were not entitled to vote, were excluded from universities and professions and had endured endemic misogyny. Despite living in a male-dominated culture, Irish women have challenged factors which for so long have operated as a form of constraint on the individual, placing them in a continuous situation of powerlessness. Some of them have achieved important positions in public life and have been recognised as influential and distinguished citizens among their contemporaries, such as Bernadette Devlin, Kathleen Lynn, and the former president Mary Robinson. With regard to the revolutionary period addressed in the present research, Constance Markievicz, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, Louie Bennett, Margaret Pearse, Maud Gonne MacBride, Helena Molony, Madeleine ffrench-Mullen, Dr Kathleen Lynn, Rose McNamara and Elizabeth Farrell have entered the official historical records and are generally remembered as female names who stood out in history and had a significant share in the process of Ireland's independence.

Nonetheless, with all due respect to such individuals it is my contention that they are not the only feminine representations of empowerment in the Irish context. In fact, their participation in Ireland's political affairs may reflect a "romantic" vision about the emancipation of a few individuals because the accomplishments of this comparatively small fraction of women were not translated into rights for all of them. In other words, these cases do not take internal power relations into account, and social inequalities are de-emphasised or ignored. Analysing the historical accounts, for instance, it is evident that Markievicz had a highly unusual profile among women in so many ways, being rich and privileged and seemingly free of responsibilities towards her family. This does not mean that the participation and achievements of these women are not important, but their narratives serve fundamentally as a synonym of individual capacity, realisation and status as they highlight issues of individual choice, access, and opportunity. Perceiving such narratives as the only feasible case of women's empowerment means ignoring the broader discussion which incorporates the situation of *all* Irish women, and emphasising an individualistic perspective instead. Despite the ostensible interest in demonstrating female engagement and participation in predominantly male areas and activities, it is of limited usefulness to observe the Irish women's experience from this top-down approach, wherein the needs and interests of (other and poor) women are predetermined and imposed from above. In addition, the existence of these few records of female participation in documents and historical writings might have

been a national strategy consisted of "managing the status quo," which integrated women into the Irish nationalistic project, without addressing structural factors that perpetuated exclusion and oppression or considering the many forms of domination experienced by Irish women.

2.1 Twentieth-Century Women: Dublin's Tenements Heroines

The reality of Irish women is constituted of a diversified social, economic and geographic range, from high-social-status individuals, engaged directly with the sociopolitical context of the country, to lower-class ones from impoverished communities with little or no space in the important moments of Ireland's history. On the other hand, what most of them have in common is that they have been historically ignored. Frequently reduced to the images of a mother or a housewife, denied a voice, the female subjects, when remembered, are sketched as faceless creatures who seem to form a subclass, the *other* half of society. "There is a recognizable class system… and it is rigidly maintained. It is difficult to know how the other half lives" (Clare 14). Besides that, the circumstances of life were very hard to the lower classes, as in the case of the Dublin inner-city women from the deprived working-class context who were completely left behind. Paradoxically, while chiefly notable male achievement has been sustained, Dublin inner-city area has a long history of struggle mainly led by women. In particular, the tenement neighbourhood in the 1920s was home to a matriarchal society in which, in most families, women played the main role behind the scenes, while men were fully devoted to Irish national issues, when not having problems with alcoholism and unemployment. Although so little documentation is available on the lives and activities of these female subjects, oral tradition has helped to reconstruct their past experiences, not only affirming their vital role in family and society's life, but also revealing narratives of true lost heroines. In his book *Working Class Heroines: The Extraordinary Women of Dublin's Tenements*, Kevin C. Kearns brings together testimonies and accounts of these female real-life characters who, in the words of Mary Robinson, rocked not only the cradle, but also Ireland's conventional system. According to Kearns,

> Refusing to be rendered historically voiceless any longer, women are affirming that our everyday lives are history. Using an oral tradition, as old as human memory, we are reconstructing our own past. We search for hidden clues to direct us to 'lost heroines', to record their past experiences because so little documentation was available on their lives and activities. (1)

The reports are from children, relatives and even public figures who knew and lived with these forgotten women. The memories reveal a very different version of the female

experience from that outlined in most historical books, or rather, they uncover the variant excluded from the official narrative, as the following accounts indicate.

> [T]hey were heroines. They struggled on day after day in dreadfully depressing conditions with large families, ill health… washing, cleaning, cooking and a lot of problems with (husbands') alcoholism. It was the mothers that would keep the family together. They had tremendous resilience and such a marvelous spirit… heroines. (1)

> Men – many unemployed or unemployable – live off the dole and have failed to play an important part in the family… women play the dominant role, working to keep the family together. (46)

> It *is* a matriarchal society. Mothers played the main role. And the men were hopeless… *hopeless*, for whatever reasons. And became feckless or would give up after a while. But, then, they never had a chance either, like if they were unemployed. The men were in the background, in *every* way. (7)

> Inner-city mothers, I don't know where their *strength* comes from, their resilience. How they *keep going*! To keep their head above water, get through the day. Maybe it's an instinct… their survival make-up. (17)

Although referring to different decades, these testimonial quotes make it clear that, even in the face of structural and psychological constraints imposed by politics, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, lower-class Irish women had the "strength" to overcome hardship to "keep going" with their lives. In this sense, they are examples of individuals who, according to Rappaport's ideas on empowerment, handled their strengths and competencies, their agency, and embodied proactive behaviours in the face of obstacles. By doing so, they not only challenged mandatory gender roles, but they also proved that a behavioural process of change from a state of powerlessness to an empowered one is possible. Furthermore, these real experiences seem to put a link between the resignification of the almost universal concepts concerning women and men's natural behaviour with the personal process of female empowerment. To understand this better, I shall seek to identify those aspects which betoken this individual breakthrough.

2.2 Objective and Subjective Forms of Oppression

As psychological empowerment takes on different forms in different contexts, before approaching the operational forms of this phenomenon in the lives of Irish women, it is

fundamental to take into consideration the Irish context from which this process emerged and became feasible. According to Carr,

> Although cyclical, for analytical purposes, the process of empowerment can be thought to have an origin: a "position". It is widely assumed that the point of departure in the empowerment process is a position of human misery, whether it is termed powerlessness, oppression, or deprivation. Both theorists of empowerment and feminists have sought to explicate this starting position by considering socioeconomic factors, on one hand, and psychological factors, on the other hand. (13)

In this respect, regardless of the Irish context at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is possible to address two different forms of women's oppression: objective factors, such as poverty (as well as all its social consequences) and the harsh circumstances triggered by the armed conflicts which occurred in the period, and subjective ones, such as the ideological barriers created by patriarchalism and nationalism.

With regard to the objective factors, for instance, housing conditions were extremely precarious, as the poorest inner-city families often lived their entire lives in a single-room house. The tenements were austere places, with the state of conservation of the properties so shockingly primitive that they were often described as "slums". A third of the city's population had to endure such circumstances during the first half of the twentieth century.

Poor Irish women thus had a life of unceasing pressure for they lived in a realm of deteriorating housing, extreme poverty, a drastically low rate of unemployment, very low wages, families with many children with little or no health and nutrition. Moreover, the National Archives of Ireland indicate the slums were not limited to the back streets or to impoverished ghettos, but they also extended to a more central area:

> The decay of Dublin was epitomised by Henrietta Street, which had once been home to generations of lawyers, but was, by 1911, overflowing with poverty. An astonishing 835 people lived in 15 houses. At number 10 Henrietta Street, the Sisters of Charity ran a laundry with more than 50 single women inside. The other houses on the street were filled with families. For example, there were members of nineteen different families living in Number 7. Among the 104 people who shared the house were charwomen, domestic servants, labourers, porters, messengers, painters, carpenters, pensioners, a postman, a tailor, and a whole class of schoolchildren. Out the back were a stable and a piggery.
> (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/exhibition/dublin/poverty_health.html Accessed on 15 Mar 2019)

As described by RTÉ, Ireland's national broadcaster, in its project, "The Century Ireland 1913-1923", in 1913 most proprietors of tenement houses, previously owned by the rich of Dublin, did not care about sanitation and conditions, they were only worried about making profit. If they had formerly housed a single rich family, in the 1920s it was common

to see one or more families in each room. As they were built before modern sanitation, there was no running water, so the woman of the house had to carry it in from the street, often going up four or five flights of stairs, and then returning again with the dirty water. There were not toilet facilities within the house. There was usually just a single toilet in the back yard for the whole house. Besides the structural adversities, it was an environment of homeless and drunk people, which made it unpleasant for the families living there, where it was possible to find a family of eight or ten sleeping, eating and living in one room, usually sharing one or two beds between them. The rooms were cold as there was no heating, and the conditions made it difficult to cook, meaning families usually consumed a wholly inadequate diet.

Sean O'Casey himself described the troubled life in the tenements:

> You get used to hunger, and a good many other things. If you live in a tenement you get used to almost anything – the chap from upstairs coming in drunk and calling you every name under the sun and offering to cut your throat, then round next morning to apologise; or the furniture and everything in the room upstairs being flung out of the window; or boiling your food in an empty sardine tin. But you can be further down and out than a tenement. I've slept in doss-houses where the beds are six deep one above the other, and a ladder to reach them. (qtd. in Stewart 27)

It was a scenario that persisted for a long period. A 1916 census

> revealed that there were 800,000 living in overcrowded conditions, while the infant mortality rate in the working-class north of Dublin city was 25.6 per 1,000 compared to 7.7 among the middle classes. Tuberculosis was still causing in the region 4,500 deaths per year. (Ferriter 319)

The tenements seemed to be a world apart from the rest of Dublin. To illustrate the difference between the circumstances lived by a poor woman and a middle-class one, Tony Gregory, the Teachta Dála[17] for the Dublin Central constituency from 1982 to 2009, stated about his own mother:

> My mother was an inner-city mother. The suburban middle-class (mothers)… they were *different worlds*! The inner-city mother *accepted* her lot. She saved, she spent absolutely *nothing* on herself, having to *slave* basically. She had different life expectations, different hopes. My whole political life has been dominated by the belief that the deprivation and social inequality which my mother struggled against all her life must be eliminated. (qtd. in Kearns 2)

The social disparity between Dublin strata existed throughout most of the twentieth century. There were basically two distinct realities, the inner-city life of social and economic struggle and the prosperous world of the suburban areas. "Astonishingly different life

[17] A member of the Irish parliament. The official translation of the term is "Deputy to the Dáil". A more literal translation is "Assembly Delegate".

experiences – only a few miles apart" (Kearns 6). Ferriter raised the tragic aspect of this disparity stating that this disproportion between classes meant "life for the few and death for the many" (319). In the middle of all this, the prospect of finding a job to keep the family was low, both for men and women. The miserable life of the tenements was also due to unemployment. When there was work, it was poorly paid, as in the example of a tailor in Dublin and the miserable diet of dry bread and tea that his family lived on. Charles Cameron, a Corporation medical officer remembered: "it may appear strange that a tradesman could earn only 10 shillings per week; but such is often the case owing to irregular employment and the poor payment for making the cheaper kind of clothes" (McManus 17). When husbands contributed by working outside the home, they would normally leave all domestic duties and even the parental burden squarely on the women's shoulders, as David McKeon remembers about his father, "He'd go to work, finish his work, have his few pints, come in and have his meal, and go to bed. He left the responsibilities to my mother" (qtd in. Kearns 32). This was very common among working men. In fact, most of them had grown up in a context where the mother was the dominant figure, so they perceived it as natural when their wives took the responsibility for everything in the family's maintenance.

The leading role of women extended beyond the familiar and domestic context. They also had to take control of external issues, such as that of family housing itself. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the majority of Dublin's residents lived in rented accommodation. Thus, landlords held great power in the Dublin tenements, and dealing with their demands was an incessant concern. Rent increases and the fear of eviction were quotidian matters. However,

> Husbands did not deal with landlords. That was the wife's duty. Tradition. Women were just "better at it", men contended. Husbands didn't like having to engage in "official" conversations with "authorities" of any ilk, especially those with a ledger in hand. In truth, most mothers were better suited to cope with – and, if need be, confront - the landlord or his collector… more adept than a clumsy-tongued man when it came to negotiating with a landlord short on payment and patience. They were more savvy at deciphering human character and shooting a brusque temperament…. They possessed the "touch". (Kearns 65)

To be dispossessed was a real nightmare for a mother. As they were in charge of dealing with the landlords, it was very often a woman's duty to handle the threat of eviction. There are many accounts of women confronting bailiffs, struggling to repel them and save the roof over their heads. They openly refused to follow their orders, challenging the employment of physical manoeuvres. They were required to be physically strong and mentally determined:

> If not actually tossed out, they were escorted out roughly or carried out screaming. Or dragged, kicking furiously. Hauled out as indelicately as their simple belongings.
> But sometimes a defiant mother could singularly succeed in deterring evictors from ejecting her own family or that of a neighbor. By sheer force of fury and determination, take on a bunch of thugs and emerge victorious.
> Many older Dubliners can remember no wilder street spectacle than womenfolk in pitched battle against a posse of evictors…. Always mothers of large families themselves, they were accustomed to territorial disputes, physical tussling and altercations with authorities…. There was simply no tactful way to deal with an on-coming 24-stone Mammy with glowering eyes and harmful intent. The best judgment was to stand aside in the path of a locomotive.
> [A]ctual hand-to-hand combat between emerged mothers and surprised henchmen. Women took up strategic positions at windows and on roofs to dispense a hailstorm of bricks, coal, glass bottles and the like on the men below. (77-78)

It can thus be seen that a women's defence of her home often acquired a larger dimension since a woman's eviction could become a collective question when neighbours (especially female ones) became involved in such a "personal problem". According to Kieffer, the personal level of empowerment is the experience of gaining increasing control and influence in daily life and community participation. In a similar vein, Calvès indicates that empowerment begins with the mobilisation of civil society around local issues, before gaining enlarged grounds. To illustrate, according to Paddy Hughes, a former resident of Coleraine Street,

> There was a woman going to be evicted and the woman was crying. And she was told (by neighbouring mothers), 'you remain where you are!" And those people attacked the city sheriff and the posse. Mostly women attacked them…. The women attacked those big, old policemen. They run out of the street. We won the battle that day, I remember distinctly. (qtd. in Kearns 79).

The accounts of such external problems are further evidence that the lives of the women residents in Dublin's tenement houses was one of subsistence and resistance. Taking care of a family required a lot of strength and the ability to exercise control over external and psychological obstacles. Women were the heroines of the community. Their maternal and domestic duties consumed every waking minute of their day, as Hughes remembers:

> Oh, she had very much hardship. Every day was the same. Up at six in the morning, washing big vats, getting food ready. Heart! *All* the mothers at that time, their pride and joy was their family. They must have been made of iron. She was *exhausted* at the end of the night. Surviving. *Trying* to survive! (qtd. in Kearns 27)

It was a demanding life, frequently without the support of any other family member. They could not devote time to themselves and had no room for any leisure activity. As if that

were not enough, being a mother invariably demanded resolving any urgent family question. They were considered problem solvers and they were expected to cope with any kind of family crisis. As Catherine Clarke recalls, “No matter what crisis happened in the family, my Ma would just take control and sort it out. She’s a safety net” (qtd. in Kearns 30).

Life was tougher for those married women who could not count on their husbands’ wages. “[U]nemployment was endemic, the husband was not working. (But) he did not respond to that by taking on responsibilities in the home. So, the mother had to take on so many different roles for her family to survive” (Kearns 31). When there was no work for the husbands, the mothers got the “extra gift” of being the main household income. They had to work in jobs men refused to do. For example, Bill Cullen cites the case of his own mother who worked daily at street vending to feed her children, while his father was periodically unemployed:

> The Ma had her hands full trying to survive with the Da unemployed. She sold fruit in Henry Street. (But) the Da was too proud to be seen down helping… that would have shown publicly that he couldn’t support his family. The men kept far away from their wives selling. (qtd. in Kearns 47)

Since men were unwilling to display their poverty, women had to take on the upper status of providing for the maintenance of the members of the family. As reported by the National Archives of Ireland:

> Women tried to make money as dealers selling fish (Mary McCarthy at Gloucester Place), flowers (Frances McQuillan at Coombe Cottages), old clothes, pigs, fruit (Mary Jane Swords at Little Strand St.) and much more, on the side of the streets. Women worked at home, or with other women, to make various items such as bags, hats, vests and dresses, and worked in laundries and parlours (the Hoey family at Charleville Cottages). Some worked in factories as weavers of wire (Mary Hynes at Kean's Court), and in the fields which still lay in parts of the city. Some were forced to turn to prostitution on the streets or in brothels, and they, too, ended up in Mountjoy Prison. (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/exhibition/dublin/poverty_health.html Accessed 15 Mar. 2019).

Thus, women projected an image of being strong and resourceful before their family and before their community.

Kearns argues that being unemployed could be “emotionally debilitating and damaging to self-esteem and confidence” (31). But, if that were the case for men, was it not even more stressful and exhausting (both mentally and physically) for a woman who, faced with her husband’s unemployment, had to carry an extra burden? One might have expected that, being jobless, men would spend their free time assisting with domestic and parental

duties; however, it is shown that they spent little time at home. As Kearns suggests, "Being 'boxed-in' was a terrible bore. It didn't suit their nature to be house-bound", since they were considered "gregarious, social creatures meant to roam free…. So they rambled around town… chatting, smoking, jesting…. When men had a few bob in their pockets, they shuffled in and out of their local bookies and pubs. Anywhere was preferable to being confined at home with wife and bawling kids" (32). No one dared to contest such conduct. It seemed that they had the right to freedom from domesticity on account of their "premium" social role. It was a predetermined image strictly associated with men. "It was a deal of freedom and socialization taken for granted. Revered tradition. Beyond challenge" (32). For those fortunate enough to have a job, pubs were considered a place to socialise, men preferred to spend their non-working time for relaxation. "To get out, to get into the pub, it was a different world – escapism. It was a man's world. A form of escape… (from) a nagging wife and lot of children around crying. Much better being in the pub" (32). For those who were jobless it worked as a relief for despair and dismay. On the other hand, for every married woman it meant more difficulties. While their husbands had this form of escapism taken for granted, women had no form of relief. Men could escape from the harshness of living in the middle of an awkward reality, but women confronted and dealt with all the burdens of it, which included the domestic, maternal, educational and financial aspects of family's life. They also needed relief and entertainment, but they sacrificed their personal necessities in order to provide at least a minimal support for their families.

In addition, the 1920s were an arduous period for the Irish population given that they had to face the process of reconstruction which followed the aftermath of the Irish revolution and Independence. Prior to this the British Empire had ruled Ireland for about seven hundred years. Being subsumed in English culture for so long had provided Irish people with the desire for freedom. Thus, following the Revival Movement[18] and the First World War, three armed conflicts from 1916 to 1922 changed the nature of the relation between England and Ireland once and for all, and, despite serving to free Irish people from the restraints of English colonialism, it was also a period of terror because of the high cost of human lives. These events are of particular interest for they provided the historical background for the O'Casey plays analysed in the present study.

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[18] A literary and political movement which helped to inspire a new generation who believed Ireland could flourish as an authentic nation and that an independent country would emerge through a nationalist revolution.

The first event was the insurrection of 1916, also known as The Easter Rising,[19] which ended as abruptly as it began. Ireland, an integral part of and dominated by the British crown, was proclaimed an independent republic by the Irish who described themselves as provisional leaders of the new government. It started on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, when approximately, 1,600 Irishmen, led and organised by Patrick Pearse, Tom Clarke, Séan MacDiarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, Éamonn Ceannt, James Connolly and Joseph Plunkett, seized strategic points of Dublin city and from the GPO (General Post Office) they read the proclamation which announced the establishment of "The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic for the People of Ireland". After a weeklong battle against the British forces, the group surrendered, leaving Dubliners in a city in ruins. Although it did not achieve its main objective at the time, due to the rapid response from the British, the insurrection was a fundamental event, which fomented and gave strength to the process of independence.

Three years after the Easter Rising, in 1919, under the leadership of Michael Collins, a war against the British forces began in Ireland. The Irish War of Independence was a bloody conflict basically between the IRA (Irish Republic Army), a radical and extremist (originally considered a clandestine) military group which gradually gained recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of most of the population, against all representations of the British state, such as the Royal Irish Constabulary and the notorious Black and Tans.[20] The Irish succeeded against British rule and achieved both separation from the United Kingdom and national independence. In 1921, "quite suddenly and almost unbelievably", the war was over, "… a truce was signed between all the Crown forces and the IRA. Not long before, *The Irish Times* had written: 'All Ireland streams with blood'" (Kee 189). Officially an independent nation now, Ireland was still not free from the problems it had previously faced as a colony. Poverty, hunger and housing continued to be the everyday issues of Irish people. Sean O'Casey was one of the writers most conscious of this sad reality and insisted that Independence had made no difference to ordinary people living below the poverty line, and that misery was far from being removed from Irish society. For him, it was not "a question of English or Irish culture with the inanimate patsies of the tenements but a question of life for

[19] In my M. A. dissertation, *Imaginary Irishness: The Feminine in Dramatisations of The Easter Rising in Sean O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars and Tom Murphy's The Patriot Game*, I present a detailed overview of the Easter Rising and its significance for the Irish process of independence.

[20] The Black and Tans were British ex-servicemen recruited and sent to Ireland in 1920, to form a police reserve to augment the troops already in Ireland. "They were not a special force, being there simply to swell the ranks of the RIC (Royal Irish Constabulary), but their nationality and the fact they had often been attracted to the job simply by the money, made them a distinctive element within it. There were eventually to be about 7,000 of them altogether" (KEE, 1982, p. 182).

the few and death for the many. Irish-speaking or English-speaking, they are all what they are: convalescent homes of plague, pestilence or death" (O'Casey, *The Letters*, 1310).

In 1922, in a context of internal division between the new Irish Free State and the anti-treaty IRA,[21] the Civil War took place. Just a few months after the War of Independence, Irish comrades who had fought against the British army for the freedom of Ireland were now at war with each other due to their different convictions. "The bitter Civil War was to prove that the Irish were no more blessed or noble than their counterparts in many of the other divided parts of Europe" (Ferriter 191). Over time, violence was disseminated and there was a spread of individual killings, destruction of property, burning of houses, blowing up of bridges and bank robberies.

The events of these turbulent years reverberated throughout Dublin and affected every social level. According to Ferriter, "For those intimidated, boycotted, ridiculed or forced out, there seemed little room for generosity in the strict definition of what constituted the 'Irish nation'" (191). It was a thorny moment for the people of the entire country. There were many political divisions. The author adds: "During the years 1912 to 1918, it seemed like a giant vacuum existed in Ireland, into which a variety of organisations and movements were being sucked, often with conflicting aims, personalities and visions of the future" (110). Besides all the damage resulting from military action in this inter-war period, still there were also secret societies which planned and rendered their own justice. For this reason, a high rate of violence occurred through all the country.

Historians recount this dramatic period of Irish history as a narrative focused on the achievements and deeds of important male figures. Records concerning women in general have received insufficient attention from the authors (Kee, Coogan, O'Farrel, Kostick and Collins, Thompson), with little room given to accounts of leading female characters. In fact, it is difficult to discover information about all the parties involved in these conflicts, and still more complicated to learn about the "battle" which occurred on the streets of Dublin and impacted directly upon those who are often excluded from these historical records, the ordinary people. When it comes specifically to the involvement of common, poor women in this period of hostilities, there is a significant gap that has proven to be extremely challenging to fill. Reclaiming the role of these female subjects who lived under the appalling conditions of inner-city Dublin during the revolution period has proved to be an almost impossible task.

[21] Even though after the War of Independence the IRA was in favour of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and was part of the new Free State, a number of participants did not agree with the terms and became opposed to it. As a consequence, this parcel of members, who became known as Irregulars, deserted the new government and started the Civil War.

Researchers are obliged to take a close look at the narratives that speak about the situation of women in general, or to make use of accounts about women from other parts of Ireland but who endured similarly oppressive conditions, such as the city of Cork, which was profoundly affected by the War of Independence and the Civil War. Although few in number, the documentation and texts reveal how ordinary women were susceptible to innumerable interferences. The intersection of their stark reality with the factors emerging from the revolutionary ideals, such as strong attachment to national ideals, unleashed female engagement in unexpected areas and sudden ways. For example, assessments of the Civil War show that women in general were not confined exclusively to a passive role. Sean O'Faoláin recalls, "The women I met were particularly disturbing – driven by that unfeminine animus… they were… power-hungry, temperamental but with few warm emotions, ruthless, abstract, in discussion and full of terrifying sentimentality" (169). Irish writer P. S. O'Hegarty also remembers how the women he saw during the war eliminated every "normal" feeling from themselves: "[I]intolerance, swagger, hardness, unwomanliness captured by women and turned them into unlovely destruction-minded arid begetters of violence" (52). Although these passages seem to present female engagement in the struggle for independence as something of an embarrassment, they demonstrate that Irish women were politicised and were emotionally and ideologically involved in Ireland's cause. O'Farrel relates a situation of conflict during the Easter Rising saying that there were "six Cumann na mBan women in the garrison, according to the leader of the group" and that "everyone of them was prepared to give her life" (36). As another example, recalling the events before being arrested and taken to Richmond Barracks,[22] Rose McNamara stated: "The men gave each of us their small arms to do as we liked with, thinking we were going to go home, but we were not going to leave the men we were with all the week to their fate; we decided to go along with them and be with them to the end, whatever our fate might be" (qtd. in McGarry 259-60). This deep attachment "beyond what was expected" was something that conferred visibility upon women during the revolutionary years. But, first and foremost, it shows that they were not weak, passive housewives who should be placed in a bell jar as delicate objects requiring protection. In fact, some prominent male figures involved in the conflicts encouraged female engagement in the cause of Ireland and the effective participation of some women in areas predominantly occupied by men. During the Rising of 1916, for instance, "In one room men and girls were methodically filling the last of the bombs, working up to the

[22] The Richmond Barracks were a British Army barracks in Inchicore, in Dublin, to which, after the surrender, seventy-seven women were arrested along with their male colleagues.

last minute to increase the supply munitions" (Taillon 37-8). Countess Markievicz remembered that she had preferred to serve in the Citizen Army because the group appeared not to have a gender-biased view of female participation in general and because women were allowed to exercise military skills:

> When Connolly began to organize the Irish Citizen Army he brought me along treating me, as he got to know me, as a comrade, giving me any work that I could do and quite ignoring the conventional attitude towards the work of women. This was his attitude towards women in general; we were never, in his mind, classed for work as a sex, but taken individually and considered, just as every man considers men, and then allotted any work we could do. (qtd. in Kostick and Collins 76-77)

Even though estimates vary from 100 to 200 as to the exact number of women who were directly involved in the Rising, those who had the chance to show off their skills did not restrict themselves to a supporting role in the different armed conflicts which happened in that period. For example, in the article "Women's role in War of Independence revealed", Niall Murray talks about the discovery of first-hand accounts of rural Cork[23] women in the War of Independence which reveal that "the role of women in the war was supportive and maybe not as glamorous, but in many ways it was as dangerous as at the front lines… a demanding work requiring the utmost intelligence, resourcefulness and courage". Amongst the different activities that women performed, "their duties included hiding and moving arms, providing safe houses, fundraising, carrying dispatches, giving medical aid, procuring food and supplies, keeping contact with prisoners, and monitoring enemy movements" (N. Murray). The documentation contains letters, formal documents, photographs and other materials from Molly Cunningham, who was a Cork leader of Cumann na mBan. One set of documents from the 1930s "shows Ms Cunningham's application for a military service pension for her role in the troubled period", and it also describes how she worked "carrying dispatches, arranging for the recovery of bodies, moving arms, searching other women, and moving around the area in disguise" (N. Murray).

It is now generally acknowledged that women in groups or as individuals played a vital role in the Irish revolutionary movement, fighting side by side with their male counterparts. Nonetheless, this combat experience was not common. Éamon de Valera, for

[23] No change of government could mask the significant social and economic challenges which faced the whole country. This was as true for Cork as it was for any other county in Ireland. The greatest indicator of this was the impact of economic stagnation on the population of the county. Indeed, the story of Cork in the first decade of the twentieth century is a story of Irish emigration as a response to the difficult conditions which laid waste to the country. It was from the port of Queenstown (renamed Cobh in 1922) in Cork that many Irish emigrants left for the United States. A staggering number of these people were from the county of Cork. Between the end of the Great Famine of the 1840s and the 1911 census around 550,000 Cork people emigrated in search of better conditions of living. http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/exhibition/cork/main.html

example, who later became Ireland's president, refused to allow women into his garrison. The vast majority of the women who fought in the rising were relegated to subsidiary activities. Brigid Lyons, a medical student at the time, who would later become the first woman to serve in the Irish army after Independence, recalled that she "spent a lot of time making tea and sandwiches" at her post in the Four Courts – Ireland's main court building (qtd. in White). Although men appreciated women's involvement during the Rising, they praised them mostly for the fact that they helped to add conveniences and homely service to guarantee the welfare of the garrisons. In his diary about the events of the Easter Rising, Seosamh de Brún, a rebel from the Irish Volunteers, wrote about his gratitude for women's contribution during his mission at the Jacob's: "Provisioning here is perfect – tons of flour, sugar, & biscuits and those girls working so hard.... Only in great moments like those does one get a true glimpse of Womanhood, patient self-sacrificing & cheerfully brave" (qtd. in O'Farrel 35-36). Or as Taillon writes, "But there was no repining. They kissed and shook hands, the women handling parcels and boxes of cigarettes" (37-38). Most women worked in the background as seemingly unsuspicious messengers and as loaders.

Concerning working-class women, the situation is even more complicated. They are certainly not remembered like the few who became directly involved in the conflicts; consequently their names are not recalled in the historical narratives. If on the one hand, for a few prominent women, the revolutionary period brought a certain degree of visibility, on the other, it meant a worsening of living conditions for the poor. "For those working-class families, dependent on their breadwinners and on their weekly wage, this matter of mobilization for revolt was a wrenching part of their hold on life" (Taillon 37-38). As Taillon reminds us, while many ordinary Irishmen left home to engage in the national cause, saying goodbye to their wives and young children and trudging off straight into battle, their wives then became responsible for their whole family income. In addition to this financial burden, they were still facing scenes of violence on the streets, gunfights, and risking their lives wherever they went. The fatalities of the conflicts were mainly civilians, and many were female. Records show that the youngest fatality of the Rising was a 22-month-old girl, Christina Caffrey, who was shot in her mother's arms at the door of her house on Church Street (Hayes).

As the Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War are recorded in history as being male-gendered, it is difficult to discover what really happened to ordinary women who faced such adversity. "Why do we focus on the bombing of O'Connell St and fail to pan out to the kitchens of Dublin where women daily faced struggles as great as those which faced

the insurgents: desperately scraping together enough food for desperately loved children as pregnancy followed pregnancy?" (White). One thing is certain: the "bullet holes" from those armed conflicts provided stark scars in the lives of those women. If they already lived frugally before, the deplorable circumstances which emerged during these events only made their poverty and misery worse. All the same, they challenged the difficulties in different ways, either by taking the lead in areas generally destined to men in the domestic realm, or by struggling to survive. Thus, looking at a more integrated framework and taking into account the large mass of neglected women, the female heroes of Irish revolutionary period are also the "poor women who defeated forces much mightier than those of the Crown — hunger, pestilence, poverty — to get their families" together (White).

Despite the multiple forms in which this large female contingent played such a major role and took charge of so many tough tasks in this turbulent scenario, the principle of male superiority was deeply entrenched culturally. Catholic and patriarchal principles, which fitted the nationalistic purposes like a glove, were not questioned by the people of Ireland. The spread of a conservative wave in the first decades of the twentieth century boosted the notion of separate spheres and condemned women to an unjustly restricted place in society, one that had little if any correlation to the way they lived their lives (Luddy 3). As a consequence, the "only roles for women were as wives and mothers… with very limited rights" (Beale 5). In this manner, patriarchalism, nationalist and religion were impregnable constraints. The 1920s Irish context of the tenement houses can be depicted in terms of theory and practice. Theoretically, as in any patriarchal society, men were the main authority, the decision- makers, and held responsibility for providing for their family's needs. In practice, however, women "were *everything* – mother, father, counsellor, doctor… fathers seemed invisible"; in fact, "it was "*naturally expected* for mothers to be the primary caretaker, cope with problems, make decisions, handle crises" (Kearns 7). It was a very evident role reversal: the role of women was the result of men's "non-role", which seems also to have a correlation with the socio-economic aspect because:

> In suburban Dublin… decisions are made, not uniquely by the mother, but by both parents in consultation. In the inner-city, women play a dominant role in a matriarchal society, working to keep the family together. Men… for many reasons have failed to play an important part in the family and community. (Lemass 30)

While, on the one hand, the majority of important questions were left to women, without any effective male participation, on the other, they were excluded from having a voice and influence over their personal interests and rights. In fact, female existence was

sharply framed by male standpoints. Marriage, for instance, especially for poor women, could represent a two-edged sword. While women from a higher class could delay the time for getting married and had different prospects, such as educational opportunities, career choices and even the possibility of emigration, for the poorer, getting married could represent an escape from utter destitution. It was often a means of palliating financial difficulties and family problems, as the emotional turmoil provoked by poverty.

Apart from being a financial and emotional salvation, marriage brought the inevitability of pregnancy. For lower-class women, who were generally unhealthy, pregnancy was a painful and risky experience. Particularly, for a woman without a husband, an unwanted pregnancy was an alarming and disastrous incident, which meant she was prone to poverty, isolation and shame. Brian Friel illustrated this situation in his play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), depicting the story of Michael, who recounts his memories of the summer of 1936 in Ballybeg, narrating the pitiful and miserable conditions faced by his mother and his four aunts. The core story is about the arrival of the first radio in the house of the Mundy sisters in 1936, which has an impact on both the external and psychic environment of the Mundy sisters. Although the play revolves around the behavioral changes that accompanied the late arrival of machines in rural Ireland, the play's subnarrative about Michael's mother, Chris, reveals the difficulties a single mother had to deal with in the Ireland of that time. She has no source of income and Michael's father, Gerry Evans, never asks how she manages to feed and maintain their son. Chris is completely dependent on the very little money from her employed sisters. She also has to handle the pressure of the cultural and moralistic conventions towards a single mother even from within their closest family environment:

> CHRIS. Danny Bradley is a scut, Rose.
>
> ROSE. I never said it was Danny Bradley!
>
> CHRIS. He's a married man with three young children.
>
> ROSE. And that's just where you're wrong, missy – so There! (To AGNES.) She left him six months ago, Aggie, and went to England.
>
> MAGGIE. Rose, love, we just want –
>
> ROSE. (To CHRIS.) And who are you to talk, Christina Mundy! Don't you dare lecture me!
>
> MAGGIE. Everybody in the town knows that Danny Bradley is –
>
> ROSE. (To MAGGIE.) And you're jealous, too! (6)

On account of her 'former crime', Chris seems to be marked forever as someone who does not deserve people's trust, as we can see from Rose's lines when Cristina tries to advise her youngest sister. As if that were not enough, Michael's father does not seem to worry about Chris's delicate situation, since he sees the mother as being fully responsible for the child. Stories like this one were all too common in real life because, inserted in the miserable and marginalised context of the tenements, many young women entered married life naïve and unprepared.

The church, the government, the schools and even their own families failed to prepare these lower-income women about any sexual matter. On the contrary, these institutions seemed to cast these young girls against their human nature. In the end, sex was a subject usually left to strangers or to the "streets".

> A custom of ignorance creating a circle of ignorance, generation after generation. Victims all. Detecting that their mother was uneasy with the subject, girls often refrained from seeking answers. Vital questions, unasked, or unanswered. Rather, let nature unfold naturally. Lack of sexual knowledge bred not only anxiety in maturing girls, but fears. (Kearns 99)

Any concern about the subject had nothing to do with the well-being of women and girls. The Catholic church, for instance, supported the opinion that sex education should be ignored in school for it could result in harmful effects (Sawyer 118). In face of such awkward silence from their families, young women were obliged to believe in divine teachings. As Grainne Foy remembers,

> We were taught nothing about sex. We were taught how you should be married before you even contemplate sex. Never actually told how you would become pregnant. The only reference to sexuality would be men's sexuality… how you were to fend that off… when they'd reach fourteen… 'get away from me'. Protect your body until such a time when it was right and proper to have children. *Actual sexual feelings* that a woman would enjoy wasn't even touched on. (qtd. in Kearns 102)

When they talked about the subject of sex, it was the moral and immoral aspects of it, rather than any practical information or the feelings involved in a loving relationship. Sermons were full of tales of "fallen women" whose goal was more to frighten girls than to inform or teach anything. As a consequence, the general idea was that the woman was the one who had to be "strong", dispelling impure thoughts, remaining chaste. In other words, responsibility for preserving virginity was that of the woman alone. The Church imposed the burden of being obedient and chaste as a female prescription:

> Virginity was the ideal. For females. A condition – or blessed state – of purity. Same as the Blessed Virgin. Sexual thoughts or contact could tarnish a girl's chasteness. But lost virginity despoiled her morality and character. A purity forever lost, beyond

> redemption. She was less worthy in the eyes of God, less desirable in the eyes of man. Used goods! There was no mistaking the lesson – when it came to marriage, Dublin lads wanted a "nice" girl. (Kearns 103)

Once married, the woman continued to live in subjugation. The husband was the sole authority about the couple's sexual intimacy. Refusing sexual intercourse meant insubordination in bed, an unthinkable thing.

The virginal status was another topic of moral judgment for married women, as Sarah Hartney declared, "There was a thing when you got married, the intimate part of married life, like there was supposed to be a maidenhead – and if that wasn't burst and the blood wasn't on the sheet next day, well, he'd always give you the life of a dog" (qtd. in Kearns 111). This whole oppressive idea was reinforced by the words of the Church:

> That (sex) as entertainment for men – no television back then. And you had to. The priest, he'd say, 'you're married and you have to suit your husband. That's it!' Oh that's what you married a man for. That was a load of crap now, wasn't it! And then men had no responsibility. He pulled up his trousers and off he went. (111)

The paradox was that women had to live as a man's possession in respect to sexual issues but later, it was the woman (assuming the role of a mother) who shouldered the responsibilities for child-rearing and managing financial problems.

In fact, religion played a crucial role in the lives of Irish women. It defined and limited almost every aspect of female status. The discourse used by the church was one that touched on points that not only defined social responsibilities and duties but also interfered in notions concerning female nature and identity. Not only did religion determine their social and civic function, but also their expected and ideal essence. The prevailing view about women among clerics was well described in a lecture delivered in Trinity Church in Dublin in 1856 by the Reverend John Gregg:

> [T]oday; I do not address mothers and daughters… I do not address wives or young women, as such; all these have their own peculiar responsibilities and duties: my lecture is intended for *women*. There are two points especially to which I wish to direct the attention of you, women. There are two things which you ought to desire – which is your duty to desire – which is your interest to desire, and which it is for the good of society – for the everlasting benefit of yourselves and others – that you should desire, and these are, *excellence* and *usefulness*. Excellence has reference to yourselves – usefulness to others. Excellence has reference to your character, and is *internal*; and usefulness has reference to your conduct, and is *external*. There is a great difference between desiring excellence, and desiring to *excel*. I do not ask you to excel… but I do ask you to think, to strive, to pray that you maintain your excellence. A desire to excel often proceeds from pride or vanity, but the desire of excellence always proceeds from virtue and grace. When we desire to excel, we are apt to envy those whom we do not surpass, and to be jealous of their superiority; and we are

> likely to use means to bring them down to our own level, when we cannot reach to their height…. God has adapted our sex to peculiar duties to which we are especially called, and for which you are not so well fitted; and He has adapted your sex to the peculiar duties to which you are called…. Society does best when each sex performs the duties for which it is especially ordained…. [Y]et woman is in a lower position far than God originally assigned her, and in a position far inferior to that to which, in later times, Christianity has raised her…. It is the Christianity of the Bible that has given you your proper elevation…. You, my friends, are more indebted to the religion of the Gospel than even we men are. You should feel almost a deeper interest in it than men. It has done more for you in this world than for them, and as much for you with respect to the world to come. (qtd. in Luddy 13-14)

This model of excellence and usefulness was created, expected and supported by influential people, such as moralists, clerics, philosophers and writers, and it continued to prevail throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Irish woman who did not fit in with the proper behavioural pattern was labeled disrespectful and had to live confined to asylums, refuges or workhouses.[24] Living and expressing themselves 'unusually' could mean a traumatic and dreadful subsequent experience. The way a woman should behave in society was generally seen as one of submission, passivity; as a kind, patient, moral, spiritual and perfect wife and mother, fully in agreement with her domestic duties towards her husband and children, a role which was considered suitable for her because of her physical and mental skills. When a woman extended her participation beyond this internal border, it was because she was engaged in charity, which was nothing more than the same domestic activities, but in a broader context. Moreover, she should be extremely grateful to the church for the possibility of reaching a higher level when performing her obligations. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, there was a flourishing of a prescriptive literature relating to how women should behave and, even though it was geared towards the better-off members of society; poorer women were also expected to acquire all those "natural" virtues which were deemed fitting to women.

The "natural" place of women represented a deadlock for every woman. "Their world was very small. They were confined … they were trapped, no sort of breaking out of it. No airs, no notions of upward mobility" (Kearns 6). A woman could never complain about her life. If she was married to a cruel husband, for example, there was no way to escape, she would have to accept her bad luck. Cathleen O'Neill remembers that, if ever a woman articulated in confession that she had been beaten, she would be told that she had to go back home because her place was there with her husband. "'Go back to your husband!' So that's

[24] Workhouses were places where, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, poor people without money or housing were obliged to work in exchange for food and shelter.

why they did what they did (stayed)…", they did not have any other place to go. (qtd. in Kearns 115). Since divorce and separation were inconceivable, for most poor women, living with their husbands could mean a life sentence because setting up two separate roofs were not a feasible possibility. Undoubtedly,

> sour marriages and bad husbands were to be found in all classes and areas of Ireland. In larger, multi-room homes of the suburbs it was easier for discordant couples to find separate, "safe" space to lessen contact and tension. But in typically small city-centre flats, husband and wife were staring in each other's face whichever way they turned. Literally bumping into one another. It could feel like a cell. Especially if the husband was domineering or threatening. Actual abuse could take different forms: verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual. (Kearns 116-7)

Whatever the problem was (verbal/physical violence or drunkenness), leaving their husbands was not an option. If a woman did leave her home there would be no refuge with her family, nor with any institution. Based on religious convictions, most women had the sense of being predestined to this "mission" by heavenly order and that everything in life was the "will of God". Doing so, they could not feel resentful because, in fact, the established female status in 1920s Dublin determined that women were inferior individuals. "Oh, sure, the mothers were slaves – it was part of the *culture* at that time" (Kearns 5).

The roles of mother and family caretaker were indisputably the most fulfilling for women. It was precisely this strong affective tie related to the figure of the mother which placed women in a subordinate position to men, since these responsibilities automatically removed them from the political and public world. In addition to being strongly influenced by religious discourse and socioeconomic factors, placing women exclusively in the domestic realm was also a political question, since the creation of the ideal national female stereotype was a constituent strategy of the New Irish State. In my MA dissertation I argued that,

> Irish political ideology operated as a form of constraint on the individual, constructing a way of thinking about society, preventing individuals from considering alternative structures, and thus limiting their thought. In the case of Irish women, they were supposed to be domestic, passive and sacrificial, even though some of them participated actively in military activities, unsettling the idea of the apparent patriarchy as an unconquerable monolith which was able to define woman's identity as nothing more than the product of male power and privilege. (Parra 40)

In the Irish political ideology prevailing at the beginning of the twentieth century, the identity of the Irish woman was purposely located in the submissive state. Most women probably had no notion of their limited circumstances since anticolonial and nationalistic precepts also intruded into the domestic sphere of the Dublin slums, transforming it into a politicised locus,

denying women the right of their nature, circumscribing their space and inhibiting them from being who they really were.

The Irish female subject suffered in various ways. About this plural form of oppression, in my MA dissertation, I concluded that,

> The connection presented between nationalism and the female image is relevant in the way that, while feminist ideology is obstructed by the, almost universal, patriarchal culture which promotes the conception of submissiveness for women, it is noticeable that the nationalist ideology, although an untiring promoter of equality and unity, also contributes, in practice, to accentuate the difference and the weakening of the feminine image. (Parra 14)

Daring to challenge the secondary, clearly inferior, status promoted by the Irish New State, the Church, and the patriarchal system would almost certainly result in an excruciating life.

2.3 From Hidden Personal Stories to a Powerful Collective Narrative

An analysis of the experiences of women with this particular Irish background is relevant because their stories make it possible to gain a greater understanding of the personal/psychological process. Taking into consideration all the objective and subjective forms of oppression, it becomes clear that, regardless of the individual experience of each of these women, they have been involuntarily represented as powerless. In this sense, Carr evokes an idea of multiple possible locations that correspond with the diversity of different people’s lived realities when she defines the position of powerlessness, oppression or deprivation as the point of departure in the empowerment process (14). Similarly, Gutierrez (“Beyond Coping”) proposes that stressful life events can catalyse the empowerment process, sparking identification with others, a perception of the social components of the individual’s problems, the development of political skills, and engagement in collective change. However, this state had nothing to do with personal wishes or any intellectual and psychological inferiority, and, indeed for some, it was a situation that could be overcome (Carr 14). The stories of those Irish women show that they were able to break away from the traditional roles prescribed for them and perform a leading role in a context strongly marked by the objective and subjective manifestations of oppressiveness. Such women outshone their male counterparts by not acting in accordance with the prevalent gender concepts of society which insisted that they were the “weaker sex”.

Irish women not only attained more than was expected of them, but also demonstrated no shame in being from a deprived stratum of society. On the contrary, as Kearns observes, one notable characteristic that defined these women was "an inherent pride. An indefatigable pride. A pride in themselves, family, ancestral roots, community. A pride that, along with faith, got them through life's hardest times" (81). They were aware of their hierarchic position in society, that they were from the working class and that they were marginalised, but, nonetheless, they still did not feel inferior. This is consistent with a particular stage of personal empowerment since, in accordance with Freire's suggestion, a critical consciousness is one of the operative elements in the process, leading to the discovery of the political roots of the individual's experience of powerlessness and oppression (*The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). Carr also explains that acquiring a critical consciousness of one's position and relationships in society is an active strategy because women can connect their experiences of oppression with those of other women and thereby see the political dimensions of their personal problems. It seems that it was from this process of discovery that the Irish women were able to move towards other possible positions. Their pride had nothing to do with arrogance nor with the idea that one is better than other people. It was a positive feeling, associated to a sense of *self-respect* and *human decency*, a satisfaction with personal characteristics and abilities that encouraged them to strive for equality, for humanism and to be respected for what they were. In this sense, the performance of those women also signals notions of interpretation and identity: the complementing elements of critical consciousness. This occurs at the moment when they can compare their everyday personal experiences with the political realities established by the patriarchy and can understand how different they are from their oppressors. For De Lauretis, this moment enables them to break free from patriarchal or other oppressive discourses. The next stage is to comprehend the existence of possibilities for personal and societal transformation (MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory*). This was what enabled mothers to transfer this feeling to their children. Therefore, even though they were able to offer so little in terms of material possessions and opportunities, they were able to teach them to be "proud". Much independence and self- reliance emerged through this sense of pride, which was essential to obtain the strength to continue fighting against injustice. The result obtained through the interpretative process inherent to consciousness-raising was the creation of provisional identities which, under the influence of historical circumstances, were driven by the agency of individuals struggling to "create themselves". The incorporation of this new identity may be verified as a strategy that conferred power on these individuals. Kearns names this phenomenon as the "invaluable gift"

which provides support, "self-confidence and integrity" (82). For these Irish women this "gift" served as an empowerment mechanism or strategy. Despite their social and economic limitations, they mastered qualities which made them capable of engagement with life. In the cases shown here, mobilisation emerged through the very dialectics of interpretation and identity-building that constitutes the raising of critical consciousness (Carr 18). Importantly, this served as a mechanism for both individual and collective objectives. Neighbours and community were regarded as an extended family. As May Mooney remembers, "people were more close then. Each would help one another… the women, very charitable" (qtd. in Kearns 84). Helping and accepting help were an organic order. There was a natural interdependency since "women really supported one another, even though they might be living in hard straits, supported them in hard times… in sickness, in times of birth, in times of death" (Kearns 85). The combination of arduous aspects of their experience and how they dealt with them culminated in the process which served as a catalyst for action for Irish women.

However, according to the historical or literary definition, these Irish women did not have the qualities of a hero, admired for great achievement. Kearns explains:

> Within this context, the city's mothers have been revered, not for great achievements on a public stage, but for their saintly and heroic nature in performing noble, selfless deeds daily and within the confines of their humble homes and local-community: caring for family before self, masking worries and pain to spare others, toiling without relief, enduring hardship without complaint, administering to the sick, suffering hard husbands. The natural propensity to give of themselves *everything* for others. A quiet courage and nobility of spirit and character. Heroines more akin to Mother Teresa than Joan of Arc. (10).

The heroism of such women does not consist of "epic feats of bravery, religiosity or political acts", like that of "Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale or Constance Markievicz. Quite to the contrary…. Theirs is not a heroism of grandiose deeds, for they are not revolutionaries, suffragettes or political activists" (Kearns 9). The power of these women is of a subtler type and lies in the fact that, "within four walls and in domestic privacy", they challenged adversity by gaining mastery over their affairs and succeeded in controlling it within their possibilities and contexts (Richter 269). Their attitudes and behaviour against harshness revealed their power. They were profoundly aware of their misfortunes and the oppressive circumstances under which they and their community existed. So, as matriarchs of their families and communities, they best understood their own individual needs, as well as those of their community, which paved the road to subsequent transformations. Individual empowerment thus leads on to a more collective level because a breakthrough in oppression

may be brought about by an individual or individuals who, living in an oppressive reality, can better understand the mechanisms to challenge the situation.

When theorists discuss the importance of a personal form of empowerment, concerned primarily with a psychological intent, they argue that it is an individualistic and limited perspective, in the sense that it can be boiled down to the idea of mastery and personal control in which the subject concern is only to do things for him/herself, excluding more global power struggles and disconnecting the individual from his/her socio-political context. In other words, notions of cooperation and the importance of caring about others are diminished. But this was not the case of the poor women who are being analysed in the present study, as recalled by local historian and author, Mairin Johnston: "they [women] just lived to provide for others – as individuals they weren't important" (qtd. in Kearns 9). Their individual acts were of little importance to themselves. In fact, the struggle of these women did little to legitimise or highlight individual emancipation but impacted on the family group. As Bernie Pierce remembers, "[T]hey never really had a life themselves. Food on the table and clothes for their children… didn't do anything for themselves. Their *whole life* was their children" (qtd. in Kearns 21). Oral testimony provides evidence of this vital empowered role, since "recalling their mother, descendants tend to dwell upon the sacrifices she made for them. How naturally she relinquished her own needs in love and care of those around her. How, in selfless devotion to tending to home and family, mothers actually neglected themselves", in order to contribute to a more collectivised purpose. (Kearns 34). It was the only way those women could empower themselves, by making their mastery benefit their family and their community. They did not strive to achieve extraordinary outcomes since, in their complicated context, the most important accomplishment was the survival of their family.

Examining the operation of empowerment in this specific Irish context may reveal varied forms of how women experienced the process, as well as varying outcomes. Nevertheless, recalling Rappaport's ideas, it is possible to see inconsistency and variation both in the process and in the end of empowerment ("Studies in Empowerment"). Thus, as theoretical considerations have covered broadening approaches, the personal process of empowerment of women has also been understood as a multiform phenomenon which embraces notions of graduality and multi-dimensionality. In the same pluralised perception, Batliwala indicates that the very essence of empowerment is to leave the key stakeholders in the field to define the goals and methods of action. What is important, therefore, is that this personal phase of gaining critical consciousness concerning their actual conditions changed

inequitable power relations in a minor locus (first on the psychological and individual levels) and was extended, where possible, to the collective sphere. The efforts and the strength demonstrated by the women from the tenements cannot be merely defined or marked out as individualistic phenomena, for their actions resonated and impacted on their communities. In this regard, their narratives are far from being considered de-politicised, vertical, and instrumental cases.

Today, almost a century later, the gathering together of these single narratives of the oppressed women reveals the larger narrative of a wider group of marginalised Irish women. It is the combination of these individual experiences which assigns visibility both to the group and the individual. In this sense, in the long term, these individual, yet multiple, narratives meet a higher dimension. Nonetheless, despite their important deeds and their natural strength, historical records have denied these women a voice and acknowledgement of their empowerment. In the light of the lack of formal documents which reveal how these women lived during this period, O’Casey’s plays serve as testimony to the actual conditions and experiences of the lost women of the tenement. The fictional accounts of Minnie, Mary, Juno, Norah and Bessie are pivotal narratives in the way in which they portray strong female characters in the midst of several forms of oppression. Following these reflections on social concerns, the next chapter will examine dramatic theory in order to formulate an interaction between this social approach and theatre studies which will enable me to read Sean O’Casey’s plays from a feminist empowerment-oriented standpoint.

3. CONSIDERATIONS ON DRAMA

What differentiates literary writing from non-literary writing is the inherent connection of the former with humanity. Classic literary records provide an understanding, or, at least, expand the comprehension of functioning of the human heart and spirit. Although, all literary genres touch upon human questions, drama, however, has been considered the most concrete artistic representation of humanity. It is a portrait of real life. For Goethe, if "the greatest effort of art is to produce the appearance of a grand reality by an illusion, the theatre, as an ideal scene, had attained its object" (183). It is one of the most internalised social manifestations of humanity. Martin Esslin defines drama as "mimetic action, action in imitation or representation of human behaviour" (14). Representation is a natural part of human existence. Shakespeare declared, "All the world's a stage" and, indeed, there is much role playing and illusion in quotidian existence. Deepening the proximity of the involvement between drama and nature, Esslin talks about it in terms of a fluid convergence. He argues that "drama is so deeply enmeshed in human nature itself, and in a multitude of human pursuits, that it is wellnigh impossible to draw the exact dividing line between where one kind of more general activity stops and drama proper starts" (10).

As all play activity consists of a mimesis, drama is considered to be one of the most practical forms of recreating real-life situations and behaviour patterns. Consequently, it is the most social of the art forms. The theatre, as a place of eloquence and social fact, is inscribed in the foreground of the concerns of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. (Hubert 7). Drama is a place of conversation about society. "But, beyond that, drama can be more than merely an instrument by which society transmits its behaviour patterns to its members. It can be also an instrument of thought, a cognitive process" (Esslin 21). Indeed, it is significant to think that theatre may serve as a method by which it is possible to work out concrete implications of abstract thought. From the Greek tragedies to Sartre and Beckett, it has been a form of philosophising in "existential terms" (Esslin 22). This understanding is crucial to dealing with theatrical works as a locus for reflection to think about human situations.

3.1 Character

Drama is the most mimetic literary genre because it places the fictitious on stage as if it were reality. It seems that it is precisely this element, which is responsible for the uniqueness of stage action and its intrinsic relation with social nature. For Hubert, the notion of mimesis lies at the heart of all reflection on theatrical studies and it was due to the purity of this element that theorists have classified theatre distinctively from romance and poetry. The mimetic nature of theatre renders the theatrical text ideal for sociological and historical approaches, since it "is understood as the imitation of reality, or rather, its representation. All mimetic art presupposes the existence of two objects — the model and the created object — that have between them a complex relation of similarity and dissimilarity" (9).

A dramatic work is one that represents the actions of a subject through (generally) human beings who talk to each other and in which the playwright rarely speaks. Novels and drama both deal with human questions; however, there is a basic difference: whereas, in the former, everything is described by the narrator, the latter dispenses the mediation of the narrator and represents the narrative through the physical presence of actors and actresses. The story is thus not told as such; it is shown as if it were reality itself (Esslin 110). In addition, while narration on the printed page is necessarily linear, moving in a single dimension, so that, at any given moment, only a single segment of the action can be concentrated upon, a theatrical performance is physically multi-dimensional. A multitude of information is communicated simultaneously as many things happen at once.

This characteristic leads me to another fundamental premise: theatre's crucial emphasis on action. Although there are plays that use language as a fundamental, sometimes the only, element in the evolution of the theatrical action, like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which the characters "do not move" and almost every action is an effect from the dialogue, words in drama can be considered secondary since the playwright has the option of making use of visual elements to replace words. Nevertheless, "there is no drama (action) without actors, whether they are present in flesh and blood, or projected shadows upon a screen or puppets" (Esslin 11). To a certain extent, actors and actresses are subordinate to the action due to the fact that their performances are subordinate to the demands of the verisimilitude of the action; "the most important component of any dramatic performance is the actor" who "is the word transformed into living flesh" (Esslin 34). Esslin stresses that "the actor is and will always remain the keystone of all drama.... It is in the actor that the elements of reality and illusion meet" (89). The importance of the actor or actress resides in the fact that is through

their presence on the stage that action happens. In this way, a playwright must grant a significant place to another indispensable element, the character. Pavis talks about the interaction “character v. action” in terms of two different forces that exist together and affect each other, a dialectic exchange:

> All characters in theatre perform an action (even if, as in Beckett, they do nothing visible); conversely, any action requires protagonists in order to be staged, whether they be human characters or simply actants. Hence the notion, fundamental to theatre and to any narrative, of an action/character dialectic. (Pavis 48)

Throughout the history of the theatre the character has assumed different forms and functions according to the understanding and doctrines of each period. Pavis defines the character as the constituent that basically takes on the features and voice of an actor or actress. However, he also talks about a “historical metamorphosis of the character”, saying that this apparent identity between a living person and a character has not always assumed this symbiotic interaction, since, for the Greeks, for instance, the character began by being only a mask, or persona (47). In that period, the performer was detached from the persona as its executor rather than its embodiment. In fact, according to Arnold Hauser, in the early stages of theatre history, it was the choir, the mass and the people that assumed the role of the protagonist in a play, and when Thespis, the first actor in Greek drama, according to ancient tradition, invented the protagonist, it resulted in a public rebellion (83). “The evolution of Western theatre is marked by a reversal of this perspective: the character is identified more and more with the actor and becomes a psychological and moral entity similar to other human beings” (Pavis 47). In fact, other immutable principles upon which European drama was founded started to be subverted in the second half of the eighteenth century. In this period there was a definitive rupture with the classical conceptions in different aspects: reason succeeded emotion, rules gave place to the freedom of art, the individual prevailed over the universal. Theatre became a means of reflection and debate:

> Not until Diderot came onto the scene with his bourgeois drama did the character represent a condition rather than an abstract and purely psychological *caractère*. Work and family (and, in the nineteenth century, the fatherland) became the milieu in which the characters, copied exactly from reality, developed toward naturalism and the beginnings of *mise-en-scène*. (Pavis 47)

From this phase onwards, an intrinsic tie gradually transferred to the character the features of an illusion of a living being, which came to be represented in its everyday banality. Princes and kingship were replaced by ordinary people. The intention on the part of dramatists was to make the theatre a space for the most varied social conditions. Accordingly, there was also a

concern with action and its verisimilitude with real life. The result was the development of far more complex, three-dimensional characters.

The significance of such a symbiotic proximity between the theatrical figure and the real-life person is that it allows the audience a deeper look at the human existence. For Pavis,

> The fact that the character belongs to both the semantic and the semiotic spheres makes it a hinge between the event and its differential value within the fictional structure. As a shifter between event and structure, the character sets up relationships between elements that are otherwise irreconcilable: first, the reality-effect, identification and all the projections the spectator may experience; second, semiotic integration into a system of actions and characters within the dramatic and stage universe. (50)

The interaction between semantic and semiotic features gives the stage character a precision and consistency that take it from the virtual to a real and iconic status.

Bearing in mind that the human view of the real world and real people is fragmented and limited, fictional works, through the emphasis of some resources such as appearance, behaviour and intimacy, may represent the mystery of the human being and reconstitute, to a certain extent, the characteristics of a real person. In this line of thinking, a fictional representation may be depicted with the same intensity and complexity contained in real life.

Despite literary works representing human beings in formed contours, in arranged scenarios and living preset situations, these characters are invariably portrayed as part of backgrounds which evoke real-world cognitive, religious, moral, historical, political and social values, so these fictional subjects are also portrayed at the point of collision of such principles; they "pass through terrible conflicts and face situations in which they are essential aspects of human life: tragic, sublime, demonic, grotesque or luminous" (Rosenfeld 45; my trans.).[25] Through the selection of schematic aspects, the character goes beyond its fictional framework and reaches a universal validity. All in all, a good character must be lifelike. Such a comprehension of the points of contact between a theatrical representation and a real-word subject is a fundamental ingredient of drama theory that makes it possible to associate this idea with empowerment theory. Before commencing a careful analysis of O'Casey's female characters from the perspective of the process of individual empowerment, it will be helpful to make some general points about the dimensional aspects of the construction of a theatrical character.[26]

[25] [...] passam por terríveis conflitos e enfrentam situações-limite em que se revelam aspectos essenciais da vida humana: aspectos trágicos, sublimes, demoníacos, grotescos ou luminosos.
[26] The considerations on theatre and character set out in this chapter are, for the most part, pertinent to realistic modern drama, since that is the period O'Casey's plays analysed in the present study.

Of all the schematic components fundamental in the elaboration of a literary text, character is the most essential, since, through it, the imaginary aspect of the work is enhanced. Describing a landscape, an animal or an object may produce a form of prose. Nevertheless, a literary piece only reaches the fictional level when the inanimate being becomes humanised. Excessive absences from the human element in a narrative may render it merely a description or an account. This is particularly relevant in the case of drama where, in addition to the other dramatic elements, the stage cannot remain empty, nor can the character(s) present on it remain in silence. Although the characters may be waived for a certain time in the cinema and literary fiction since these genres can fictionalise stories through images and words, this is not possible in the theatre due to its fictional completeness. This is a great advantage for the dramatist since the members of an audience, confronting the "live" character, are very inclined to believe in what they see. While "a novelist has to describe what a character looks like", the appearance of the character in a play "is instantly conveyed by the actor's body and costume and make up. The other visual elements, the setting, the environment in which the action takes place, can be equally instantly communicated by the sets, the lightning, the grouping of the characters on the stage" (Esslin 17). Such live confrontation boosts the spectator's belief. Thus, while in the novel the character is an element among several others, even if it is the main one, in drama, the character in action establishes the spectacle itself. It is the component which constitutes practically the whole of the work — without the characters the play ceases to exist.

Characters may be based on real people, either wholly or as a combination of several individuals in which it is possible to determine components of characterisation such as motivation, desire, fear, duty, curiosity, personality, revenge, catharsis, designing these elements in a three-dimensional schematic background composed of social, physical and psychological aspects. Characters fall into two categories: major (the prominent figure) and minor (the supporting figure).

A good script gives the performer some initial information about the character. Further information can be gleaned from what other characters say and think about her/him. It will be through these descriptive elements that an actor/actress will bring a scripted character to life. In building a performance it is fundamental to give the audience the belief that the character being performed is truthful and not a cliché or a caricature. Hubert (36) lists four elements (quality, convenience, truthfulness, and consistency) which should constitute this balance for the character's creation. In addition, details like history, economics and

politics are important as well in the way they contribute to construct a background against which the character will be placed.

Despite the fact that a play in general provides much less description of characters than novels do, such details are of great significance. This leads us to look at the process of construction of the character in drama. According to George Pierce Baker: “when the drama attains a characterization which makes the play a revelation of human conduct and a dialogue which characterizes yet pleases for itself, we reach dramatic literature” (4). During the process of construction, the author needs to consider a number of aspects and methods in order to portray a character consistently throughout their performance. There are several classifications regarding the characterisation of the theatrical figure, but, according to Prado, “The manuals for playwriting indicate three main ways: what the character reveals about him/herself, what he/she does, and what others say about him/her” (88; my trans.).[27]

For the purposes of organisation, I have classified these three methods of character construction in terms of language and action. The techniques which use language as a form to elaborate a theatrical character are what the character reveals about him/herself and what others say about him/her. These mechanisms that expose the consciousness through words seem to be artificial methods linked to anti-dramatic procedures (Prado 91), since the emphasis of drama is on action. On this matter, a certain technical difficulty arises because calling forth submerged feelings and reflections that are not clear to the human eye without the narrative resource is a challenging task for playwrights. In theatre it is impossible to capture this stream of consciousness, a tool so often used in the novel of the twentieth century. The audience does not have direct access to the character's moral or psychological awareness. It is necessary to translate this camouflaged mental material into words, communicating it in some way through dialogue. Even with such limitations, playwrights have developed techniques which represent the inner consciousness of their characters. capable of implementing this prospecting interior operation. Three of them are the aside, the confidant and the monologue. According to Patrice Pavis’s dictionary,

- the **aside** is a speech by the character for his/her own benefit itself and consequently for that of the audience. It is shorter and less structured than the monologue and constitutes part of the dialogue, like a slip of the tongue that is heard "by chance". The aside introduces a modality other than dialogue, since it reduces the semantic context

[27] “Os manuais de *playwriting* indicam três vias principais: o que a personagem revela sobre si mesma, o que faz, e o que os outros dizem a seu respeito.”

to that of a single character and serves to signal the character's "true" intention or opinion, in a way that enables the audience to comprehend and judge a situation on a well-informed basis. The aside is never a lie (since one does not voluntarily mislead oneself), so, inserted into the theatrical development, these short pauses for internal truth allow the spectator to form an opinion. Generally, it is accompanied by stage business (physical separation of the actor, a change in intonation, a look directed toward the audience), aiming at a more realistic act. “The use of the aside has been criticised in an ingenuously naturalistic conception of performance, but contemporary staging has rediscovered its virtues in terms of its dramatic force and dramaturgical effectiveness” (29-30).

- the **confidant**, generally a minor character and of the same sex, is a passive, but irreplaceable listener to the protagonist's confidences and may be a counsellor or a guide to it. They are very often represented as messengers bringing news, narrators of tragic events, tutors, old friends, teachers or nurses. Considered a substitute for the chorus mainly in plays of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the confidant plays the role of an indirect narrator as an instrumental source for exposition and subsequent comprehension of the action. The confidant’s dramaturgical duties within the play are just as variable as its true relationship to the main character. Apart from a few exceptions, the confidant is a complement to the protagonist, seldom raised to the level of the major characters. For this reason, confidants are rarely portrayed in a clear and detailed way, but rather as an echo with no tragic conflict to assume or decision to take. In general, the confidant represents the general opinion. Often promoted to intermediary figures between the main characters and the creator, this "dual" character sometimes substitutes the audience (74-75).
- the **monologue** is speech made by a character to him/herself. It does not contain the verbal exchange present in a dialogue, but it keeps the same context from beginning to end. The changes in semantics are kept to a minimum to ensure the unity of the subject of enunciation. It is often restricted to a few indispensable instances, especially in realistic or naturalistic theatre, since it is frequently associated with antidramatic aspects.[28] Regarding the deep structure of the monologue, it can be said

[28] In this sense Pavis’s concept of monologue seems somewhat outdated. Martin Esslin argues that monologues are, in fact, dramatic forms just as much as narrative dialogue. According to the author, internal monologues are essential theatrical resources: “A writer like Beckett, most of whose narrative works are internal monologues, must really be regarded as, above all, an outstanding dramatic writer, a fact which is borne out by his great success as a writer both for the stage and for radio” (1978, p. 19).

> that it communicates directly with society as a whole for the reason that it does not depend structurally on a reply from an interlocutor, but establishes a direct relationship with the spectator who is an accomplice and a watcher-hearer. For Pavis, "the monologue has made a forceful comeback in contemporary writing… and the literature of the interior monologue and stream of consciousness has much to do with it" (218-9).

The same techniques can be used regarding what other figures say about the character, as well as the author's stage directions, which usually precede the character's first entrance and which can be taken as fact. Pavis also mentions speech as a method for the description of hidden motivations: "Discourse of a character and, indirectly, comments by other characters, provide self-characterisation and offer several different points of view on the same figure" (52). However, this kind of reported characterisation does not necessarily work inasmuch as the real impact comes from what the characters themselves do. Both in a play and in real life, the inner nature of a person is revealed not only by mental, physical, biological and social characteristics, but by his/her actions.

The mechanism of action, what he/she does, which has been the most powerful and constant resource of drama through the ages, operates as a counterpoint to language on account of its direct attachment to the dramatic method. Building up a theatrical figure through actions means that the playwright must transform the character's state of mind into actions. In this respect, there are outer mechanisms which externalise the inner world of the character, such as feelings that can be demonstrated by body expression, a certain tone of voice, a way of looking, talking and walking, among others. What is invisible must somehow become visible, or at least implied. It is therefore vital to find significant aspects, which objectively display the psychology of the character. Hence, although action is important, it cannot be comprehended only as physical movement. Silence, omission, refusal to act, in applicable contexts and situations, also work as mechanisms for exteriorisation as well.

In addition to activeness, text and subtext are equally important in representing action. What matters is not only what the theatrical figure says, but also the function of the dialogue, what it does, as Esslin observes,

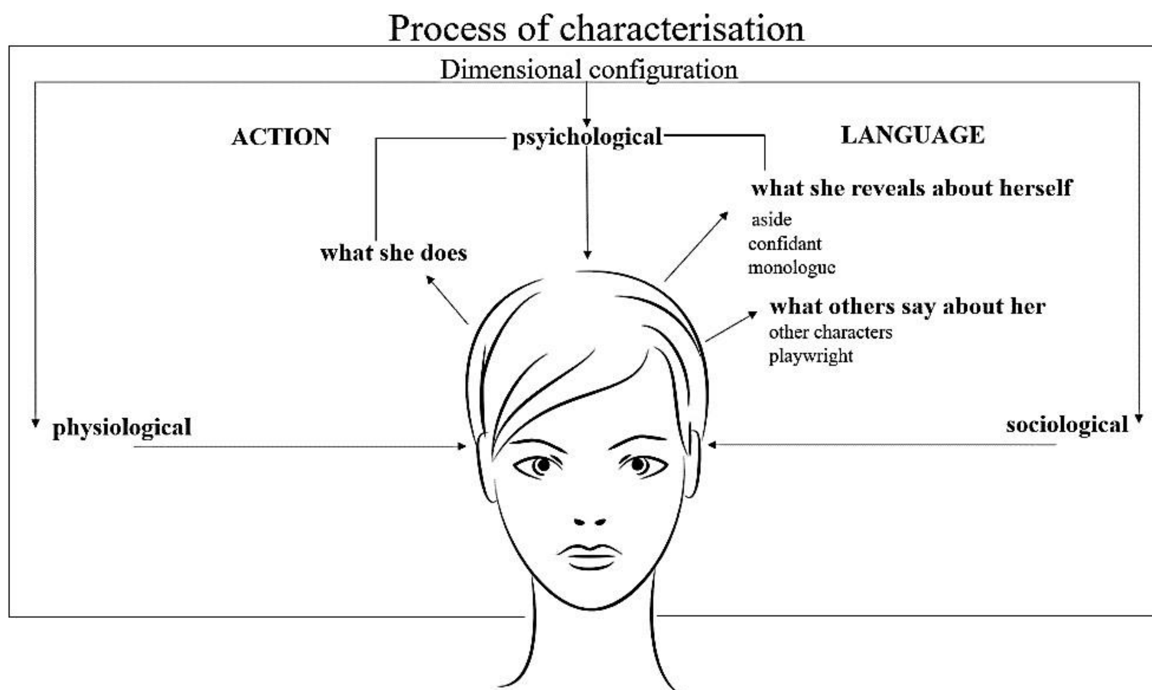
> Analyse any skillfully written play and you will find that invariably the characterization is in the action. In drama, of course, language very often *is* action. One could go further and claim that all language in drama of necessity *becomes* action. In drama we are concerned not only with what a character says – the purely semantic meaning of their words but with what the character *does* with his words….

> And that action is behind the words, unspoken. What is *not* said is as important in drama – both as action and as characterization - as what *is* said. It is not the words that matter but the situation in which the words are uttered. (40-41)

Even from the shortest and most basic dialogue the spectators can decide for themselves what is behind the spoken and the unspoken lines. For Pavis, the speech creates the character, since he/she can only say and mean what the text appears to mean (51).

Besides action, Pavis (52) refers to additional procedures for the interpretation of the theatrical figure: *stage directions* (to indicate the psychological or physical state of the characters); *names of places and of dramatis personae* (to suggest a character's nature even before the action); discourse, by the character him/herself and by other characters (to provide self-characterisation and different points of view on the same figure); *stage business and paralinguistic factors,* such as intonation, facial expression and gestures (provided by the author, director and actor in order to express a “reality-effect”). All these components are essential in that they help to create a framework within which the actions that reveal character can believably be undertaken.

To sum up, the diagram below demonstrates the aspects of the theatrical character’s configuration that will be taken into account in the analysis of the female characters in Sean O'Casey's plays:



It is important to ponder on a character's construction according to the very diverse ways information can be communicated, rather than relying on an intuitive view of interiority and personality.

Altogether, understanding the process of characterisation of the dramatic character means establishing connections which imply action, text and historical background in the same way that interpreting the process of individual empowerment entails considering different aspects of the subject's experience such as behavioural, linguistic, contextual and socio-political factors.

3.2 Subject v. Object Character: An Approach to the Individual Dimension

The construction process is responsible for the verisimilitude of the character and his/her actions while providing the audience with a sense of reality.

Augusto Boal examines the engagement of the dramatic subject in the theatrical action, contrasting the assumptions formulated by Hegel and Brecht. He proposes a classification that defines the Hegelian character as subject, and the Brechtian character as object. For him, "Brecht's whole poetics is basically an answer and a counterproposal to the idealist poetics of Hegel" (Boal 71). According to Hegel, poetry "is that within ourselves, the ideal world, the contemplative or emotional life of soul, which instead of following up actions, remains at home with itself in its own ideal realm, and, consequently, is able to accept self-expression as its unique and indeed final end" (103). Hegel speaks about a type of poetry which devises the world as a complete place filled with ideal human actions which are disclosed freely; in short, it approaches notions of individuality and subjectivity. In relation to drama, Hegel insists on the fundamental point that "the event does not appear to proceed from external conditions, but rather from personal volition and character" (251). Hegel's view is thus opposite to the way in which Brecht would later organise his ideas on poetics, because, even though the Hegelian perspective accepts the coexistence of subjectivity and objectivity, "the soul is the subject that determines all external action" (Boal 73). In other words, extrinsic events are completely dependent on a character's free spirit. Thus, the dramatic character is understood to be the absolute subject of its actions, which may be limited only by another (equally free) subject.

The Brechtian conception of the theatrical character converts Hegel's understanding of it as absolute subject back into the notion of an object of economic and social structures (Boal xxiv). Brecht's drama is a form of politics, engaged with social questions that must be transformed. He thinks of a play as a place for a sociological experiment. "It is an almost scientific demonstration carried out through artistic means" (Boal 83), a way to expose the dramatist's thoughts. Brecht's character utters his ideas. Although they have their personal characteristics, they are not created with predetermined qualities or characteristics, rather they acquire them during and through their social-life experience. As a consequence, the unfolding of the action does not depend on the subjectivity of the character, but rather it will be developed from the interaction between the character and the socio-political architecture.

In an attempt to clarify the distinctions between subject and object character, as proposed by Brecht, Boal organised the table below, starting with a fundamental difference which makes clearer all the secondary differences:

The 'Dramatic Form' according to Brecht (Idealist Poetics)	**The 'Epic Form' according to Brecht (Marxist Poetics)**
1. Thought determines being. (Character-subject).	1. Social being determines thought. (Character-object).
2. Man is something given, fixed, inalterable, immanent, considered as known.	2. Man is alterable, object of the inquiry, and is 'in process'.
3. The conflict of free wills impels the dramatic action; the structure of the work is a scheme of wills in conflict.	3. Contradictions of economic, social, or political forces impel the dramatic action; the work is based on a structure of these contradictions.
4. It creates empathy, which consists in an emotional compromise of the spectator, depriving him of the possibility of acting.	4. It 'historicises' the dramatic action, transforming the spectator into observer, arousing his critical consciousness and capacity for action.
5. At the end, catharsis 'purifies' the spectator.	5. Through knowledge, it drives the spectator to action.
6. Emotion.	6. Reason.
7. At the end, the conflict is resolved, and a new scheme of wills is created.	7. The conflict is left unresolved, and the fundamental contradiction emerges with

	greater clarity.
8. Hamartia prevents the character's adaptation to society, and this is the fundamental cause of the dramatic action.	8. The personal faults that the character may have are never the direct, fundamental cause of the dramatic action.
9. Anagnorisis justifies the society.	9. The knowledge acquired reveals the faults of the society.
10. It is action in the present.	10. It is narration.
11. Experience.	11. Vision of the world.
12. It arouses feelings.	12. It demands decisions.

(Boal 80)

The fundamental difference between the theorists' views is that while Hegel considers the character to be an absolute subject carrier of a free spirit giving rise to which from the dramatic action, Brecht sees the character as an object of its social and economic relations, from which the external actions will be developed.

Both in real life and in drama, the essential nature of a person is revealed not only by mental, physical, biological and psychological factors, but by his/her experience as subject inserted into a social system regulated by relations of power which reveal important aspects of the person's inner self. The subjects' attitude in submitting to cultural standards or in counteracting them also reveals much information about them. Through this comparison it is possible to introduce additional points of contact between drama's theory and the approach to the process of individual empowerment addressed in Chapter 1. In conclusion, Brecht's ideas appear more pertinent to the formulation of an analysis of the female protagonists of O'Casey in the *Dublin Plays* as representations of women whose lives were influenced by different social and political conditions which prevented them from exercising their "free spirit". In this sense, it is possible to define them as object characters controlled by social forces. Furthermore, conversely, it is seen that: "[T]hroughout Hegelian poetics … the spirit is subject. Epic poetry shows actions determined by the spirit; lyric poetry shows the movements within that spirit itself; finally, dramatic poetry presents, before our eyes, the spirit and its actions in the exterior world" (Boal 78). The Hegelian character is a free creature with absolute control of his/her existence, living in an ideal world where all external actions origin strictly in him/herself. Within this conjuncture the character has great autonomy over his/her actions. Hegelian characters are subjects who are already deemed to

be capable of their own actions and able to master the skills and resources to gain power over their own lives. External circumstances may represent an obstacle to their actions, but their control is something given.

On the other hand, in the twentieth century, especially in the second half, a new configuration of theatrical subject was revealed, particularly in some of Brecht's plays, in which the character is an object determined by social structures who has to deal with a system of forces directing the movement of the dramatic action (Boal 68-9). In terms of the evolution of the plot, the Brechtian character is central for the narrative, and most action of the play revolves around him/her. Even though this Brechtian figure is influenced by social forces, he/she is not supposed to be eternally a passive individual. "Brecht does not mean to say that individual wills never intervene" (Boal 84). The determining factor of the action is precisely the results from the interaction between the subjects and the society in which they live. "It is not just the presence of the subject, but the presence of the two-part subject-object unit that makes up the axis for a story" (Ubersfeld 45). That is especially relevant if we understand Brecht's drama as a place for (social) experience, a stage where the character is "given over entirely to the needs of the fabula" (Pavis 42). As modern life ascribes to the subject a multiplicity of positions and potential identities, the experiences generated within this diverse environment will not follow the same standards all the time. Even though Brecht assumes that the theatrical character is controlled by the influences of oppressive social forces, his conception of theatre converses with notions of transformation and, due to that, the character can no longer be presented as a victim, as a passive object of an unknown, immutable environment ("Estudos" 20-1). The character situated in this context must be thought of in terms of a set of complementary traits, fragmented into a multitude of signs, leading to a more intertwined notion of subject, which becomes a more plural issue for analysis than the old idea of individuality. In this sense, it is possible to establish points of connection between the evolution of the dramatic character and some considerations about the mutability of the individual's identity in a flux of continuous transformation. One of the outcomes from that constant process of change is an intervention through the phenomenon of empowerment. Thus, in drama, as the scene advances, the action, which could continue to be developed through the influences of conventional (oppressive) social rules over the characters, starts to run under the operability of individual wills, subverting the "inflexible" structures of power and oppression.

It is a context of conflict which brings about the prospect of a scenario where the character, not satisfied with what is imposed upon it, may willingly develop mechanisms to

confront or subvert oppressive aspects. Seeking a narrow link between this theatrical perspective and ideas on empowerment, the character as an object of social forces can be seen in a state of powerlessness, frequently in a situation of passivity and oppression, which, although it may present multiple roots and realities, is recognised as the propelling position to the creation of the driving force to a state of power. This is the character which represents the circumstances from which the process of empowerment will derive, passing from the state of object to subject, from a powerless position to an empowered one.

Analysing the evolution of the theatrical character in line with the ideas about transformation of identity, it can be said that, if the character was previously classified as being the absolute subject of its will, from Brecht on it begins to be seen in a new light as a figure shaped by social forces, besides legitimising the existence of the mechanisms of oppression over the individual. This perspective also comprehends the existence of characters, embodied in a mutable nature, who will not accept or adapt to a state of powerlessness. To a certain extent, unlike the subject character, this subservient theatrical figure is the one that, logically, needs to subvert the structures of oppressive power. In summary, this connection between drama and empowerment theories concerning the consideration of transformations experienced respectively by the character and women provides an approach at an individual level, a change regarding the personal domain. As empowerment may develop in a number of contexts as a multifaceted process, its results aim not only at the individual dimension of power, but also at the collective one. In this way, avoiding a small-scale approach, it is important to see how the action of the character (who is able to empower itself) could operate to aim at a more collective level. In that respect, it is important to examine another basic dramatic element: the audience.

3.3 Drama for Social Transformation: An Approach to the Collective Dimension

In order to propose a broader understanding approach to the dramatic character as outlined above, as a women's empowerment issue, we must return to Martin Esslin's claim that theatre is "an instrument of social and political change… a powerful political weapon" (95). The possibility of a sociological analysis begins with the interplay between drama and mimesis because imitating life provides models of human behaviour that can be investigated from the perspective of sociology.

The practice of theatre itself can be understood in terms of social transformation. Boal points out that theatre is a form of mastering people's autonomy in different ways, both those who work with it and those who watch a performance. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (2008) is pertinent to the attempt by the present study to link the aspects addressed with the considerations about empowerment in Chapter 1. Although the focus of Boal's book is on the social transformation arising from theatrical practice, he envisages a close relationship between theatre and the individual. In his Preface to the 2008 edition of his book, Boal writes that,

> At that time, I was concerned with theatre as theatre, and about its relationship to social human beings. Now, I am more concerned with human beings as theatre.
>
> I was a teacher of theatre. Now, I understand that there is no such thing. Those, like myself, who are teachers – and students – of theatre, in reality we are students and teachers of human beings.
>
> When we study Shakespeare we must be conscious that we are not studying the history of the theatre, but learning about the history of humanity. We are discovering ourselves. Above all: we are discovering that we can change ourselves, and change the world. (ix)

This perspective interests me since my own analysis of the female protagonists of O'Casey's plays, while primarily concerned with theatre, is also very much concerned with the real forgotten Irish women who lived in the revolutionary period of Ireland. It is a study of Irish drama which is also, to a certain extent, a study of the Irish people, particularly the oppressed female individuals, for "drama, with its collectivist contents, is better at provoking an attitude of discussion" (Brecht, "On arts" 73). Theatre cannot only be seen as a representation of the world. For Brecht, the era in which he was living could only be theatrically reproduced if he believed it was a world susceptible of modification ("Estudos" 21). For that reason, the German playwright defended the perpetuation of a close connection with mimesis, so that theatrical representation could reproduce the idea of experiencing reality in tune with life (19). Within this understanding a new perception on aesthetics also emerged, in which it was no longer seen as being of primary importance:

> With the help of aesthetics alone we cannot do anything about the existing theatre. In order to liquidate this theatre, i.e., dismantle it, get rid of it, sell it off at a loss, we must call on science, just as we have called on science to liquidate a whole lot of other superstitions. In our case, this means sociology, i.e., the theory of human beings' relationships to one another, in other words the theory of the unsightly. (Brecht, "On arts" 68)

Aware of the need to change the way human relations were perceived, Brecht believed that theatre had the power to create an 'ideological superstructure' for a real shift in the way of

life of his time. He defended a form of drama which, unlike the Realist and Naturalist schools, held a broader perception of human existence within social structures ("On Theatre" 45). Although O'Casey's earliest plays are considered essentially realistic works, he wrote them when "the modernist critique of representational realism affected all forms of expression in Europe between 1890 and 1930", a period when Brecht himself, for example, "[S]ystematically abandons the theatrical conventions of the realist and naturalist stage that had developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, associated in particular with the work of Hauptmann and Ibsen" (Silberman et al. 14-15). This phase can be understood as a transition from a realistic and naturalist dramatic art to a form of theatre that seeks the modification of the world, one with the power to transform human beings and the society in which they live. Brecht proposed a form of psychological research into reality, turning drama into a mediator between philosophy and life, to convey new ideals, seeking to emphasise individual freedom and subjective expression. It was a new perspective, which reshaped the prevailing theatrical configuration and made the stage a place for the rehearsal of important (social) transformations. Consequently, by the mid-1920s, Brecht also "began to redefine the role of the theatre spectator as questioning and analytical… and to link socially critical drama to a type of theatrical representation that does not simply reproduce reality in a supposedly neutral and self-evident manner" (Silberman et al. 16). The playwright sought to create a form of art opposed to the purely dramatic form which could break with the old vocabulary and tradition, transforming both the sense of the text and the way the performance was presented, and preventing the audience from being mere spectator-receivers and taking on instead an active role.

> Bertolt Brecht… always refused to make his message too explicit because he knew, instinctively as well as consciously, that what matters is the posing of the problem in a way which will compel the audience to think for themselves, rather than drumming some message into their heads. (Esslin 99)

Just as action and character are basic constituents of drama, the spectator is of equally fundamental importance. A play is just a manuscript until it has an audience. In addition, the role of the audience within a performance is on a level far beyond a simplistic relation of aesthetic and entertainment. The role of the spectators in the process of theatrical communication is a very complex one. Besides the performers, it is the other element which puts the fictional universe in touch with the real world. In a sense, the audience is the channel by which invented situations and dilemmas are codified and converted into material questions. Esslin describes this phenomenon as a process of release which may provide relief

from strong and repressed emotions: "in ritual as in drama the aim is an enhanced level of consciousness, a memorable insight into the nature of existence, a renewal of strength in the individual to face the world. In dramatic terms: catharsis" (28). The releasing of strong feelings through a particular activity helps the subject to understand complex emotions. The multi-layered nature of theatre "leaves the spectator free to make up his own mind about the sub-text concealed behind the overt text – in other words, it puts him into the same situation as the character to whom the words are addressed" (Esslin 18). Thus, the effect on the audience does not automatically rely on the intentions of the author alone, since "a play may impact its spectators if it has an effect that lingers in their minds and gradually makes them realise the complexity of what is being depicted" (97). Aristotle observed this cathartic experience as something produced through the identification of the spectator with the tragic hero; the way the characters are constructed and behave on the stage touches the audience. Although the representation of "the object of the subject's quest can very well be individual… what is at stake in this quest always goes beyond the simple individual because of the links that are established between the subject-object unit (one that is never isolated)", the representation of a single individual "can be collective" as it means a "group that desires its own salvation or liberty (these being threatened or already lost)" (Ubersfeld 45). Consequently, if the audience experiences a change of attitude before an oppressive reality, even if it is represented in the personal realm, such a transformation may enable numerous individuals to understand and to question the mechanisms of power and control existing in the real world. The scrutiny of such an internal reflection will not only take place in the individual spectator, but also with the audience as a whole reacting to each other in such a way that the message received becomes a very complex exchange.

With regard to this question, Ubersfeld argues that,

> Theatre appears to be a privileged art of capital importance, because more than any other art, it shows how the individual psyche invests itself within a collective relationship. The spectator is never alone; as his or her eye takes in what is presented on the stage, it also takes in the other spectators, just as indeed they observe him or her. As both psychodrama and a means to reveal and identify social relations, theatre holds both of these paradoxical threads in its hand. (4)

It may be argued that observing a dramatic form of expression that exposes (social) domineering structures may lead the audience to different levels of perception and action. It can evoke both an individual and collective response since the message can be understood in the same way by different individuals. A production with such a high degree of reflection also has the power even to divide its audience. Initially the audience identifies social relations

and, from that point on, they can decide whether they agree or disagree on how the system works. Only after that process of awareness and interpretation, are they able to act according to their comprehension, whether breaking with or accepting life under the (repressive) rules. “Theatre does more than just awaken spectator’s fantasies. It can also sometimes awaken their consciences, and perhaps the two go together. As Brecht says, this is brought about through the association of pleasure and reflection” (Ubersfeld 31). Thus, the fact that drama does not function only as a message, but also as a form of expression that can induce the audience to take a possible action, seems to indicate another point of connection with the considerations concerning empowerment in the sense that the characters’ processes of transformation rehearsed on the stage can impel the spectators to action. More particularly, in relation to my approach to O’Casey’s plays, I believe that, based on his writings about female experience, he not only denounced the marginalisation of individuals, but also argued for personal and collective change for Irish society with respect to women’s issues.

In the next chapter, I discuss selected passages from O’Casey’s dramatic works, focusing on the representation of female figures. O’Casey’s *Dublin Plays* provides a balanced and focused starting point for my analysis of Irish women, since this material concerns the Dublin tenement dwellers. O’Casey focuses on women existing in a disruptive environment and he questions what Irish Independence means for this deprived portion of the Dublin population. My aim is to demonstrate how O’Casey’s realistic/naturalistic plays were innovatory developments in terms of character and the transformative power of the theatre, in three visionary plays about feminist ideals which predicted notions of female empowerment.

4. WHEN EMPOWERMENT MEETS DRAMA: THE TIMELESS CONTRIBUTTION OF *THREE DUBLIN PLAYS* TO THE REPRESENTATION OF IRISH WOMEN

On 30 March 1880, at 85 Upper Dorset Street in Dublin, Susan Archer Casey gave birth to John Casey, who would become one of Ireland's greatest dramatists. After the premature death of her husband, Michael Casey, at the age of 49, she was responsible for keeping the family together, as well as nursing Sean,[29] who did not enjoy good health and had to struggle with deteriorating eyesight all his life. Regardless of all the misfortunates and obstacles imposed by life, "it sometimes happens that a powerfully original writer is received as a voice of nature itself" (Murray, "Three Dublin Plays Introduction" vii). This was true of O'Casey for, despite the harsh circumstances of his early years and some longrunning feud with the directors of the Abbey Theatre, Susan's son went from being a Dublin labourer to an acclaimed artist in and outside Ireland.

As a playwright, his concern was the working-class context of his roots, especially with respect to the actual conditions and the future of the poor before Ireland's tumultuous nationalistic period. He resented the hypocrisy of the patriotic speeches which were heard all the time in Dublin, while Irish politics ignored the daily problem of struggle and survival which he considered to be more important than the achievement of 'romantic' national prospects, such as the idea of 'save and fight' for Ireland. He could not accept that a large part of the country's population, the working-class and the poor, would live in a free Ireland but still incarcerated in overcrowded tenement houses, breeding grounds of disease and starvation:

> As patriotic revolutionary fever spread in Ireland, O'Casey watched the needs of the working class take a back seat in the country's growing political goal of independence. Although the playwright was not against the idea of a free Ireland, he could look beyond it and understood that the idea of changing the flag, separating Ireland from England, was not going to make Ireland the kind of place he wanted it to be, especially for the people he cared about. In fact, Ireland's liberation did nothing to solve some fundamental questions, because people continued to live in slums, being poor and exploited. (Parra 86)

When the Abbey Theatre was founded in 1904, the primary concern of its founders, William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory, was to give voice to an authentic Irish drama with the purpose of promoting Ireland's self-image and energising the revolutionary spirit of the Irish Revival Movement, which had begun at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, the

[29] Later, being caught up in the cause of Irish nationalism, O'Casey changed his name to the Gaelic form, Sean.

national theatre became the core of Ireland's cultural and literary renaissance. However, it was difficult for many authors to remain completely free from the controversial political questions which took over the movement. Most Irish writers ended up transferring nationalistic principles to their dramatic and literary production. O'Casey wrote honestly about the people from the slums, who seemed to have been hidden in that revolutionary scenario and had their needs further eclipsed. The playwright had knocked on the Abbey's door hoping to get his plays produced long before 1923, when *The Shadow of a Gunman* was welcomed onto Abbey's stage. His official association with the theatre started when he was forty-three years old, after five prior submissions had been rejected, as may be seen in the table below:

Table 4.1 O'Casey's submissions to the Abbey Theatre

Date that O'Casey submitted his play	**Title of O'Casey play**	**Was it accepted?**
2 March 1916	*Profit and Loss*	No: Script returned to O'Casey on 6 March 1916
29 October 1919	*The Harvest Festival*	No: Script returned to O'Casey on 24 January 1920
10 November 1919	*The Frost in the Flower*	No: Script returned to O'Casey on 26 January 1920
6 January 1921	*The Crimson in the Tricolour*	No: O'Casey spoke in person with Gregory about the play on 10 November 1921. She later revealed that she wanted to produce the piece, but Yeats was down to it.
10 April 1922	*The Seamless Coat of Kathleen*	No: Script returned to O'Casey on 17 April 1922

28 November 1922	*The Shadow of a Gunman* (Submitted under the title 'On the Run')	Yes: Play produced on 12 April 1923
23 August 1923	*The Cooing of Doves*	No: Script returned to O'Casey on 24 September 1923
30 August 1923	*Cathleen Listens In* (Title originally recorded in logbook as 'Kathleen Listens In')	Yes: Play produced on 1 October 1923
28 December 1923	*Juno and the Paycock*	Yes: Play produced on 3 March 1924
8 August 1924	*Nannie's Night Out* (Submitted under the title 'Irish Nannie Passes')	Yes: Play produced on 29 September 1924
12 August 1925	*The Plough and the Stars*	Yes: Play produced on 8 February 1926
21 March 1928	*The Silver Tassie*	No: Script returned to O'Casey on 10 May 1928

Source: Moran, *The Theatre* 67

O'Casey travelled to London in 1926 to receive the Hawthornden Prize for *Juno and the Paycock*. Whilst there he fell in love with his future wife, Eileen Carey Reynolds, an Irish actress. They decided to settle in England in 1927. Although O'Casey's decision to leave Ireland might have been interpreted as an anti-Irish gesture, the real reason did not relate to the people, but to those who ruled the country. Once he remarked, "I couldn't stick it. Neither could Shaw. I am not anti-Irish – I am very much for the people of Ireland. It is the establishment that I am against" (qtd. in Stewart 77). In the history of Irish literature, many other writers left the island to live abroad, some of them almost their entire life, such as Oscar

Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett. O'Casey's decision to live outside Ireland was motivated in part by his commitment to political issues and his paradoxical relationship with people from the Irish theatre, as he stated "I have a good deal of courage, but not much of patience, and it takes both courage and patience to live in Ireland. The Irish have no time for those that don't agree with their ideas, and I have no time for those that don't agree with mine" (qtd. in Stewart 25). Even living in England, the author still faced further quarrels with his home country. For instance, *I Knock the Door*, the first of the six volumes of his autobiography, published in 1939, was promptly banned in Ireland due to its explicit narrative of adolescent sexual experiences. The same happened with his essay on political and theatrical themes, *The Green Crown* (1956), which, like many other of his previous writings, was banned in the country. In 1955, the production of *The Bishop's Bonfire* was heavily attacked in the Catholic press for its satire on the Catholic Church, which O'Casey considered as one of the obstacles to the country achieving necessary political reforms. Thus, the difficult relations with Ireland were far from over. The playwright became so angry that he forbade any professional production of his plays in the country because the Archbishop of Dublin removed the play *The Drums of Father Ned* from the programme of the 1958 Tostal, an annual festival of Irish culture. The situation was only reversed in 1964, the year of his death, when the Abbey company was invited to be part of the commemorations of the four- hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death and O'Casey allowed the productions of *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars.* (Stewart 14-15).

Nevertheless, before moving to England, the playwright had glorious moments in Dublin with his three early plays performed in the Abbey Theatre: *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *The Plough and the Stars,* in which he tackled the human consequences of the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War and the Irish Civil War. "That could perhaps be one of the reasons why O'Casey's plays have lasted; they reflect a long-term struggle" (Stewart 92). These realistic dramas of the Dublin slums in war and revolution demonstrate that "O'Casey always retained a faith in the positive effects his drama could have on audiences, and the combination of qualities that he ascribed to Arden[30] – power, protest and frantic compassion – is an equally summation of his own work" (Stewart 18). His dramatic productions were primarily engaged with the possibility of giving a voice to marginalised subjects. O'Casey himself was one of those excluded subjects he wanted to talk about. He emerged from the poorest people of Dublin who lived in the tenement houses.

[30] John Arden (1930-2012), English playwright.

When he wrote about lower-class Dubliners in the *Three Dublin Plays*, in fact he "was recording his experiences and parading the colorful denizens of the tenements for Abbey audiences to enjoy" (Murray, "Three Dublin Plays Introduction" vii). The author recognised the roots of his early work saying that, "Born in a tenement house, I write about people in tenement houses" (qtd. in Stewart 19). In 1926, when he arrived in London, in an interview for the *Evening Standard,* O'Casey again commented on the links between his work and the place where he lived:

> I am not accustomed to a big hotel, and everything was so quiet last night that I listened for the familiar noises of the tenement quarter which I live in Dublin. An author abroad should live in the atmosphere of the places and people about whom he writes. Then only can he hope to get a true perspective. Thus I wrote about people in the tenement regions, and I lived, and still live, in a single room in a quarter like to that I have tried to describe. (qtd. in Stewart 21).

The images of Irish tenement life reproduced by O'Casey are, in fact, real pictures of those who lived in Dublin slums. "His fellow tenants in the house, where he lived through much of the 1920s, provided inspiration for several of his characters, including Mollser Gogan and Captain and Juno Boyle" (Kelly). Even "Dublin critics tempered their admiration for the three early plays with the insinuation that their freshness and familiarity together derived from a kind of photo-realism" (Murray, "Three Dublin Plays Introduction" vii). He knew how much those residents had their lives cruelly suppressed by living amidst poverty and violent political conflicts. Moreover, the connection of his works with the life in the tenements goes beyond an association with the environment, it also reveals a strong link with the people with whom he lived: "I worked with Captain Boyle, a character in *Juno*, for five years. I didn't even alter his name" (qtd. in Stewart 20). Shivaun, his daughter, also remembers: "Little Mollser lived underneath him and I think the Boyles lived on the first floor, but I think he could be living anywhere and he would have found stories" (qtd in Kelly). Daily life with those people functioned as a laboratory for O'Casey to observe their habits and idiosyncrasies, something which later he used to construct the characters and the settings of his first dramatic texts. Real-life contact with Dublin during the Irish revolutionary conflicts enabled O'Casey to transport reality and the depth of human emotion onto stage. This elevated the realistic aspect of his drama as if he were mirroring the lives of poor tenement dwellers (bricklayers, street vendors, charwomen) in *Three Dublin Plays*. "He knew exactly what he was doing with the Dublin Trilogy and I think the task is very clear. You have to go after it with a scalpel, go after what he wants with real precision" (Stewart 104). Examining the three plays, one also notices an approximation in form and style with

playwrights acknowledged for their naturalist techniques, such as Anton Chekhov, Émile Zola and Henrik Ibsen. The kind of realism developed by O'Casey allows audiences to see and feel how deplorable the tenements were and how that atmosphere affected people.

Two other aspects that stand out from this initial work are characterisation and expressive language. Lady Gregory[31] herself, as one of the Abbey`s directors, told O'Casey that characterisation was one of his remarkable points (Benstock, *Sean O'Casey* 53). The playwright brought to the Irish stage characters who were funny and witty, but also very touching and heartbreaking. The characters in *Three Dublin Plays* are not a paltry caricature or overly comic representations, they are fully realised characters. Though the main characters are not the heroes engaged in the fight for revolution, these noncombatants in a city under military siege form a well-articulated representation of the tragic experience many people had actually been through. The characters are capable of expressing a sense of humour, but the end of the plays does not maintain the same mood. In *Three Dublin Plays* tragedy and comedy are juxtaposed in a way that meant something new to the theatre of O'Casey's time. The plays are frequently classified as tragicomedy due to their smooth transition from comedy to tragedy. Disclosing hypocrisies and unfair social and economic conditions, the tragic aspect arises as a disruptive effect derived from comical episodes. "O'Casey's technique is to take the audience in with the comedy, and then the tragedy hits very hard…. Many other playwrights try to do that but they don't often succeed as well as Sean O'Casey does…The ending comes as a shock" (Stewart 92). Regarding this initial phase, O'Casey's realism and humanism are inherently twisted. The humanity of O'Casey's characters was an indispensable dramatic component of his work. O'Casey did not believe that human beings lacked humanity and pointed out that artificiality was the trouble about dramatists of his time since they made life out of drama, instead of making drama out of life (Stewart 30-1). From his bitter experience with poverty, O'Casey developed humanity and compassion for oppressed people. In a sense, his first plays pay a tribute to those excluded from the Irish history and in this respect his attention is particularly focused upon the female experience.

[31] "Lady Gregory was probably the biggest influence on him and proved to be the figure who most believed in O'Casey as a promising playwright, encouraging him to continue writing about the tenements and their people." (PARRA, 2016, p. 91-92).

4.1 O’Casey’s Feminist Vein

Sean O’Casey’s trajectory of approximately forty-four years as a playwright can be divided into two periods: the *Three Dublin Plays*, the plays for which he is still best known, and his production after them. The plays in the first stage of his career are directly engaged with Irish history and politics. Through an approach which is both historical and ideological, the author touches on questions related to the working class, the poor and women from a humanist perspective. The second stage, with *The Silver Tassie* (1928) as the first play, moved away from the realism of the early plays and incorporated an expressionist strand. According to him, this was a change in style that “came spontaneously” (Stewart 75). Some critics affirm that *The Plough and the Stars* contains the seeds which would lead to *The Silver Tassie*. Paul Kerryson argues that “*Plough* is linked to *The Silver Tassie* and O’Casey’s exploration of surrealism and expressionism” and for this reason “he was actually well ahead of his time, even in terms of intimating how things should be staged” (qtd. in Stewart 93).

However, O'Casey had already shown himself to be a playwright ahead of his time in the first phase of his career, when he was recognised for having a feminist vein, writing in a period in which Irish drama experienced an intense commitment with nationalistic and patriarchal traditions. “There’s no doubt that O’Casey’s women are stronger than the men” (Stewart 116). While the national drama of his time insisted in reproducing on stage a patriarchal society in which men had all or most of the power and influence, “his attitude toward women as stronger individuals remained consistent throughout his career” (Benstock, *Sean O’Casey* 73-74). Unlike most writers of that time, he devoted a powerful representation for his female characters. The treatment of Minnie, Mary, Juno, Nora and Bessie in the *Three Dublin Plays* deviated from what was expected from the national Irish drama produced during that revolutionary period and resulted in a mixed reception for his work.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the productions of The Abbey Theatre were important in the creation and development of an identity for Irish women. For Christina Wilson, “at times, the drama appearing onstage would turn into drama offstage”, inversely “in examining the presentation of women on the stage, it is possible to glean much information about cultural attitudes towards women” (291). Such was the case of the drama produced in the period of Ireland’s struggle for independence. Thanks to the idealised, but only imaginative, model of revolution promoted by the Irish politics, a general prudery in the way women were represented manifested itself in the plays produced in that time. The message of most plays concerning gender roles was an endorsement of the imaginary symbol

of passive women and sacrificial motherhood propagated by the Irish government. Those plays sustained a narrative in which men are represented as glorified heroes while women are depicted as naturally passive supporters of a violent revolution. They were depicted in several roles (mothers, lovers, wives, daughters, goddesses, peasants, and wage earners), but, in most cases, they were symbolically bonded to a weak representation, surrounded by diverse forms of constraints and oppression, which, in fact, were the gender complexities that Irish women really had to deal with. According to Meaney, representing women in such a way goes beyond fictional aspects because it brings a question about confining power to a specific group of individuals since "all too often in male nationalisms, gender difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men" (*Gender* 3-4). As such, in addition to patriarchal and religious constraints, in this specific context of Irish history, women's subordination was intensified.

On the other hand, if the real condition of Irish women was ignored by the politics and by the national drama as well, it was not forgotten by O'Casey. Real women were intimately present in his memory, which enabled him to create compelling female images in *Three Dublin Plays*. O'Casey explored the problems lived by the women who lived in the slums. His name is so closely connected with the life of the tenement and with the female condition of that time that historians have used it to describe scenarios and circumstances, as Kearns wrote about a teacher's impression of a school in 1970:

> Indeed, when teacher Elizabeth McGovern, 58, took her assignment at a Sean MacDermott Street school in "modern" 1970 she found it still "*very much* an O'Casey world" of impoverishment and decrepitude. Local mothers, she immediately noticed, bore the enormous daily pressure to make ends meet financially while caring for virtually *all* their family's needs. It was an unsettling situation. (3)

Since women always played a strong influence in O'Casey's life he was never ashamed of expressing his thoughts about them. Once asked by Don Ross, from the *New York Herald Tribune* if he thought women more courageous than men, he said, "In life, yes. They're much more near to the earth than men are. … women are half the population of the world – they're very important. What on earth would we do without them? [Laughter] I couldn't live in a house where there wasn't a woman" (qtd. in Stewart 64). Shivaun O'Casey told *The Independent* that her father "Used to say that if presidents and prime ministers were women, there would be no more war because they understood what it's like to lose a child" ("If he were here").

In O'Casey's life there were some outstanding female figures who were very significant to him and for whom he demonstrated deep affection. For instance, there are

several accounts of O'Casey's strong emotional attachment to his mother. Before Susan's death, even living in England, O'Casey helped to care for her. At various times the author made clear his admiration for her, as in the text of *The Plough and the Stars* in which the initial words "To the laugh of my mother at the Gate of the Grave…" are dedicated to Susan. According to the playwright, she had a wonderful laugh and he could hear it a quarter of an hour before she died (qtd. in Stewart 25). With respect to his early years, his sister, Isabella Charlotte Casey, is another feminine figure who is worth noticing. Even though hardly featured in O'Casey's autobiography,[32] she contributed to his initial education, especially when his attendance at school was only sporadic, due to an ulcerated cornea. Although O'Casey himself wrote in his autobiography that he learned to read by himself in his early teens, different sources indicate the involvement of Isabella during his early years and even describe her as "practically a second mother to him" (Hickling). One of the reviews of *The Rising of Bella Casey* (2013), by Mary Morrissy, a historical novel which reimagines O'Casey's sister, refers to the book as a story of Sean O'Casey's other Juno and reinforces her relevant contribution to the playwright's development:

> Bella was 15 years older than Sean and had been something of a second mother to him. A clever girl, she'd trained as a schoolteacher and influenced his own love of books, but when she married a soldier in the British army and went on to a life of increasing poverty, O'Casey appears to have turned against her, disappointed that her once-bright prospects had amounted to little. (Kearney)

Presumably, that is the reason why Isabella disappears from O'Casey's biographical account earlier than 1918, the year of her death, when she succumbed to the Spanish flu epidemic. The playwright, "who was 12 at the time, was angry that his sister had traded her superior education 'for the romance of a crimson coat'" (Cutler). Although little else is known about Isabella's life, Morrissy's fictional narrative suggests the idea that she was an important feminine presence in O'Casey's life. It reconstructs her story by restoring real facts of the missing years, showing her involvement, at least during the childhood, in O'Casey's upbringing. Cutler points out that it is likely that Isabella inspired some of the author's female characters and that he adored her as a child.

Eileen Reynolds was another important female figure in O'Casey's life. Eileen, an Irish actress, met O'Casey for the first time on account of her admiration for *Juno and the*

[32] O'Casey composed his autobiography in six volumes over more than two decades: *I Knock at the Door* (1939), *Pictures in the Hallway* (1942), *Drums under the Windows* (1945*), Inishfallen, Fare thee Well* (1949), *Rose and Crown* (1952), *Sunset and Evening Star* (1954). The volumes are written in the third person and O'Casey initially refers to himself as Johnny Casside. Whereas the playwright gives a very affectionate portrait of his mother in these writings, he did not devote much space to his sister.

Paycock. She was seventeen years younger than him and married O'Casey in 1927. They had three children, Breon, Niall and Shivaun. She was a very independent spirit and also a lovely personality who, towards the end of O'Casey's life, when he was almost blind, used to read to him for hours and hours (Kelleher). Eileen outlived O'Casey by thirty-one years, but she never married again. She remained a widow and nurtured the playwright's posthumous career by promoting his plays and writing about him. Shivaun, their youngest daughter, remembers that "there was a great flirtation between them. … She was a lovely personality" (Kelleher), and that O'Casey was a lovely father:

> And yet he lived completely with in his family. They had moved from London because Bernard Shaw had recommended Dartington Hall in Devon as the school the O'Casey children should attend and Sean would not live apart from his children. He was very proud of his active role in the simple duties of the household. Many an afternoon I stood with him in the kitchen doing the "washing up," or sat on the steps outside the front door shelling peas for dinner. (Coker)

Shivaun was born when the playwright was sixty. Although she came to know much of his professional life via secondary sources, she supports the image of her father as a very affectionate man. She remembers "her father would spend hours playing with her and her two brothers when they were children" (Kelleher). Shivaun became first an actress and then a theatre director and formed her own company, The O'Casey Theater Company, which has internationally produced O'Casey's autobiographical works and many plays, including *Three Dublin Plays*. She has also produced many other works in remembrance of O'Casey, such as *Song at Sunset* (1998), a one-man-show about Sean O'Casey and *Sean O'Casey: Under a Coloured Cap* (2005), a documentary dedicated to her mother and to her youngest brother Niall who died from acute leukemia at the age of 21. In the latter, Shivaun also included footage of her mother and talks about her memories and, besides providing O'Casey's personal and family life details, she underlines the kindness of her father to women from all over the world[33] and that he had been always concerned about the women of Ireland. "He corresponded with hundreds of women over the years…. He was very aware of women's problems and what they were having to face at that time." (qtd in Kelleher). O'Casey was concerned about the dominance of the Catholic Church and its impositions upon women and young girls. His daughter pointed out that he "was something of an early feminist himself" (*If he were here*). She remembers, for instance, that her father corresponded with a woman who

[33] Shivaun O'Casey reveals that when the family lived in England her father exchanged an impressive number of letters with hundreds of women in Ireland who faced diverse tyrannical situations. For more details regarding these women and their stories, access https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/sean-ocasey-letters-reveal- feminist-and-freethinker-26225075.html

was required to take a vow of chastity because "she was very pretty and very sexual. She was very confused. He actually based a character in one of his plays on that woman" (Kelleher). These details about O'Casey's personal life elucidate why, when writing his first plays, instead of making moral judgments about women or reproducing gender difference in terms of power, as most male authors did, O'Casey imparted a feminist tincture to his work. In fact, it seems he was giving life again to all those poor subjects he had lived with and to those stories he had learned over the years exchanging letters.

In *Three Dublin Plays*, the female characters are representations of women who challenged different forms of subjugation, moral, patriarchal, nationalistic, economic and others. Since the plays are tragicomedies, the women do not have a happy end, but O'Casey always emphasises the role of women in transcending tragic circumstances (Murray, "Three Dublin Plays Introduction" vii). Such an initiative in constructing powerful feminine figures capable of overcoming tyrannical circumstances indicates the operation of a fundamental resource for deconstructing the well-structured patterns for the common shared Irish national identity promulgated by the New Irish State, which, in terms of gender, defined its nationalist ideology very clearly through a binary distinction, women representing a symbol of the nation, the traditional figure of "Mother Ireland", a colonised feminine space, and men as the agents of the nation and owners of the colonial power. In such a political and social architecture, power is not associated with the female image. In fact, it replicates the women's long-standing exclusion from it. Therefore, a close reading of these plays shows that, unlike politics and pattern of plays of his time with respect to the representation of women, O'Casey was not simply producing persuasive female portrayals, but he was also addressing the question of the empowerment of women.

4.2 *Three Dublin Plays* through the Lense of Empowerment

4.2.1 The Shadow of a Gunman

The Shadow of a Gunman, first staged in 1923, is the first of O'Casey's *Three Dublin Plays*. The play is situated in 1920, and the story takes place in a small improvised room in Hilljoy Square, house of Donal Davoren and Seumas Shileds. This detail reveals an autobiographical connection since, in 1920, just a few years before the play's success at the Abbey, O'Casey had moved out of East Wall into a tenement flat at 35 Mountjoy Square,

where he lived with Mícheál Ó Maolain, a colleague in the Citizen Army. According to *The Irish Times*, he was "a native Irish speaker from the Aran Islands, … was a devout Catholic and could quote reams of Shakespeare, Shelley and the romantic poets, and he became the model for Seumas Shields in *The Shadow of a Gunman"* (qtd. in K. O'Neill).

The play presents the violent context of the Irish War of Independence, a period when violence and terrorism, justified by nationalistic beliefs, were all over Dublin and endangered most the lives of ordinary people who dwelt in the tenement houses, like the main characters depicted in the play, a poet, a peddler, and a young girl who inadvertently becomes involved in the war. In fact, O'Casey uses this horrific setting to denounce the effects of Irish politics on the population. For him, the play is a meditation on violence: "Well, I think the general philosophy of the play is the bewilderment and horror at one section of the community trying to murder and kill the other. … I think they're making life dangerous instead of making life safe. … [A]nd I think that's the philosophy that's in *The Shadow of a Gunman*" (qtd. in Stewart 62-3). The correlation of the play with such a turbulent Irish historical background is announced from the outset when, on account of the confusing political chaos of the time, everybody in the tenements mistakenly presumes that Davoren is an I.R.A gunman on the run. "Sure they all think you're on the run. Mrs Henderson thinks it, Tommy Owens thinks it, Mrs an' Mr Grigson think it, an' Minnie Powell thinks it too" (O'Casey 13). Even the landlord, having heard the rumour about Donal, gives the two lads an eviction order because "he is afraid of a raid, and that his … property'll be destroyed" (13). Although we learn Donal is far from being an official shooter, the residents have their tranquility threatened when they discover that, in fact, there was someone among them involved with the I.R.A.

The truth about the actual I.R.A agent comes as a shock and sets off an unfortunate outcome. The tragedy of the play is sustained by the catastrophic denouement which, as in *The Plough and the Stars*, is depicted by a woman who sacrifices her life. *The Shadow*'s tragic and comical elements are not intertwined. It starts out as a comedy and abruptly shifts to a deep tragedy at the very end of Act Two. When it "takes its uncorrectable skid into tragedy, there's enough dramatic force to make you feel for the characters, even the ones you laughed at" (Soloski). Even though O'Casey's comic elements persist for much of the play, tragic consequences are imminent. This first play and its satirical, but sentimental, depiction of the forgotten people of Dublin was an announcement of O'Casey's style for this blending of comedy and tragedy as a recurrent feature in the two subsequent *Dublin Plays*.

Donal Davoren, an aspiring poet, who shares a room with Seumas Shields, is flattered by the fact that his neighbours and, especially, Minnie Powell, misinterpret him as a brave

fighter. "But Minnie is attracted to the idea, and I am attracted to Minnie. And what danger can there be in being the shadow of a gunman?" (O'Casey 32). Although his false heroic image does not imply any risk to the dwellers, they end up in danger when Maguire, Seumas's friend, the character who is actually involved with the I.R.A, leaves a bag full of bombs in their room. When they eventually discover that the bag contains explosives and that Maguire has been killed in an ambush, Donal, Suemas, and the other residents become terrified. Initially presented simply as a young girl who is attracted by the fake gunman on the run, in the face of risk, Minnie fearlessly takes the bag up to her room. As soon as she does so, Black and Tans surround the house and arrest her. After that, a huge explosion is heard from offstage, followed by rapid machine-gun fire. She is shot when the Black and Tan lorry is caught in an ambush. Mrs Grigson, a tenement dweller, rushes inside and reports to Donal and Seumas that Minnie is dead.

Originally placed in the leading role of the play as a false gunman, such a prominent image is not enough to sustain Donal as the hero or the central figure of the play for too long. His representation as a hero is questioned mainly because of Minnie's heroic attitude. Her fierce readiness before the final tragic circumstances poses a significant contrast with his horrendous passiveness. Additionally, the way O'Casey introduces this character enhances the arguments against his image as a hero:

> *Davoren is sitting at the table typing. He is about thirty. There is in his face an expression that seems to indicate an eternal war between weakness and strength; there is in the lines of the brow and chin an indication of a desire for activity, while in his eyes there is visible an unquenchable tendency towards rest. His struggle through life has been a hard one, and his efforts have been handicapped by an inherited and self-developed devotion to 'the might of design, the mystery of colour, and the belief in the redemption of all things by beauty everlasting'. His life would drive him mad were it not for the fact he never knew any other. He bears upon his body marks of the struggle for existence and the efforts towards self-expression.* (3-4)

When O'Casey introduces the male 'protagonist', the use of the word *struggle* does not have the same sense as it does when it is deployed in an empowerment-oriented context. Rather, it is not associated with the idea of fighting to get the best of something. It is more an idea of conflict and dilemma than one of real effort that leads to outcome or personal achievement. According to Christopher Murray ("Introduction" viii), he is "handicapped in the Darwinian struggle for existence." In fact, his image does not fit the notion of power, but rather it comprises the notion of a pointless struggle, which becomes even clearer when the poet's struggle is already predicted by the author as an eternal one. Murray interprets this character as a would-be-hero which conveys irony in different aspects of its representation, as

in the conflict between the image of an artist with the image of a gunman, as well as his opportunism and vanity contrasting with his lack of courage towards his artistic convictions (*Twentieth Century* 100). When compared to Minnie, there is a distinction between their postures towards life that can easily be deciphered. Minnie's form of struggle is active, but Donal's is inactive, his face lines indicate "*a desire for activity*" which he is far from achieving. His constant and unsolved dilemma with society is his essential characteristic and he does not show any sign of inclination to engagement. Although he and Minnie are poor tenement residents who have always struggled through life, Minnie is full of energy and dynamism, while Donal's eyes denounce "*an unquenchable tendency towards rest*".

Donal and Seumas are the first two characters introduced in Act One. Their initial lines reveal their impotent attitude towards varied circumstances. As their roles unfold throughout the play, their passive behaviour, which is gradually exposed, will be clearly assumed in the final events of the plot. O'Casey's description of Seumas reiterates the perception of male characters in inconspicuous roles: "*Seumas, who is in the bed next to the wall to the right, is a heavily built man of thirty-five; he is dark-haired and sallow- complexioned. In him is frequently manifested the superstition, the fear and the malignity of primitive man*" (4). As for Donal, O'Casey repeats the notion of conflict in Seumas' picture using the opposition between "*heavily built man*" and "*sallow-complexioned*". The latter is usually employed to describe someone weak in appearance, often very pallid, and it is invariably associated with the idea of being sick or unhealthy. Although Seumas physical image may convey a visual notion of force, this is undermined as soon as the author finishes his physical description. Besides, he is almost never pleased with anything or anybody. He incessantly complains about the country and about its people:

> No wonder his unfortunate country is as it is, for you can't depend upon the word of a single individual in it. … Oh, this is a hopeless country! That's the Irish People all over – they treat a joke as a serious thing and a serious thing as a joke. Upon me soul, I'm beginning to believe that the Irish People aren't, never were, an' never will be fit for the self-government. (6, 9)

He repeatedly finds fault with others while he makes himself blind to his own (the same) faults, for example when he attributes "to Maguire the laziness which is actually his own" (Benstock, *Sean O'Casey* 65). Furthermore, he is very often worried and afraid that something bad will happen or has already happened, as can be seen in his reaction when Minnie is caught by servicemen and the only thing he can thinks about is if she is going to denounce him and Donal: "… an' so long as she keeps her mouth shut it'll be all right.… Holy Saint Anthony grant that she'll keep her mouth shut. … Did she say anything, is she

saying anything, what's she sayin', Mrs Grigson?" (57-59) According to Benstock (65), "Seumas Shields apparently displays elements of … superstitions and cowardice". In fact, such constant apprehension about what is on the verge of happening exposes the character's weakness and, consequently, unwillingness towards changing. He is afraid of the new.

In addition, the environment in which Donal and Seumas live also says much about their mood. It sets the tone for what will be revealed about their personalities. From the very beginning of the play, they seem to be surrounded by a lack of enthusiasm and determination which is symbolically indicated by the imagery used in the description of their room. "*The aspect of the place is one of absolute untidiness, engendered on the one hand by the congenital slovenliness of Seumas Shields, and on the other by the temperament of Donal Davoren, making it appear impossible to effect an improvement in such a place*" (3). The environment foreshadows the impossibility of change. When introducing these characters, O'Casey makes it clear that action and power are not their essential characteristics. When asked by Donal what they are going to do with the eviction order received from the landlord, Seumas says: "Oh, shove them up on the mantelpiece behind one of the statues", clearly an attempt to get rid of the problem which would mean only superficial relief for them. In fact, no action is taken. Donal replies: "Oh, I mean what action shall we take?" (13). Nothing is done about the case. It seems Donal does not know what to do, and Seumas is afraid of acting or does not want to act.

Throughout the play, they fail to develop a different attitude, which indicates powerlessness. For example, when they find out that Maguire was killed, they become desperate without any idea of what to do, as their minds had stopped functioning properly:

> *Davoren goes over to the bag, puts it on the table, opens it, and jumps back, his face pale and his limbs trembling.*
>
> DAVOREN. My God, it's full of bombs, Mills bombs!
>
> SEUMAS. Holy Mother of God, you're jokin'!
>
> DAVOREN. If the Tans come you'll find whether I'm jokin' or no.
>
> SEUMAS. Isn't this a nice pickle to be in? St Anthony, look down on us!
>
> DAVOREN. There's no use of blaming St Anthony; why did you let Maguire leave the bag here?
>
> SEUMAS. Why did I let him leave the bag here; why did I let him leave the bag here! How did I know what was in it? Didn't I think there was nothin' in it but spoons an' hairpins? What'll we do now; what'll we do now? Mother o' God,

grant there'll be no raid tonight. I knew things ud go wrong when I missed Mass this mornin'.

DAVOREN. Give over your praying and let us trying to think of what is best to be done. There's one thing certain: as soon as morning comes I'm on the run out of this house.

SEUMAS. Thinkin' of yourself, like the rest of them. Leavin' me to bear the brunt of it.

DAVOREN. And why shouldn't you bear the brunt of it? Maguire was no friend of mine; besides, it's your fault; you knew the sort of a man he was, and you should have been on your guard.

SEUMAS. Did I know he was a gunman; did I know he was a gunman; did I know he was a gunman? Did… (51-52)

Donal and Seumas are bewildered. All their talk is of no help in finding a reasonable way out. Seumas calls for divine intervention, and Donal blames him for being Maguire's friend. None of that contributes to resolving the desperate situation. In fact, it just makes things worse. They show no natural inclination to cope with difficult circumstances. Donal cannot think of anything, except running out of the house, which reaffirms his ineptitude at managing life setbacks; in turn, Shields' irritating sentence repetition serves only to make the conversation pesky and to prove his incompetence. Later, despite being aware of the risk Minnie is taking by bringing the bags with the bombs into her room, they do nothing, but merely observe the conjuncture of the events which will lead to her death:

SEUMAS. (*thoughtfully*) […] If they come across the bombs I hope to God Minnie'll say nothin'.

DAVOREN. We're a pair of pitiable cowards to let poor Minnie suffer when we know that we and not she are to blame.

SEUMAS. What else can we do, man? Do you want us to be done in? If you're anxious to be riffled, I'm not. Besides, they won't harm her, she's only a girl, an' so long as she keeps her mouth shut it'll be all right. (57)

Seumas does not care about the consequences Minnie might suffer. He just wants her to keep quiet. The passage also reveals that Seumas' view of Minnie is a reproduction of the prevailing gender stereotypes when he says that, on account of her fragility, she will be safe. A "strong" serviceman will not hurt a "weak" girl. It does not occur to them that they could go for Minnie and save her from the enemies' hands; but if they did, that would pose men once again in a superior standing, since a woman was saved by males. It is not a case of woman needing masculine strength, but it has to do with a notion of cooperation, of assisting

others. Cooperating or assisting someone does not imply superiority. They could assist Minnie as any human being would do for another one. It is the absurd level of passiveness in face of such a tragic situation which shocks. Their inaction is deeply disturbing, as showed in the scene in which Minnie is being arrested by the Auxiliary:

> MRS GRIGSON. (*from the door*) God save us, they're takin' Minnie, they're takin' Minnie Powell! (*Running out*) What in the name of God can have happened?
>
> SEUMAS. Holy Saint Anthony grant that she'll keep her mouth shut.
>
> DAVOREN. (*sitting down on the bed and covering his face with his hands*) We'll never again be able to lift up our heads if anything happens to Minnie.
>
> SEUMAS. For God's sake keep quiet or somebody'll hear you; nothin'll happen to her, nothin' at all – it'll be all right if she only keeps her mouth shut.
>
> MRS GRIGSON. (*running in*) They're after getting' a whole lot of stuff in Minnie's room! Enough to blow up the whole street, a Tan says! God tonight, who'd have ever thought that of Minnie Powell!
>
> SEUMAS. Did she say anything, is she saying anything, what's she sayin', Mrs Grigson?
>
> …
>
> DAVOREN. What way are they using Minnie, Mrs Grigson; are they rough with her?
>
> MRS GRIGSON. They couldn't be half rough enough; the little hussy, to be so deceitful; she might as well have had the house blew up! God tonight, who'd think it was in Minnie Powell!
>
> SEUMAS. Oh, grant she won't say anything!
>
> MRS GRIGSON. There they're goin' away now; ah, then I hope they'll give that Minnie Powell a coolin'.
>
> SEUMAS. God grant she won't say anything! Are they gone, Mrs Grigson?
>
> MRS GRIGSON. With her fancy stockins, an' her pom-poms, an' her crêpe de chine blouses! I knew she'd come to no good!
>
> SEUMAS. God grant she'll keep her mouth shut! Are they gone, Mrs Grigson? (58-59)

Mrs Grigson has no idea that Minnie is undergoing all those hazards because she, in a gesture of solidarity, had rushed out Seumas' and Davoren's room carrying the bag full of bombs to her place minutes before the Auxiliary brook down the tenement's street door, looking for the possessor of the arsenal. Despite Mrs Grigson's comments on Minnie's reputation, both male characters, who are fully aware of the truth, do nothing at all to try to put things straight. Seumas is in the grip of desperation. Donal is completely inert. They do not even have the courage to look outside in order to see what is happening to Minnie. It is a

female character who tells them what is happening on the street. Theoretically, empowerment is about the capacity to express "individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviour … to change", at different levels, including personal actions. In addition, "empowered outcomes for individuals might include situation-specific perceived control and resource mobilization skills" (Perkins and Zimmerman 569, 570). Donal and Seumas do not intend to cause any harm to Minnie, but nor are they able to mobilise any skill to help her, or at least, to induce a different outcome. How can they begin a process of change, if they do not even recognise the miserable state they are in? Paulo Freire says that oppressed people are generally alienated and therefore they lack self-knowledge. "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it" (69). Considering the two characters are unable to interpret their actual state, they cannot represent figures associated with the idea of empowerment. They do not demonstrate any of the features involved in the process nor in the outcome.

Donal's words before the first appearance of Minnie Powell reinforce the argument over his incapacity for transformation:

> DAVOREN. (*returning to the table and sitting down at the typewriter*) Oh, Donal Og O'Davoren, your way's a thorny way. Your last state is worse than your first. Ah me, alas! Pain, pain ever, for ever. Like thee, Prometheus, no change, no pause, no hope. Ah, life, life, life! (*There is a gentle knock at the door*.) Another Fury come to plague me now! (*Another knock, a little louder.*) You can knock till you're tired. (14)

In this passage Donal shows how unhappy he is with the current circumstances of his life. In spite of this dissatisfaction, he does little or nothing to change it. Although he realises his downward trajectory, he is not aware of the factors leading him to this condition. He does not understand the material reality of his oppression. He presents an "inability to manage emotions, skills, knowledge, and/or material resources in a way that effective performance of valued social roles will lead to personal gratification" (Solomon 16). Nevertheless, it can at least be said that Donal assumes a position of lack of power. No change happens for he does not move to the next stage of the process, conscientisation. Freire indicates critical consciousness as the key ingredient in realising empowerment. The increasing of conscientisation is of fundamental importance for it is the phase in which the individual sees and understands his/her position and moves toward other possible positions. Davoren seems only to observe or watch his state, but he does not care enough about it to discover the reasons and the possibilities for change.

The lexis prefigures the language of empowerment theory. The sentence "Your last state is worse than your first" confers the idea of a process with different phases in which he

compares the first with the last. There is also the suggestion that it has repeatedly happened to him, when he says "Pain, pain, for ever" and "Ah, life, life, life", conveying a notion of self-perpetuating lifecycles which have always ended in pain. This hypothesis is reinforced by his declaration "Like thee, Prometheus, no change, no pause, no hope". Without change, there is no empowerment. "Change" is one of the keywords in Rappaport's writings on the systematisation of empowerment theory and it is considered the target-stage since it is understood as the outcome of the process by many theorists.

The reference to the myth of Prometheus also supports the assumption of a cyclical process which brings no reversal. The mythological figure is also associated with power, for he was the entity responsible for bringing the capacity to use fire to humanity. Although he is most often remembered as the titan who gave fire to mankind after stealing it from Zeus, it is the passage about his punishment which conveys the notion of consecutive circular processes. Prometheus was a Titan who decided to fight on the side of the gods after the battle between the Greek gods and the race of giants called Titans. In return, Zeus entrusted him with the task of creating all living things. He formed the first humans out of mud and in the image of the gods, but Zeus decreed that they were to remain mortal and deemed them subservient creatures, vulnerable to the Earth's elements and dependent on the gods for protection. As a result of an error by Prometheus, Zeus forbade the use of fire on Earth for any purpose, but the Titan refused to see his creations denied this resource. So he scaled Mount Olympus to steal fire and brought it down to the people. It gave humanity the power to control nature for their own purposes and ultimately dominate the natural order. In fact, Prometheus' deed is considered to have been a catalyst for the fast development of civilisation. When Zeus realised that Prometheus had subverted his authority again, he imposed a brutal punishment on the Titan. He was chained to a mountain-side for eternity and every day he was visited by an eagle who would tear out his liver and each night his liver would grow back to be attacked again in the morning so that he remained in perpetual agony. The imagery of the Titan's punishment conveys the notion of an endlessly repeated event. For Murray, "it is quite appropriate that to the end Davoren remains incorrigibly the precious, priggish figure he is at the start, … because he is artificial and mawkish" (*Twentieth Century*, 100). Thus, like Prometheus, Donal seems to be damned to an ever repeating lifecycle which will not lead him to any improvement.

The appearance of the female character who follows the presentation of Seumas and Donal is clearly an antagonistic image opposed to the weak presence of the male figures. "*A Woman's figure appears at the window and taps loudly on one of the panes; at the same*

moment there is loud knocking at the door" (4). The debut of the female character takes place immediately after the powerless picture associated with the male ones. Her action shows signs of assertiveness and physical force. She is knocking at Seumas' and Donal's door. The scene creates an imagery of something full of energy trying to penetrate an inert place. O'Casey was very accurate in his depiction of women for, although their representation is linked to the idea of strength, endurance and superiority in relation to the male presence, O'Casey does not hide any of their "controversial" attitudes, such as when he describes "big Mrs Henderson is fightin' with the soldiers – she's after nearly knockin' one of them down" when Minnie is caught by the Black and Tans' lorry (59). In fact, he paints their existence as being very close to that of those real Irish women's stories narrated in Chapter Two. Another example is Mrs Grisgon; although a minor character, she is an effective representation of those Dublin heroines. She is a very poor lady "*about forty, but looks much older*" (42). O'Casey's introduction to this character reproduces almost photographically the pitiful conditions of many tenement women:

> *She is one of the cave-dwellers of Dublin, living as she does in a tenement kitchen, to which only an occasional sickly beam of sunlight filters through a grating in the yard; the consequent general dimness of her adobe has given her a habit of peering through half-closed eyes. She is slovenly dressed in an old skirt and bodice; her face is grimy, not because of her habits are dirty – for, although she is untidy, she is a clean woman – but because of the smoky atmosphere of her room. Her hair is constantly falling over her face, which she is as frequently removing by rapid movements of her right hand.* (42)

Hers is a life confined to a kitchen without time to herself, the real life of many Irish women. In contrast, O'Casey employs a completely different tone for her husband, Mr Adolphus:

> *He is a man of forty-five, but looks, relatively, much younger than Mrs Grigson. His occupation is that of a solicitor's clerk. He has all the appearance of being well fed; and, in fact, he gets most of the nourishment, Mrs Grisgon getting just enough to give her strength to do the necessary work of the household. On account of living most of his life out of the kitchen, his complexion is fresh, and his movements, even when sober, are livelier than those of his wife. He is comfortably dressed; heavy top-coat, soft trilby hat, a fancy coloured scarf about his neck, and he carries an umbrella.* (44- 45).

The contrast between these two descriptions gives a perfect notion of inequality. The representation of the tough feminine experience is in complete opposition to the comfortable masculine state. Mrs Grigson looks older than her husband, very probably because her daily tasks demand much more physical force than Mr Adolphus exerts in his job. The miserable way she dresses and her appearance confirm how much time and dedication this woman

confers on other people. On the other hand, Adolphus dresses comfortably and seems livelier than his wife "*on account of his life out of the kitchen*".

According to Benstock (*Paycock* 66), O'Casey's works portray women in three different stages, as maidens, as mothers and as old women. In the *Three Dublin Plays*, these roles are easily identifiable through characters such as Mary, Juno, Nora and Bessie. In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, the author develops more elaborately the young image through the representation of Minnie Powell. Unlike Mary, the daughter in *Juno and the Paycock*, Minnie does not have contact with books, and she is represented initially as an ignorant tenement girl. At first glance, the audience's impressions are based on what other people (her neighbours) say about her. For instance, Seumas describes her as "an ignorant little bitch that thinks of nothin' but jazz dances" (37), and several times he refers to her in a disdainful tone, which, in the end, reveals more about his petulance than about Minnie's essence. Donal, on the other hand, has a different opinion about her: "Had poor Minnie received an education she would have been an artist. … I'm sure she is a good girl, and I believe she is a brave girl" (37). Even though the initial impression of her tends to favour an image of insignificance, sometimes given to frivolity, as the story unfolds, her strong essence is revealed. O'Casey's treatment of female characters is marked by a propensity for creating them far superior to their male counterparts (Benstock, *Paycock* 66), and this is not different with Minnie. O'Casey introduces her distinctive characteristics in a way which poses her as a compelling image against the male characters:

> *The door opens and Minnie Powell enters with an easy confidence one would not expect her to possess for gentle way of knocking. She is a girl of twenty-three, but the fact of being forced to earn her living, and to take care of herself, on account of her parents' early death, has given her a force and an assurance beyond her years. She has lost the sense of fear (she does not know this), and, consequently, she is at ease in all places and before all persons, even those of a superior education, so long as she meets them in the atmosphere that surrounds the members of her own class. Her hair is brown, neither light nor dark, but partaking of both tints according to the light or shade she may happen to be in. Her well-shaped figure – a rare thing in a city girl – is charmingly dressed in a brown tailor-made costume, her stockings and shoes are a darker brown tint than the costume, and all are crowned by a silk tam-o'-shanter of a rich blue tint.* (14)

Although Minnie's description is composed of contrasting elements ("*easy confidence*" x "*gentle way*"), they do not convey the same notion of conflict as that seen in the description of the male characters. These contrastive elements are complementary and

reveal much about her agency[34] and self-control. Furthermore, O'Casey demonstrates sensitivity when constructing Minnie's physical image, including details which reveal her femininity such as her hair which is "*neither light nor dark, but partaking of both tints according to the light or shade she may happen to be in*."

From O'Casey's detailed physical and psychological depiction of Minnie, her picture is already assigned to a higher level than that of the males. For Benstock, O'Casey's young heroines, like Minnie Powell, "share with the mother figures of his plays a unique position: they far outnumber the male heroes, most of his men being too weak and too conventional to rival strong-minded and vibrant women" (*Sean O'Casey* 85). She is younger than the other characters, but already self-sufficient. Despite the demanding circumstances of her life ("*forced to earn her living*", "*take care of herself*"), and a tragic past event ("*her parents' early death*"), Minnie appears as one of O'Casey's heroines exactly because of this capacity to overcome obstacles and move forward. "Those who can say yes to life, as Minnie can, despite the "circumstances" are his natural heroines" (76).

Regarding the starting point of empowerment, Rappaport ("Studies") and Gutierrez ("Beyond Coping") proposed, respectively, that a position of lack of power may result from the incorporation of past experiences and that stressful life events can catalyse the process. In this sense, assuming "that the point of departure in the empowerment process is a position of … deprivation" (Carr 13), the loss of her parents in childhood posed for Minnie a process of individual empowerment, since this tragic event meant a life with many more difficulties. Becoming an orphan could have made her much more vulnerable to oppressive circumstances of life. "*She's had to push her way through life up to this without help from anyone*" (19). In addition to this psychological factor, the fact that she lives in the Dublin slums reveals that socioeconomic factors have contributed to her state of deprivation.

Murray finds this female character to be surprising (*Twentieth Century* 99), because, although she is despised by other characters in the play, she is ultimately the only resident of the tenement willing to sacrifice herself. Her attitudes throughout the play gradually disclose her prospects for empowerment. There are several aspects of her behaviour that show her ability to control hostile circumstances. For instance, while Donal and Seumas are desperate with the discovery of the ammunition in their house, Minnie "*rushes into the room … only partly dressed*", with "*a shawl over her shoulders*" (52), to warn the two men about the arrival of the Black and Tans in the tenements: "Mr Davoren, Donal, they're all around the

[34] In this context, agency means the state of being in action or exerting power.

house; they must be goin' to raid the place; I was lookin' out of the window an' I seen them; I do be on the watch every night; have you anything?" (52). In the face of such a critical situation, "*Davoren reclines almost fainting on the bed; Seumas sits up in an attitude of agonised prayerfulness; Minnie alone retains her presence of mind. When she sees their panic she becomes calm, though her words are rapidly spoken, and her actions are performed with decisive celerity*" (52). As soon as Minnie becomes aware of the danger, she acts: "The process of conscientization mobilizes people for action" (Carr 18). Examining the lexis it is clear that the female behaviour is opposed to that of the male characters. While Donal is fainting and Seumas is agonised, Minnie retains her presence of mind which enables her to remain calm to think and act. Such an ability to manage difficult situations is a commonplace for Minnie. Earlier in the play, in her initial dialogue with Donal, she clearly controls the sequence of the events, even faking a situation, in order to get close to him:

MINNIE. Are you in, Mr Shields?

DAVOREN. (*rapidly*) No, he's not, Minnie; he's just gone out – if you run out quickly you're sure to catch him.

MINNIE. Oh, it's all right, Mr Davoren, you'll do just as well; I just come in for a drop o' milk for a cup o' tea; I shouldn't be troublin' you this way, but I'm sure you don't mind.

DAVOREN. (*dubiously*) No trouble in the world; delighted, I'm sure. (*Giving her the milk*) There, will you have enough?

MINNIE. Plenty, lashins, thanks. Do you be all alone all day, Mr Davoren?

DAVOREN. No, indeed; I wish to God I was.

MINNIE. It's not good for you then. I don't know how you like to be yourself – I couldn't stick it long.

DAVOREN. (*wearily*) No?

MINNIE. No, indeed; (*with rapture*) there's nothin' I'm more fond of than a Hooley. I was at one last Sunday – I danced rings round me! Tommy Owens was there – you know Tommy Owens, don't you?

DAVOREN. I can't say I do.

MINNIE. D'ye not? The little fellow that lives with his mother in the two-pair back – (*ecstatically*) he's a gorgeous melodeon player!

…

MINNIE. Tommy takes after the oul' fellow, too; he'd talk from morning till night when has a few jars in him. (*Suddenly; for like all her class, Minnie is not able to converse very long on the one subject, and her thoughts spring from*

> *one thing to another*) Poetry is a grand thing, Mr Davoren, I'd love to be able to write a poem – a lovely poem on Ireland an' the man o' '98. (14-16)

This excerpt shows evidence that Minnie acts deliberately. Her "sudden" talk to Donal does not happen by accident, as she pretends. Her visit to the lads' room had a definite intention and it was not "for a drop o' milk for a cup o' tea". She pretends she is looking for Seumas when, in fact, she wants to see Donal. Moreover, even though there is not any direct reference in the text about it, it is possible to presume that she already knew Seumas was not at home, since she knocks at the door minutes after the peddler has left. In addition, this passage shows an inversion of the social order concerning women's expected posture towards flirting. In 1920s Ireland, the boundaries which limited female behavior acting were much more evident and reinforced. Men were expected to make the first move in dating. The dialogue shows how Minnie takes the lead and is able to produce the intended effects on Donal. Her dominance is clear throughout the scene. She is quick-witted, paying attention to what is happening and ready to react, "*her thoughts spring from one thing to another*", for example when she drops her conversation on Tommy Owens and suddenly starts talking about poetry, which is one of Donal's topics of interest. The female character clearly conducts the conversation, and everything that is said by the male is in response to her.

In addition to her dominating capacity, she does not fear what other people think of her. For instance, when Minnie Powell visits Donal in his flat, Seumas is worried about what other tenement's residents will say about that:

> SEUMAS. I was goin' to say something when you put out the light – what's this is was? – um, um, oh, ay: when I was comin' in this evenin' I say Minnie Powell goin' out. If I was you I wouldn't have that one comin' in here.
>
> DAVOREN. She comes in; I don't bring her in, do I?
>
> SEUMAS. The oul' ones'll be talkin', an' once they start you don't know how it'll end. Surely a man that has read Shelley couldn't be interested in an ignorant little bitch that thinks of nothin' but jazz dances, fox-trots, picture theatres an' dress. (37)

On the other hand, Minnie says: "An' do you think Minnie Powell cares whether they'll talk or no? She's had to push her way through life up to this without help from anyone, an' she's not goin' to ask their leave, now, to do what she wants to do" (19). According to Murray, some critics fall into the trap of adopting Minnie's initial ingenuousness as a synonym of inauthenticity (*Twentieth Century* 99). However, she is prepared to give her life in order to save a presumed gunman, a brave act which makes her the heroine of the story. In contrast to Minnie, Donal representation "supplies a portrait of the

artist as anti-hero, whose identity in the face of social breakdown is 'unbound', disengaged, in retreat and irredeemably guilty" (101). Minnie has many powerful characteristics which place her at a far superior level to that of Donal and Seumas. She can articulate her thoughts very fast, she anticipates critical situations and she manages resources in order to control circumstances, but, far more importantly, Minnie acts. Her natural propensity for action is what most distinguishes her from the male characters.

In the final scene, there is more evidence of her superiority in terms of psychological and behavioural skills. "I'll take them to my room; maybe they won't search it; if they do aself, they won't harm a girl. Goodbye… Donal" (52-53). As a matter of fact, Minnie does not succeed in her attempt to control that tragic situation, since she is put into the Black and Tans' lorry and minutes later,

> *Explosions of two bursting bombs are heard on the street outside the house, followed by fierce and rapid revolver and rifle-fire. People are heard rushing into the hall, and there is general clamour and confusion. Seumas and Davoren cower down in the room; Grigson, after a few moments' hesitation, frankly rushes out of the room to what he conceives to be the safer asylum of the kitchen. A lull follows, punctuated by an odd rifle-shot; then comes a peculiar and ominous stillness, broken in a few moments by the sounds of voices and movement. Questions are heard being asked: 'Who was it was killed?' 'Where was she shot?' which are answered by: 'Minnie Powell'; 'She went to jump off the lorry an' she was shot'; 'She's not dead, is she?'; 'They say she's dead – shot through the buzzom!'* (61)

Minnie's death seems to suggest a total defeat of her empowered attitudes; however, Carr argues that "even 'failed' attempts at political change are successful in that they reveal information about the structures and systems that are being targeted". Although the statement expresses a more collective approach of engagement, Carr adds that both social and personal trajectories are inherent in the process of empowerment and that their outcomes impact on their agents in terms of change of position and self-conceptions (18). Minnie's downfall does not diminish her attitudes while alive, nor does it remove the significance of her actions. This nonconventional female representation exposes how women had been submitted to an incoherent and contradictory role, challenging the conventional gender stereotypes nurtured by patriarchal principles. Frequently associated with the idea of receiving protection, in this play it is the female who manages circumstances to provide protection for others. In this sense, the feminine character discloses the inherent capacity of women to demonstrate power. O'Casey argued, "Women must be more courageous than the men. Courage doesn't consist in just firing a pistol and killing somebody else … women's courage consists in 'fortitude – and patience – and understanding'" (qtd. in Stewart 63). For Benstock, "The pathetic

weakness of Seumas and Donal" in the face of the tragic events just "made Minnie Powell look strong … she proved to be magnificent" (*Twentieth Century* 74). The opposition here works very well because the male characters do not demonstrate any sign of power throughout the play as Donal himself assumes in one of the last lines: "It's terrible to think that little Minnie is dead, but it's still more terrible to think that Davoren and Shields are alive! … Oh, Davoren, Donal Davoren, poet and poltroon, poltroon and poet!" (62). He thinks he is a poet, his neighbours think he is a gunman, but he is only a shadow of the things he is supposed to be. A shadow man who does not know who he is. In addition to the operation of Minnie's heroism as a subversive element which deconstructs stereotypical gender divisions, in a broader perspective, its confrontation with the dangerous life caused by armed conflicts denounces the bloodshed caused in the name of political ends. Her death cannot be reduced to an unsuccessful attempt at empowerment because it actually exposes the several tragic consequences of the Irish Civil War and illustrates how Irish politics brought horror to ordinary civilians. Although her powerful and challenging behaviour could not guarantee successful collective and social achievements due to the circumstances of that turbulent period of Ireland's history, the transcendency of her subversive narrative of personal empowerment cannot be expunged.

4.2.2 Juno and the Paycock

Juno and the Paycock was performed at the Abbey for the first time in 1924 and was extremely successful after its premiere.[35] If *The Shadow of a Gunman* opened the doors of the Irish National Theatre to O'Casey, *Juno's* financial success gave impetus to his career as a playwright and allowed him to quit his job as a manual labourer to be a full-time writer. In fact, O'Casey's first plays had a lot to do with saving the Abbey from bankruptcy, besides bringing audiences back over and over again in their subsequent performances (Murray 104). The action of the play takes place in 1922 and its background is the Irish Civil War, which, rather than bringing solutions for the country's problems, aggravated the miseries of victims, who were mainly poor citizens from Dublin slums. The deaths of two characters in the play, Robbie Tancred and Johnny Boyle, serve as examples of the fatal effects of this conflict on the Dublin poor.

[35] Peter James Harris presents an overview of the critical reception of *Juno and the Paycock* in London Theatre between 1925 and 1996 in his book *From Page to Stage* (2011).

Most of the play takes place in the Boyle Family's two-room apartment, in a tenement house in Dublin. The family consists of four members: 'Captain' Boyle, Juno Boyle, and their daughter and son, Mary and Johnny. Boyle is an irresponsible and idle person, who puts more effort into avoiding work than in looking for it. Johnny, who was hit in the hip and had an arm blown off by a bomb during the Easter Rising, skulks in his bed on account of his infirmity. Mary has a job in a factory, but she is on strike in protest against the layoff of a fellow worker. She is very engaged in trade union activities. Juno is the family's powerhouse. She runs the house and has the whole burden on her.

The setting reflects the poverty of the family. It is too difficult for Juno to make ends meet, with Jack spending money drinking in pubs with his friend, Joxer Daly. Mary is attracted to Charlie Bentham, a schoolteacher, who brings the news that the Boyles have come into a large inheritance. Excited by the news, just two days after it, Jack borrows money and makes purchases on credit in anticipation of receiving the money. After two months, Mr Bentham abruptly ceases all contact with the family and Jack discovers there is no inheritance at all. Abandoned by Bentham, Mary discovers she is pregnant and all the male characters, even her father and brother, reject her. Juno, however, is the only one who supports her and offers to help to raise the baby.

For the critic James Agate, "*Juno and the Paycock* is as much a tragedy as *Macbeth*, but it is a tragedy taking place in the porter's family" (qtd. in Murray, Introduction, ix). The play readdresses traditional forms of tragedy. It could more readily be called a tragicomedy because, in "*Juno*… you're in what's almost a parlour comedy for much of the second act, until they're in the middle of the party, drinking and singing… and it's a long way into that play – it's all been very amusing" (Stewart 96). The initial mood, with scenes like Juno trying to hide in order to surprise Boyle and Joxer as they make themselves at home, or when Boyle, hearing steps approaching from outside, which he assumes to be Juno's, abruptly *"whips the pan off the fire and puts it under the bed, then sits down at the fire"* (O'Casey 83), creates many comical moments, but it does not displace the tragedy. The comic vein is broken when Mrs Tancred, another resident of the tenement, comes in very distraught because her son's coffin is being taken out. Other moments help to develop the tragic tone of the play, such as when the Boyle family finds out they are not going to receive any inheritance, Mary's pregnancy after being abandoned by Bentham, Johnny's death, and the final entrance of Boyle, drunkenly indifferent to what has happened to his family. Although, at first sight, the play seems to be about the disaster in Boyle's family, it goes beyond domestic melodrama to touch on larger questions, such as personal struggle and feminine

autonomy. *Juno and the Paycock* established itself at the Abbey as a play exhibiting modern warfare which brings violence and terrorism to ordinary's people lives. Through a family tragedy, O'Casey tries to illuminate other aspects of the national problem such as "the tragic waste of civil war changes nothing in the social conditions still awaiting revolution" (Murray *Mirror up to Nation* 103). The play deepens this perception by focusing on the family's struggle to survive in the midst of the dreadful casualties of the Civil War, in which the central pillar is Juno Boyle, who is at the heart of her family's efforts to survive.

The play begins with a description of the Boyles' room, where Mary is reading a newspaper and her brother is sitting crouched beside the fire. The depiction of daughter and son at home seems to be the first female v. male opposition in which the play depicts the superiority of the feminine characters: *"Johnny Boyle is sitting crouched beside the fire. Mary… is arranging her hair before a tiny mirror perched on the table. Beside the mirror is stretched out the morning paper, which she looks at when she isn't gazing into the mirror"* (67). Based on the way they are positioned and on what they are doing, the image juxtaposes a contrasting view of the two characters in the room. Whilst Mary, sitting at the table, is doing two things at the same time, Johnny is only described as "*sitting crouched"*. The way he sits squatting close to the ground denotes a lack of physical motion and notion of inferiority towards Mary, not only in terms of space, but also regarding attitude. Johnny represents inaction, but Mary is a picture of action. This can be seen in Johnny's first appearance:

> *Johnny appears at the door on left. He can be plainly seen now; he is a thin, delicate fellow, something younger than Mary. He has evidently gone through a rough time. His face is pale and drawn; there is a tremulous look of indefinite fear in his eyes. The left sleeve of his coat is empty, and he walks with a slight halt.* (71)

The notion of powerlessness is reinforced by the author's description. Johnny is thin, delicate, and fearful. His description heightens the portrayal of an impotent figure. Additionally, his isolation from the other characters, "Let me alone, let me alone, let me alone, for God's sake" (103), and his infrequent appearance throughout the play establishes Johnny as a minor character in relation to the other members of his family. On the other hand, according to Fallon, O'Casey himself attributed a considerable importance to this character, saying that the tragedy of Johnny Boyle was a central portion of the play: "I cannot recall that he once spoke about Juno or Joxer or the Captain; always Johnny" (17). "I recalled O'Casey's insistence that he was writing a play about a young man called Johnny Boyle" (24). Without doubt, Johnny is a victim of the violent effects of the Irish national campaign for self-

definition. His experiences in the conflict brought him irreparable losses and an unfortunate existence. He fought in the Rising of 1916, when he was only a teenager, and was wounded in the hip. Later, during the Civil War, he lost his left arm in a fight on O'Connell Street. Besides these physical disorders, he has been psychologically damaged by his experiences. He never leaves the apartment because he is haunted by memories and hallucinations:

> *A frightened scream is heard from Johnny inside.*
>
> MRS BOYLE. Mother of God, what's that?
>
> *He rushes out again, his face pale, his lips twitching, his limbs trembling.*
>
> JOHNNY. Shut the door, shut the door, quick, for God's sake! Great God, have mercy on me! Blessed Mother o' God shelter me, shelter your son!
>
> MRS BOYLE. (*catching him in her arms*). What's wrong with you? What ails you? Sit down, sit down, here, on the bed — there now — there now.
>
> MARY. Johnny, Johnny, what ails you?
>
> JOHNNY. I seen him, I seen him — kneelin' in front o' the statue — merciful Jesus, have pity on me!
>
> MRS BOYLE. Get him a glass o' whisky — quick, man, an' don't stand gawkin'.
>
> *Boyle gets the whisky.*
>
> JOHNNY. Sit here, sit here, mother — between me an' the door.
>
> MRS BOYLE. I'll sit beside you as long as you like, only tell me what was it came across you at all?
>
> JOHNNY. I seen him — I seen Robbie Tancred kneelin' down before the statue — an' the red light shinin' on him — an' when I went in — he turned an' looked at me — an' I seen the woun's bleedin' in his breast — Oh, why did he look at me like that? — it wasn't my fault that he was done in — Mother o' God, keep him away from me!
>
> MRS BOYLE. There, there, child, you've imagined it all. There was nothin' there at all — it was the red light you seen, an' the talk we had put all the rest into your head. Here, dhrink, more o' this — it'll do you good — An', now, stretch yourself down on the bed for a little. (*To Boyle*) Go in, Jack, an' show him it was only in his own head it was. (106-7)

His personal tragedy is rooted in the national plight, which was one of O'Casey's main concerns. However, whereas an important aspect of the *Three Dublin Plays* is O'Casey's emphasis on representations that can transcend oppressive circumstances, Johnny's role is far from fulfilling such an intention. On account of his infirmity and his guilty conscience, since he gave information that led to the murder of Mrs. Tancred's son, he is afraid of every noise he hears from the street. "His sufferings are therefore self-induced and involve him in a form

of guilt manifested by superstition and hallucinations. His very life seems to depend on the trembling of a votive light, the extinction of which sends him into paroxysms of terror" (Murray *Mirror up to Nation* 103). Of course, Johnny is right to suspect that something bad is going to happen to him. In Act Three, he is shot and killed for his act of betrayal. His attempt to ride from his avengers stresses the extent to which he is riddled with guilt and fear. He feeds his own sufferings, making his miserable condition worse. He does not even try to do anything about his misfortune. His self-imposed means of dealing with his personal tragedy shows that he has no scape for improvement. His "action" in the play is thus reduced to stagnation.

His characteristics (cowardice, indifference, fear) transform Johnny into an image contrary to the idea of power or of someone who is able to move through a process with respect to specific goals. Self-efficacy, knowledge, competence, action and impact, essential components for personal empowerment are not elements of his characterisation. He does not contemplate changing his own destiny nor making decisions to make his life different; in other words, he lacks the skills to empower himself. Consequently, his lack of self-perception prevents him from any active engagement in the collective domain, which may be exemplified by the fact that his sister, who is a 22-year-old woman, has a job in a factory, while he, who "is something younger than Mary", does not bring any financial support for his family.

Compared to her brother, Mary is a more proactive figure. She is presented as a lively person when we first meet her in the play. *"She is a well-made and good-looking girl of twenty-two*" (67). Her vivacity and energy contrast with Johnny's lethargy and disablement. She demonstrates traits of self-love as she cares for her appearance, looking in mirrors and trying different ribbons around her head: "I don't like this ribbon, ma; I think I'll wear the green — it looks better than the blue" (69-70)[36]. Her character is more participative in the narrative as she frequently interacts with other characters, for example, Jerry Devine and Charlie Bentham. Both are well-educated men. Jerry "*is about twenty-five, well set, active and earnest. He is a type, becoming very common now in the Labour Movement, of a mind knowing enough to make the mass of his associates, who know less, a power, and too little to broaden that power for the benefit of all*" (72). Bentham, an English schoolteacher, "*is a young man of twenty-five, tall, good-looking, with a very high opinion of himself generally.*

[36] Peter Harris explores the symbolic significance of Mary's preference for the green ribbon in his article "The Colonial and Post-Colonial Moments in Irish Drama: a comparison of Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) with O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*" (1996).

He is dressed in a brown coat, brown knee-breeches, grey stockings, a brown sweater, with a deep blue tie; he carries gloves and a walking stick" (91). Jerry has feelings for her, but these are unrequited since she is attracted to Charlie:

> JERRY. (*appealingly*). Mary, what's come over you with me for the last few weeks? You hardly speak to me, an' then only a word with a face o' bittherness on it. Have you forgotten, Mary, all the happy evenin's that were as sweet as the scented hawthorn that sheltered the sides o' the road as we saunthered through the country?
>
> MARY. That's all over now. When you get your new job, Jerry, you won't be long findin' a girl far betther than I am for your sweetheart.
>
> JERRY. Never, never, Mary! No matther what happens, you'll always be the same to me. (81-82)

During the dialogue, Mary shows her determination to end the relationship, which is a move to get rid of him in order to be free to stay with Charlie. She clearly manages the situation to keep Jerry distant from her. She is not even interested in Jerry's apparently successful career:

> MARY. If you go on talkin' like this, Jerry Devine, you'll make me hate you!
>
> JERRY. Well, let it be either a weddin' or a wake! Listen, Mary, I'm standin' for the Secretaryship of our Union. There's only one opposin' me; I'm popular with all the men, an' a good speaker — all are sayin' that I'll get elected.
>
> MARY. Well?
>
> JERRY. The job's worth three hundred an' fifty pounds a year, Mary. You an' I could live nice an' cosily on that; it would lift you out o' this place an'…
>
> MARY. I haven't time to listen to you now — I have to go. (81)

Even though Mary is disappointed in her romantic association with Charlie, who abruptly ceases all contact with the family and abandons her, she is the kind of woman who puts her "happiness" in first place before any promise of a good life or financial stability. She pursues what she wants, rather than being constrained by what life has already designed for her. Although her resoluteness may reveal a certain dose of idealism concerning romantic relationships, it also reveals a personal mastery over her affairs and circumstances.

As regards her stronger representation in relation to her brother, Mary seems to be much more engaged with life than her brother and as she is well informed about the news, she can speak knowledgeably about politics and current affairs. She is a militant trade unionist and seeks a better life for the working class. "The hour is past now when we'll ask the employers' permission to wear what we like" (70). She is on strike in defence of a female co- worker who suffered a case of victimisation. Moreover, Mary shows her disagreement with

the domesticity imposed on the female role, particularly the belief that women are supposed to serve men. In Act One when she is at home, her mother arrives to prepare the breakfast:

MRS BOYLE. Ah, then, if that father o' yours doesn't come in soon for his breakfast, he may go without any; I'll not wait much longer for him.

MARY. Can't you let him get it himself when he comes in?

MRS BOYLE. Yes, an' let him bring in Joxer Daly along with him? Ay, that's what he'd like an' that's what he's waitin' for — till he thinks I'm gone to work, an' then sail in with the boul' Joxer, to burn all the coal an' dhrink all the tea in the place, to show them what a good Samaritan he is! But I'll stop here till he comes in, if I have to wait till tomorrow mornin'.

Voice of Johnny inside. Mother!

MRS. BOYLE. Yis?

JOHNNY. Bring us in a dhrink o' wather.

MRS BOYLE. Bring in that fella a dhrink o' wather, for God's sake, Mary.

MARY. Isn't he big an' able enough to come out an' get it himself? (69)

…

Voice of Johnny. Is Mary goin' to stay here?

MARY. No, I'm not goin' to stay here; you can't expect me to be always at your beck an' call, can you? (71)

Through these features it is possible to see the beginnings of Mary's empowerment. However, although she is depicted as an intelligent girl and shows a natural disposition for improvement, she is confined in an oppressive atmosphere due to the circumstances life imposes upon her:

Two forces are working in her mind—one, through the circumstances of her life, pulling her back; the other, through the influence of books she has read, pushing her forward. The opposing forces are apparent in her speech and her manners, both of which are degraded by her environment, and improved by her acquaintance—slight though it be—with literature. (67-68)

There are various moments in the text where it is possible to see Mary's attempt at intellectual engagement. In Act Three, for instance, she talks about going to a lecture given by Jerry in the Socialist Rooms some time ago. At another point her father comments on her reading habits: "Her an' her readin'!… What did th' likes of her, born in a tenement house, want with readin'? Her readin's afther bringin' her to a nice pass — oh, it's madnin',

madnin', madnin'" (134-5). In Act One, Boyle also refers to her intellectual aspirations when he refers to her reading of Ibsen's plays:

> JOXER. (*yielding to the temptation*). Ah, I won't stop very long anyhow. (Picking up a book from the table) Whose is the buk?
>
> BOYLE. Aw, one o' Mary's; she's always readin' lately — nothin' but thrash, too. There's one I was lookin' at dh'other day : three stories, *The Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, an' *The Wild Duck* — buks only fit for chiselurs! (85)

In a scene which also reveals much about Boyle's ignorance, it is evident that Mary's nature is connected to intelligence and the desire to better herself, but it seems not to be part of her family's world, as her father condemns her reading. Her involvement with books and her bond with knowledge are the only two things that may push her forward. In addition to her oppressive social reality in the tenements, Mary was part of a system which restricted women to low-status levels of education and occupation. In fact, it seems there was no place for women like her in Irish society. Like her brother, she is another victim of the effects of the Irish struggle for independence who is going to suffer the additional indignities of being a single mother.

In terms of empowerment, Mary is also a stronger image than Jack Boyle. His reaction towards Mary's efforts at improvement in life is only one of his many features depicting him as someone who holds everyone in his family back, including himself. The only expression of grandeur in this character is in his mind on account of his false judgment about himself. He is a showy and vain man of about sixty years old. He "*carries himself with the upper part of his body slightly thrown back, and his stomach slightly thrust forward*" (73), a posture which matches Juno's description of him: "I killin' meself workin', an' he sthruttin' about from mornin' till night like a paycock!" (68). Boyle's delusions of grandeur are noticed by his neighbours too; Mrs Madigan, another resident in the tenements, also refers to a "paycock" when she is talking to him: "So much th' better. It'll be an ayse to me conscience, for I'm takin' what doesn't belong to you. You're not goin' to be swankin' it like a paycock with Maisie Madigan's money — I'll pull some o' th' gorgeous feathers out o' your tail!" (131). Boyle, who calls himself "Captain", is always recalling his fictious sailor days and telling exaggerated stories of his "brave life" at sea. "I'm looking for a place near the sea; I'd like the place that you might say was me cradle, to be me grave as well. The sea is always callin' me" (111). But Juno denounces him: "Everybody callin' you 'Captain', an' you only wanst on the wather, in an oul' collier from here to Liverpool, when anybody, to listen or look at you, ud take you for a second Christo For Columbus!" (77). Boyle only

deceives himself with his fantasies, since nobody seems to be fooled by them, not even his friend, Joxer: “I have to laugh every time I look at the deep-sea sailor; an’ a row on a river ud make him seasick!” (96). Boyle’s actions have only two consequences, to please himself or to cause more problems for his family.

The Captain, in fact, is the opposite of the notion of empowerment. Amidst all the adversities which overwhelm the house, while his wife and his daughter display characteristics of empowered subjects, striving for improvement, he represents another source of difficulty for his family. There is no sign of proactiveness in his characterisation. He is depicted as a symbol of indolence, as Juno says:

> MRS BOYLE. Shovel! Ah, then, me boyo, you’d do far more work with a knife an’ fork than ever you’ll do with a shovel! If there was e’er a genuine job goin’ you’d be dh’other way about — not able to lift your arms with the pains in your legs! Your poor wife slavin’ to keep the bit in your mouth, an’ you gallivantin’ about all the day like a paycock! (77)

Whenever Juno instigates him to work his excuse is that his legs hurt: “It ud be betther for a man to be dead! U-ugh! There’s another twinge in me other leg! Nobody but meself knows the sufferin’ I’m goin’ through with the pains in these legs o’ mine!” (80). Curiously, it is a “terrible” pain which mysteriously appears only when someone mentions work to him:

> JERRY. Oh, you’re takin’ a wrong view of it, Mr. Boyle; I simply was anxious to do you a good turn. I have a message for you from Father Farrell : He says that if you go to the job that’s on in Rathmines, an’ ask for Foreman Managan, you’ll get a start.
>
> BOYLE. That’s all right, but I don’t want the motions of me body to be watched the way an asthronomer ud watch a star. If you’re folleyin’ Mary aself, you’ve no pereeogative to be folleyin’ me. (*Suddenly catching his thigh*) U-ugh, I’m afther gettin’ a terrible twinge in me right leg!
>
> MRS BOYLE. Oh, it won’t be very long now till it travels into your left wan. It’s miraculous that whenever he scents a job in front of him, his legs begin to fail him! Then, me bucko, if you lose this chance, you may go an’ furrage for yourself!
>
> JERRY. This job’ll last for some time too, Captain, an’ as soon as the foundations are in, it’ll be cushy enough.
>
> BOYLE. Won’t it be a climbin’ job? How d’ye expect me to be able to go up a ladder with these legs? An’, if I get up aself, how am I goin’ to get down agen? (79-80)

Jack is profoundly lazy. He is “never tired o' lookin' for a rest" and misses no opportunity of slipping out to the pub (77). When Jerry Devine comes with some news

about a job, he suddenly develops a severe pain in his legs which is just one of his repertory of tricks. The only time Boyle looks forward a transformation to his family's life, "Johnny — Mary — you're to keep yourselves to yourselves for the future. Juno, I'm done with Joxer — I'm a new man from this out" (97), is when Bentham comes with the false promise of an inheritance. The impotency of Boyle's character is reinforced with this new event. Even before this promised newfound wealth, instead of mobilising his efforts in making plans or using effective strategies to improve their chaotic financial situation, such as controlling their budget or saving money for immediate necessities, he confirms his lack of self-mastery. He concentrates on superfluous things by purchasing unfashionable furniture and other luxuries on credit, in anticipation of receiving the inheritance. Act Two opens with a description of the family's room, "*the furniture is more plentiful, and of a vulgar nature. A glaringly upholstered armchair and lounge; cheap pictures and photos everywhere. Every available spot is ornamented with huge vases filled with artificial flowers. Crossed festoons of colored paper chains stretch from end to end of ceiling"* (98). Boyle also gives a party for his neighbours to celebrate his forthcoming prosperity, where the centre of attention is a gramophone bought by himself, but carried home by Juno:

> Voice of Juno *(at the door)* Open the door, Jack; this thing has me nearly kilt with the weight.
>
> *Boyle opens the door. Juno enters carrying the box of a gramophone, followed by Mary carrying the horn and some parcels. Juno leaves the box on the table and flops into a chair.*
>
> JUNO. Carryin' that from Henry Street was no joke (101-2).

The presence of the gramophone on the stage is a representation of Boyle's flimsy vision of the life. It also corroborates his image of a self-centred man with an air of smug superiority. Even when given an opportunity for change, he is no good at decision-making and his attitudes cause disorder and additional problems for his family in the long run. Boyle has no potential efficiency and fails to bring freedom and progress for himself and his family.

In the midst of all these unfortunate events, Juno emerges as the strenght at the heart of the plot. "I don't know what any o' yous ud do without your ma" (71-72). She is the most admired woman in O'Casey's plays (Benstock, *Sean O'Casey* 74) and her image is reproduced in some of his other female characters (Benstock, *Paycock* 66). The matriarch's diligence and compassion for others are immediately contrasted with her husband's laziness

and self-importance. Juno's first appearance stresses her diligence: *"she enters by the door on right; she has been shopping and carries a small parcel in her hand"* (68). She arrives home to organise the breakfast and minutes later she prepares to go out to work. Boyle, in turn, despite it being early in the morning, has not yet returned from a night of drinking with his friend Joxer. O'Casey describes her as a woman of "*forty-five years of age"* who *"twenty years ago . . . must have been a pretty woman"; "but her face has now assumed that look which ultimately settles down upon the faces of the women of the working-class; a look of listless monotony and harassed anxiety, blending with an expression of mechanical resistance"* (68). Juno is the representation of countless poor Irish women who struggled valiantly to hold their dysfunctional families together in the oppressive context of Ireland's process of independence. "Juno is not a stand-in for Ireland, but a character who represents real Irish women" (Wilson 325). She is the breadwinner and powerhouse of her family. She is the image of the working-class female struggle which was waged by strong women who did not have the same opportunities as middle and upper-class women. Seen in these terms, her behaviour ruptures the traditional order of the Irish family and may be equated with Perkins and Zimmerman's classification of individual empowerment. As O'Casey stated about Minnie Powell through Davoren's observation in *The Shadow of a Gunman, "*Had poor Minnie received an education she would have been an artist. She is certainly a pretty girl. I'm sure she is a good girl, and I believe she is a brave girl" (37), in *Juno and the Paycock*, he reiterates the idea with Juno: "*Were circumstances favourable, she would probably be a handsome, active and clever woman"* (68). Both characters embody positive features which are constrained by external factors.

Juno received this nickname from Boyle because of a number of important events in her life that happened in June: she was born in June, married in June and had a child in June. Her name's link with the goddess Juno also contains some aspects related to the elaboration of her image. Whilst the Roman goddess Juno is the protector and advisor of women as well as the goddess of love and marriage, in Greek mythology, Juno is the goddess of the household and has been depicted riding a chariot pulled by peacocks. These associations offer an interesting consideration in terms of a feminist perspective of the play. Juno is depicted as a conventional wife/mother who struggles to serve and protect her family, suffering as an exploited figure. However, since she is the main spring of her family without any masculine support, her relationship with Boyle frequently involves controlling his actions:

BOYLE. (*to Joxer, who is still outside*). Come on, come on in, Joxer; she's gone out Long ago, man. If there's nothing else to be got, we'll furrage out a cup o' tay, anyway. It's the only bit I get in comfort when she's away. 'Tisn't Juno should be her pet name at all, but Deirdre of the Sorras, for she's always grousin'. (73)

It is noticeable that Juno exercises authority over domestic issues. At home, she is generally in control. In her presence, Jack, who is always giving himself an air of bravery, reveals his mediocrity and compliance.

JOXER. It's a terrible thing to be tied to a woman that's always grousin'. I don't know how you stick it — it ud put years on me. It's a good job she has to be so ofen away, for (*with a shrug*) when the cat's away, the mice can play!

BOYLE. (*with a commanding and complacent gesture*). Pull over to the fire, Joxer, an'we'll have a cup o' tay in a minute.

JOXER. Ah, a cup o' tay's a darlin' thing, a daaarlin' thing — the cup that cheers but doesn't… *(Joxer's rhapsody is cut short by the sight of Juno coming forward and confronting the two cronies. Both are stupefied*.)

MRS BOYLE. (*with sweet irony—poking the fire, and turning her head to glare at Joxer*). Pull over to the fire, Joxer Daly, an' we'll have a cup o' tay in a minute! Are you sure, now, you wouldn't like an egg?

JOXER. I can't stop, Mrs. Boyle; I'm in a desperate hurry, a desperate hurry.

MRS BOYLE. Pull over to the fire, Joxer Daly; people is always far more comfortable here than they are in their own place.

Joxer makes hastily for the door. Boyle stirs to follow him; thinks of something to relieve the situation. (74)

Much of Juno's agency and strength are communicated through her actions and interaction with other characters. Whereas Boyle lives in his own world of fantasy and is indifferent to what happens around him, "that's enough about them things; they don't affect us, an' we needn't give a damn. If they want a wake, well, let them have a wake" (117), Juno is responsible for the realism aspect of the play, since her role reminds the audience about the real context of the family. Adverse circumstances enable her propensity for power and struggle to bloom: "When the full brunt of the series of tragedies fall, it is only Juno who is capable of holding the pieces together" (Benstock, *Sean O'Casey* 75). She supports her family financially and emotionally. The grim realities of tenement life and "the end of the financial dream leave Juno a resolute woman, determined to start life again with her daughter" (Benstock, *Sean O'Casey* 55). As the play unfolds and the family discovers that the

inheritance was a false promise, she gradually increases her potential for empowered attitudes, a process which culminates when she evolves into full awareness and finally comprehends that her errant husband will never change his way of life.

It could be said that Juno facilitates her own tragedy, displaying a certain ambivalence regarding her consciousness and disposition for change. In Act One, she is a resolute woman who has struggled in life and does not agree with her husband's indolent behaviour. Howerver, in Act Two, Juno suspends her empowered posture, when, overjoyed with the news, she gives in to the appeal of the improbable legacy and surrenders to Boyle's foolishness, ending up as an image of pathetic disappointment. As Johnny himself tells his mother: "You're to blame yourself for a gradle of it — givin' him his own way in everything, an' never assin' to check him, no matther what he done. Why didn't you look afther th' money? why…" (138). She even facilitates Boyle's alcoholism:

BOYLE. I thought you said you were goin'?

MRS. BOYLE. I'm goin' now; come on, Mary.

BOYLE. Ey, Juno, ey!

MRS. BOYLE. Well, what d'ye want now?

BOYLE. Is there e'er a bottle o' stout left?

MRS. BOYLE. There's two o' them here still.

BOYLE. Show us in one o' them an' leave t'other there till I get up. An' throw us in the paper that's on the table, an' the bottle o' Sloan's Liniment that's in the drawer.

MRS. BOYLE. (*getting the liniment and the stout*). What paper is it you want — the *Messenger*?

BOYLE. *Messenger*! The *News o' the World*!

Mrs. Boyle brings in the things asked for, and comes out again.

MRS. BOYLE. (*at door*). Mind the candle, now, an' don't burn the house over our heads. I left t'other bottle o' stout on the table. (125)

Juno's fluctuating behaviour at some moments of the play may be explained through a provisional perspective regarding identity. Carr claims that, during the empowerment personal process, more specifically through the interpretative process inherent in consciousness-raising, provisional identities are created and recreated (17). It can be an ongoing event in the empowerment process. Furthermore, Lauretis argues that "Consciousness therefore is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions" (116). Bearing in mind this notion of volatility

as an essential feature of one's identity is helpful because it avoids a static perspective on individuals; on the contrary, it positions the subject as someone who is struggling to create himself/herself, as Juno is. According to Armstrong, "what a small hope for humanity there is at the end of this play is due to the courage of its women (14). Even though a few of her acts in the play may reveal a discordance with her image as a determined woman, Juno's final attitude dispels any doubt concerning her disposition to change. In the closing scenes of the play, she is the only character who supports Mary and shows compassion for her, offering help to raise the child. She realises how much her daughter will suffer: "What you an' I'll have to go through'll be nothin' to what poor Mary'll have to go through; for you an' me is middlin' old, an' most of our years is spent; but Mary'll have maybe forty years to face an' handle, an' every wan of them'll be tainted with a bitter memory" (134). While Juno expresses her concern for Mary, Boyle has an opposite reaction: "she'll leave this place, an' quick too!" (135). Johnny also condemns his sister's situation: "She should be dhriven out o' th' house she's brought disgrace on!" (135). Not only Boyle, Johnny and the baby's father reject her, but so does Jerry. But, in addition to revealing the character of the males in the play, Mary's plight also generates Juno's response:

> [B]ut then when Jerry rejects Mary, if you get it right, it's all the more shocking.... You cross the line and it seems that all the political convictions are fundamentally bogus and that he doesn't trust any man's ability to be consistent with his words, and winds up celebrating the resilience of a woman who can be knocked down repeatedly and yet stand up, bless herself and go on. I think he actually has a grudging respect for the strength that Juno's faith gives her, not for the faith itself but in that as a function of that woman's make-up. (Stewart 111)

The play juxtaposes female characters as agents of power and struggle, with male ones who are impotent and indolent. Johnny is obviously weak and disturbed from the beginning. Captain Boyle is an irresponsible father who refuses to change. In contrast, Juno and Mary are empowered characters who survive and are allowed the possibility of creating a reordered world for themselves (Keaton 85). Although there is this equilibrium, at the end of the play, Juno stands out as the strongest female image for she must restore Mary's faith:

> MARY. Oh, it's thrue, it's thrue what Jerry Devine says — there isn't a God, there isn't a God; if there was He wouldn't let these things happen!
>
> MRS. BOYLE. Mary, you mustn't say them things. We'll want all the help we can get from God an' His Blessed Mother now! These things have nothin' to do with the Will o' God. Ah, what can God do agen the stupidity o' men! (145)

According to Benstock, "Juno marshals her resources, cuts herself free from the useless Captain and the empty apartment, and goes off with Mary to start a new life, one that she

knows full well will always be a hard one. Grief, self-awareness, and determination are all present in her attitudes" (*Sean O'Casey* 75). Apart from the political aspect, O'Casey was saying a lot about women in *Juno and the Paycock*, showing a woman who survives alone and does not accept being subordinate to her (drunken) husband any more. "That was a very brave thing to say at the time he was writing…. But O'Casey almost seems to suggest at the end of that play that no matter what disasters befall her, the strength of a woman is that she can start again" (Stewart 94), as Juno promises Mary:

> MRS. BOYLE. We'll go. Come, Mary, an' we'll never come back here agen. Let your father furrage for himself now; I've done all I could an' it was all no use - he'll be hopeless till the end of his days. I've got a little room in me sisther's where we'll stop till your throuble is over, an' then we'll work together for the sake of the baby.
>
> MARY. My poor little child that'll have no father!
>
> MRS. BOYLE. It'll have what's far betther - it'll have two mothers. (145-6)

Despite Mary's despondence, "My poor little child that'll have no father!", Juno shows her strength because she does not give up in face of downfalls. Although her domestic and maternal actions correspond to the traditional stereotype of the Irish woman, her performance is not limited by it. Juno's representation is an empowered one because it goes beyond what was expected from a woman, demonstrating that real heroism may emerge wherever and whenever it is least expected, frequently in women like her (Kiberd 222). Juno undergoes a change as the play unfolds, she shifts from being a conventional housewife who accepts her circumstances to an independent woman who is going to make a new life not only for herself and for Mary, but also for the coming baby. It is an individual struggle for the well-being of the collective. She has already worked hard her whole life, remaining physically and mentally strong, although facing big adversities: the execution of Johnny and the discovery of Mary's pregnancy; she summons up her personal forces to resign herself not only to cope with her sorrows, but also for those around her. Long-suffering and determined in the early scenes, she leads the fight against life's oppressive circumstances and ends up as an image of personal struggle.

4.2.3 The Plough and the Stars

The 1916 Easter Rising and his own memories of the tenements inspired O'Casey to write *The Plough and the Stars*. O'Casey's play is the best-known dramatisation of the most popular Irish insurrection,[37] which is considered an event "both profoundly important and profoundly unnecessary" (Coogan 1). At the turn of the twentieth century Ireland was still part of the British Empire. Under rule from London for about eight centuries, Irish traditions and culture had been swallowed up by the English who, for instance, tried to eliminate the Irish language. Confronted with such oppressive colonisation, even aware of the possible tragic circumstances, in 1916 the Irish were ready for a revolution. The premature rebellion was the spark to freedom and made Ireland an independent country; however, it was also a tragic moment which caused an irreparable loss of human lives. *The Plough* does not praise the rising or its male heroes; on the contrary: "it is the kind of play which makes the audience reflect on how Ireland was cruelly affected by a problematic form of nationalism; it represented a courageous threat to the nationalistic version of the rebellion" (Parra 97). The play is considered to have been a form of resistance, preventing the Abbey from becoming a mouthpiece for the state (E. O'Toole). In addition, it challenged principles which were considered sacred in the Ireland of that time, such as the ones propagated by the Church and by the State. Once again, "O'Casey updated and deconstructed the heroic ideal" (Murray, "Three Dublin Plays" ix), standing out from other national dramatists regarding the image of women.

O'Casey's unconventional approach tested his relationship with some reviewers in Dublin and in London, but theirs was an opinion that he usually considered completely irrelevant (Harris 170). In that period, not only the critics, but also audiences were sensitive to dramatic representations of the nation. There were riots in the theatre. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) was the first to face the anger of the Irish nationalists, who viewed the content of the play as an offence to public morals and an insult against Ireland. About twenty years later, there were riots once again, and this time they happened

[37] In addition to *The Plough and the Stars*, other dramatic works alluding to the Easter Rising are: Maurice Dalton's *Sable and Gold* (1918); Daniel Corkery's plays, *The Labour Leader* (1919) and *Resurrection* (1924);
W. B. Yeats' *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1931); Donagh MacDonagh's radio play, *Easter Christening* (1940); Robert Farren's verse play, *Lost Light* (1943); Roger McHugh and Alfred Noyes' *Roger Casement* (1957); Brendan Behan's Irish-language play, *An Gaill* (1958), reworked by Theatre Workshop as *The Hostage*; Denis Johnston's *The Scythe and the Sunset* (1958); Hugh Leonard's *Patrick Pearse Motel* (1966); Richard Stockton's *The Prisoner of the Crown* (1972); David Rudkin's radio play, *Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin* (1972); Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985); and Tom Murphy's *The Patriot Game* (1991).

during the fourth performance of *The Plough and the Stars* in the Abbey. “Offended members of the audience hissed and jeered. People hurled lumps of coal at the stage. Audience members and actors traded punches” … and there were “speeches lacerating the writer and the performers for betraying the men of Easter Week and selling out to the English” (Crawley). It was a politically complex piece of work for that time. Even Irish women were not happy with the portraits of Irish mothers reluctant to sacrifice their sons and with the way O’Casey detracted from the death of the national martyrs. Some of the people who stirred up the riot that night were widows of the rebels who had attended with aggrieved members of Cumann na mBan and Sinn Féin. Later, there were also organised protests led by Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington[38] to prevent the continuation of the play’s first run at the Abbey. Skeffington is one of the female figures usually remembered in the official accounts of the Easter Rising because of her direct involvement, though in a secondary role, with the 1916 rebellion. She helped the Irish fighters in the headquarters by carrying supplies and acting as a messenger for several outposts. However, most women registered in the historical records had a high social status. Skeffington was a prominent republican figure and propagandist. She was the daughter of an Irish nationalist member of Parliament and married to Francis Skeffington, a well-known Irish writer and activist. Although the couple had a clear commitment to the Irish feminist cause, they strongly believed that the Irish national cause came first because it was likely to provide an opportunity for feminists from Ireland to stake a claim for the women of the nation.

In O’Casey’s version of the Easter Rising it is the ordinary women who are the eminent figures, although not directly involved in the conflict. They are powerful characters who redeem the revival of this national account (Clapp), but yet representations of women who were forgotten by the official records:

> In this play, O’Casey certainly concentrates attention on the vanity and fanaticism of men who make a religion out of patriotism and consequently destroy what he regards as finer and more fundamental human relationships. … O’Casey finds that the bravest people during the Rising were non-combatants, especially women. (Armstrong 15-16)

In opposition to the Irish stereotype of women, O’Casey’s female residents of the tenement are portrayals of proactiveness in face of difficulties. “He gave humanity to these characters that nobody else was paying attention to or interested in” (Parra 95). Unlike most of the feminine representations in plays which tackle Ireland’s national cause, his representations were not merely women in a shawl on the stage watching men being glorified

[38] Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington’s husband was shot by the British during the Rising.

as living or dead heroes, as in the famed work by Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902). Daniel Corkery's revival of 1916, *Resurrection* (1924), in the same vein, reproduces the sacrificial female role and women's domesticity, with the character Mary inspiring and encouraging her grandson to join the insurrection. Another example is the first play written about the Easter Rising, *Sable and Gold* (1918), by Maurice Dalton, which reiterates the traditional view on gender:

> The women of *Sable and Gold* never ask whether they might themselves be able to leave the house and help with the revolution that they support. They are content with the domestic role assigned to them, powerless to influence national events unless through the actions conducted by their men. The first scene depicted as the curtain rises sets the tone for the rest of the play. Two men and two women play seven card tricks together, but the women are unable to win a single hand between them. (Moran, *Stagin*g 36)

Even though these plays were much less popular than O'Casey's, they not only supported the ambiguous question of the revolution, but also helped to perpetuate the powerless image imposed on Irish women. "In *Resurrection* and *Sable and Gold*, female absence from the Easter insurgency indicates womanly weakness" (Moran, *Staging* 40), while male characters, the plays' heroes, are associated with the idea of power.

The Plough and the Stars proposes a reversal of this common scheme of the male figure as the main image of the Easter Rising. More than that, O'Casey's onstage women are disdainful of nationalism. Nora and Jack Clitheroe are central characters in the play and, even though Jack aspires to a heroic role in joining the fight, as the play unfolds, it is Nora and another female character, Bessie Burgess, who will be prominent, demonstrating many of the traces desired by the male characters, such as bravery, courage and power. "[T]he women of *The Plough and the Stars* refrain from insurrectionary activities out of choice, not because they are incapable of fighting" (Moran, *Staging* 40). As Fluther Good, who plays a carpenter in the play, states: "Women is terrible when they start to fight. There's no holdin' them back" (O'Casey 195). Fluther Good's judgment is hilariously proved true in Act Two when Bessie and Mrs Gogan have a stirring discussion in a pub. Mrs Gogan comes into the pub carrying her baby in her arms and starts drinking with Peter and Fluther. Soon afterwards, Bessie and Covey come into the bar:

> BESSIE. (*speaking to the Covey, but really at the other part*) I can't for th' life o' me undherstand how they can call themselves Catholics, when they won't lift a finger to help poor little Catholic Belgium.
>
> MRS GOGAN. What about poor little Catholic Ireland?

BESSIE. (*over to Mrs Gogan*) You mind your own business, ma'am, and stupefy your foolishness be gettin' dhrunk.

PETER. (*anxiously*) Take no notice of her; pay no attention to her. She's just tormentin' herself towards havin' a row with somebody.

MRS GOGAN. (*dipping her finger in the whiskey, and moistening with it the lips of her baby*) Cissie Gogan's a woman livin' for nigh on twenty-five years in her own room, an' beyond biddin' th' time o' day to her neighbours, never yet as much as nodded her head in th'direction of other people's business, while she knows some as are never content unless they're standin' senthry over other people's doin's! (189-90)

Eventually, both women seem to lose their senses, and the discussion turns into tumult and fighting:

BESSIE. (*jumping out to face Mrs Gogan, and bringing the palms of her hands together in sharp claps to emphasize her remarks*) Liar to you, too, ma'am, y' oul' hardened thresspasser on other people's good nature, wizenin' up your soul in th' arts o' dodgeries, till every *dhrop of respectability in a female* is dhried up in her, looking at your readymade manoeuverin' with th' menkind!

BARMAN. Here, there; here, there; speak asy there. No rowin' here, no rowin' here, now.

FLUTHER. (*trying to calm Mrs Gogan*) Now Jinnie, Jinnie, it's a derogaroty thing to be smirchin' a night like this with a row; it's rompin' with th' feelings of hope we ought to be, instead o' bein' vice versa!

PETER. (*trying to quiet Bessie*) I'm terrible dawny, Mrs Burgess, an' a fight leaves me weak for a long time aftherwards… Please, Mrs Burgess, before there's damage done, thry to have a little respect for yourself.

BESSIE. (*with a push of her hand that sends Peter tottering to the end of the shop*) G'way, you little sermonizing, little yella-faced, little consequential, little pudgy, little bum, you!

MRS GOGAN. (*screaming*) Fluther, leggo! I'm not goin' to keep an unresistin' silence, an' her scattherin' her festherin' words in me face, stirrin' up every dhrop of decency in a respectable female, with her restless rally o' lies that would make a saint say his prayer backwards!

BESSIE. (*shouting*) Ah, everybody knows well that th' best charity that can be shown to you is to hide th' thruth as much as our thrue worship of God Almighty will allow us!

MRS GOGAN (*frantically*) Here, houl' th' kid, one o' yous; houl' th' kid for a minute! There's nothin' for it but to show this lassie a lesson or two… (*To Peter*) Here, houl' th' kid, you. (*Before Peter is aware of it, she places the infant in his arms. To Bessie, standing before her in a fighting attitude*) Come on, now, me loyal lassie, dyin' with grief for little Catholic Belgium! When Jinnie Gogan's done with you, you'll have a little leisure lyin' down to think an' pray for your king an' counthry!

BARMAN. (*coming from behind the counter, getting between the women, and*

> *proceeding to push them towards the door*) Here, now, since yous can't have a little friendly argument quietly, you'll get out o' this place in quick time. Go on, an' settle your differences somewhere else – I don't want to have another endorsement on me license.
>
> PETER. (*anxiously, over to Mrs Gogan*) Here, take your kid back, owner this. How nicely I was picked, now, for it to be plumped into me arms!
>
> THE COVEY. She knew who she was givin' it to, maybe. …
>
> BESSIE. (*as she goes out*) If you think, me lassie, that Bessie Burgess has an untidy conscience, she'll soon show you to th' differ!
>
> PETER. (*leaving the baby down on the floor*) Ay, be Jasus, wait there, till I give her bach her youngster! (*He runs to the door*.) Ay, there, ay! (*He comes back*.) There, she's afther goin' without her kid. What are we goin' to do with it, now? (192-4)

O'Casey's female characters provide diverse counterpoints to the feminine image created according to the models of Irish national identity. The playwright's representation of the Irish woman is far from the notion of passivity, which was compulsorily associated with women. As Charlotte Brontë argued:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (76)

O'Casey's intense female characters challenged not only the often-idealised nationalistic behaviour, but also the patriarchal presumption that women are powerless subjects. The playwright's representations are ascribed with elements associated with the notion of power, such as physical force, natural action, proactiveness and autonomy. In contrast, the play's male characters are depicted as day-dreamers, confused, easily caught up in and disturbed by national events (Parra 99).

Among the characters who fight to keep their lives intact despite the destruction caused by the war, besides Nora, Jack and Bessie, there are also Norah's uncle, Peter Flynn; Jack's cousin, the young Covey; an alcoholic carpenter, Fluther Good; the charwoman in Clitheroe's house, Mrs Gogan, and her daughter, Molser, who is afflicted with pulmonary tuberculosis. Most of the events of the Rising are not part of the dramatisation, but they are seen from backstage. Act One is set in the Clitheroe's house. The text opens with a stage direction which describes the set in naturalistic style. At the opening of the play Jack is disillusioned by his long wait for a military commission. However, his disillusion is soon

brought to an end. As soon as he is promoted to the rank of officer in the Irish Citizen Army, he becomes fully involved in the guerrilla activities of the Easter Rising. Nora is miserable and about to be driven mad by her husband who is leaving to join the fight. Unlike the passive image of the sacrificial woman, she does not accept sacrificing her husband for the country. She does all that she can to prevent his participation in the fight for Irish freedom. When the play opens, Nora and Jack are presented as a happy, newly married couple, but as the plot unfolds, "There is the same movement from comedy to a tragical atmosphere, observed in the two earlier plays, however it comes early on" (Stewart 96). Jack switches from being an amorous husband to a stern authoritarian just because of his promotion. He goes into combat and is killed. Nora's baby is born dead and she loses her mind. Her condition prompts Bessie Burgess, an embittered Irish Protestant who has lost a son to the rebels, to become Nora's carer. At the end of the play Bessie herself is killed by a sniper's bullet.

Nora is a childless twenty-two-year-old married woman. The composition of this character subverts the Irish traditional female image in different ways, beginning with the physical and behavioural elements employed in the construction of her representation. O'Casey describes her as a young woman "*alert, swift, full of nervous energy, and a little anxious to get on in the world*", characteristics which support the notion of empowering attitudes (164). Compared with the vocabulary adopted by O'Casey to introduce Jack's character, Nora's superiority towards her husband in terms of power is evident. "The very concept of heroism is undermined through the characterization of Jack Clitheroe" (Murray, *Twentieth Century* 96). For Poulain, Jack's involvement with the Irish Citizen Army is merely a theatrical role which enables him to step briefly into the spotlight, … forcing him out of his role and back into anonymity (5). Although he is nominally the hero of the play (Murray 96), the text accords him less dramatic importance on account of his scarce, or non- existent participation, as in Act Four.

Jack's "*face has none of the strength of Nora's. It is a face in which is the desire for authority, without the power to attain it*" (O'Casey 167). While Jack's face reflects an inner weakness, Nora's is composed of traits of gracefulness and strength: *"The firm lines of her face are considerably opposed by a soft, amorous mouth and gentle eyes. When her firmness fails her, she persuades with her feminine charm"* (164). Her physical attributes corroborate her natural inclination to strive to attain her purposes. In the play, the main form of power is her struggle against nationalistic precepts. "Nora is an Irish woman unwilling to sacrifice her husband to the cause of national freedom" (Wilson 326). She confronts nationalism and she

openly discourages Jack from fighting for Ireland. “Nora in this regard has a symbolic function…. In Act Three we see clearly Nora’s hatred of war…. Her passion makes her see only the fear and ‘cowardice’ of the combatants, ‘afraid to say they’re afraid’ (Murray, *Sean O’Casey* 109).

> While most spectator-figures in the play are content to watch and enjoy the show of heroic rebellion, Nora sees, and forces us to see, what the show attempts to hide. O’Casey first counterpoints Mrs Gogan’s blood-soaked fantasies with Nora’s true vision of tragedy: “My Jack will be killed, my Jack will be killed! … He is to be butchered as a sacrifice to th’ dead!” (*PS*, 207) — thus pointing her out as the genuine “seer” and only competent spectator in the play. (Poulain 10)

Nora orchestrates a few actions to prevent Jack from engaging in the insurrection. For example, shortly after the couple’s conversation which ends with Jack singing a song to Nora, a knock is heard at the door, and it seems Nora already knows that, on the other side, “it is Irish nationalism demanding Jack’s life” (Parra 103). A little nervous, she tries to prevent Jack from answering the door: “Take no notice of it, Jack; they’ll go away in a minute” (176). Upon hearing Captain Brennan’s voice, Nora insists: “Don’t mind him, don’t mind, Jack. Don’t break our happiness… Pretend we’re not in. Let us forget everything tonight but our two selves!” (176). Afterwards, the audience discovers that Nora had burned a letter General Connolly had sent to Jack, appointing him as a Commandant. When Jack finds out what she had done with the letter, she still tries to convince him to stay at home with her:

> CLITHEROE. (*There is a note of hardness in his voice.*) Nora… Captain Brennan says he brought a letter to me from General Connolly, and that he gave it to you… Where is it? What did you do with it?
>
> NORA. (*running over to him, and pleadingly putting her arms around him*) Jack, please, Jack, don’t go out tonight an’ I’ll tell you; I’ll explain everything… Send him away, an’ stay with your own little red-lipp’d Nora.
>
> CLITHEROE. (*removing her arms from around him*) None o’ this nonsense, now; I want to know what you did with th’ letter.
>
> *Nora goes slowly to the lounge and sits down.*
>
> (*Angrily*) Why didn’t you give me th’ letter? What did you do with it? (*He shakes her by the shoulder.*) What did you do with th’ letter? (177-8)

Facing his anger, Nora confronts Jack and finally reveals she had burned the letter:

> NORA. I burned it, I burned it! That’s what I did with it! Is General Connolly an’ th’ Citizen Army goin’ to be your only care? Is your home goin’ to be only a place to rest in? Am I goin’ to be only somethin’ to provide merry-makin’ at night for you? Your vanity’ll be th’ ruin of you an’ me yet… That’s what’s movin’ you: because they’ve made an officer of you, you’ll make a glorious

> cause of what you're doin', while your little red-lipp' d Nora can go on sittin' here, makin a companion of th' loneliness of th' night.
>
> CLITHEROE. (*fiercely*) You burned it, did you? (*He grips her arm.*) Well, me good lady –
>
> NORA. Let go – you're hurtin' me!
>
> CLITHEROE. You deserve to be hurt... Any letter that comes to me for th' future, take care that I get it… D'ye hear… take care that I get it! (178)

Nora also reveals self-confidence and self-determination. Even though she pretends not to care if Jack never comes back after the argument, she goes out in search of her husband in the middle of the conflict. She does not give up her husband. Her determination to confront obstacles leads her to the ultimate consequences. In terms of power, Nora is much stronger than her husband, who does not do anything for his family. Opposing Jack's vanity, Nora's resoluteness makes her the heroine. She struggles for life while the whole system seems to want to achieve an irrational and compulsive conquest. Her repudiation of this is a direct response to the image of the traditional Irish woman who willingly sends her man out to die.

A subtler form used by O'Casey to pose Nora as an antagonistic figure to the traditional feminine image is through her behaviour in daily routines and in social situations. Besides rejecting nationalism directly, saying openly that she does not want Jack fighting for the country, Nora's characterisation is punctuated with elements which contradict the passive, weak and nonsexual image of the women of 1916:

> The women of 1916 were imagined as asexual, … charm, elegance and sensuality were not elements associated with their image and they were not usually expected to demonstrate femininity; instead, they had to stay at home destined to carry out the household tasks and sustain family well-being. O'Casey's mode of thinking does not preclude the representation of women as nurturers and home-makers, but he uses this as a premise for an anti-nationalistic point of view. (Parra 101)

Nora's image is a combination of attitudes unexpected in women of 1916. Undeniably, Nora is a woman who takes care of her house. The description of the room is associated with Nora: "*The room directly in front of the audience is furnished in a way that suggests an attempt towards a finer expression of domestic life*" (151). She cares not only about the decorative aspect, but also expresses concern about those who live with her. She lives in a house with three men and she takes care of them, "she has th' life… washing their face, combin' their hair, wipin' their feet, brushin' their clothes, thrimmin' their nails, cleanin' their teeth" (155). In this regard, her character is still embodied in a conception of domesticity, which, in fact, as seen in Chapter Two, was the reality of most poor women in the tenements. For Wilson,

> In *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey portrays women overwhelmingly as homemakers and caretakers. This might be viewed as "somewhat sexist" ⋯. The masculine war destroying the feminine is in direct contrast to the *Cathleen ni Houlihan* idea of the masculine war saving the feminine Ireland. O'Casey's women therefore do take on some symbolism, but they are firmly rooted in the actual experiences of Irish women. (327)

On the other hand, even complying with her duties, she shows that she knows what this domestic burden means to a woman, as she indicates in an argument with Jack: "Oh, yes, your little, little red-lipped Nora's sweet little girl when th' fit seizes you; but your little, little red-lipped Nora has to clean your boots every mornin', all the same" (173). Nora is aware of the fact that society sees women as subjects who belong to a domestic domain. In this way, even being inserted in a conservative realm, there are some components in the construction of this character which present her as a woman ahead of her time and a divergent figure in relation to prevailing Irish common social standards. Another example appears at the very beginning of the play, when O'Casey describes the Clitheroes' house. There is another indication of Nora's unconventional behaviour taking into account the sort of conservatism existing in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. In her room, "*over the clock is hanging a calendar which displays a picture of* The Sleeping Venus" (151), a painting by Giorgione, in which an almost life-size nude completely fills the pictorial frame. A picture like that could be something very shocking at that time, as can be observed in Mrs Gogan's reaction when she sees it in Nora's house:

> *(Mrs Gogan has returned to the front room, and has wandered around looking at things in general, and is now in front of the fireplace looking at the picture over it.)*
>
> MRS GOGAN. For God's sake, Fluther, dhrop it, there's always th' makin's of a row in th' mention of religion… (*Looking at picture*) God bless us, it's a naked woman!
>
> FLUTHER. (*coming over to look at it*) What's undher it? (*Reading*) 'Georgina: The Sleepin' Vennis'. Oh, that's a terrible picture; oh that's a shockin' picture! Oh, th' one that got that taken, she must have been a prime lassie!
>
> MRS GOGAN. God forgive us, it's not right to be lookin' at it.
>
> FLUTHER. It's nearly a derogatory thing to be in th' room where it is (162).

If *The Sleeping Venus* was considered an improper picture at that time, even more improper was to have a reproduction of it in one's home. The other residents seem to condemn it for its immoral aspect. In doing so, the picture reveals something about Nora's attitudes towards conservatism, which is evidently different to that one displayed by the characters who criticise the picture.

Additionally, O'Casey shows Nora's attempts at elegance, self-love and femininity through different forms. For example, at the very beginning of the play, Mrs Gogan receives a draper's parcel for Nora which contains a black hat with decorations in red and gold, and comments about her: "God, she's goin' to th' divil lately for style! That hat, now, cost more than a penny" (153), and Fluther adds: "She's a pretty little Judy, all the same" (154). Although the purchasing of such accessories is seen by Mrs Gogan as Nora's "notions of upperosity", it is of further significance in the construction of the character since it also discloses the presence of 'atypical' features in relation to the traditional stereotype of that period. Deviating from the conventional portrayal of Irish women as passive subjects who were in full agreement with the reality life imposed upon them, Nora's attitude is not only that of a woman who has self-love and cares about her appearance, but she is also someone who is stirring for change. She is not content with the life she has in the tenements. "She's always grumblin' about havin' to live in a tenement house" (154). In this respect Nora is different from Minnie Powell, for instance, who does not complain about the context in which she lives. Her dissatisfaction with her circumstances is not kept to herself, but is revealed through actions and words. Although not having much result due to complex social and economic factors, in this respect Nora's behaviour may also be considered as a movement to a desired transformation.

The discrepancy between Nora's image and that of the ideal Irish woman goes beyond her desire for improvement in life. Among the female characters analysed in the three plays, Nora is also the one who most clearly reveals a predisposition to sensuality, a trait which was not commonly embodied in the female representations of the Irish drama of that time. In the view of other women, the way Nora dresses is inappropriate for 'well-behaved' wives, since it displays some signs of eroticism, as Mrs Gogan remarks, "I'm always sayin' that her skirts are a little too short for a married woman. An' to see her, sometimes of an evenin', in her glad-neck gown would make a body's blood run cold. I do be ashamed of me life before her husband" (154). Nora's conversation with Jack in Act One corroborates this unconventional element of the character's composition: *"She looks appealingly at him for a few moments; he doesn't speak. She swiftly sits down beside him, and puts her arm around his neck"* (173). When trying to convince Jack not to engage in the rebellion, she reveals her sensuality in the way she addresses Jack and uses her "feminine charm" in order to retain control over the situation:

NORA. (*coaxingly*) I didn't mean to say anything out o' the way. You take a body up too quickly, Jack. (*In an ordinary tone as if nothing of an angry nature had been said*). You didn't offer me me evenin' allowance yet.

Clitheroe silently takes out a cigarette for her and himself and lights both.

NORA. (*rising from the seat*) I'm longin' to show you me new hat, to see what you think of it. Would you like to see it?

CLITHEROE. Ah, I don't mind.

Nora suppresses a sharp reply, hesitates for a moment, then gets the hat, puts it on, and stands before Clitheroe.

NORA. Well, how does Mr Clitheroe like me new hat?

CLITHEROE. It suits you, Nora, it does right enough.

He stands up, puts his hands beneath her chin, and tilts her head up. She looks at him roguishly. He bends down and kisses her.

NORA. Here, sit down, an' don't let me hear another cross word out of you for th' rest o' the night.

They sit down.

CLITHEROE. (*with his arms around her*) Little, little, red-lipped Nora!

NORA. (*with a coaxing movement of her body towards him*) Jack!

CLITHEROE. (*tightening his arms around her*) Well?

NORA. You haven't sung me a song since our honeymoon. Sing me one now, do… please, Jack!

CLITHEROE. What song? 'Since Maggie Went Away'?

NORA. Ah, no, Jack, not that; it's too sad. 'When You Said You Loved Me.'

Clearing his throat, Clitheroe thinks for a moment, and then begins to sing (174-5).

In this scene Nora adopts an unconventional posture for Irish women on the stage. There were women with the same attitudes and behaviour as Nora, but the drama of the time seldom opted for this kind of representation. Additionally, it is interesting to observe how this feminine trait leads to a question of power because, although in the end Nora does not manage to prevent Jack from participating in the rising, she is able to control the conversation and Jack, at this moment, does what she wants.

Even though Nora's representation exceeds Jack's in terms of powerful deeds, for Benstock (*Sean O'Casey*, *Paycock*), Bessie Burgess is, in fact, the female character who emerges as the prominent role in *The Plough and the Stars,* since her courage establishes her as the heroic figure in the play. Considering her controversial debut in the play, Bessie is proof of O'Casey's dislocation of heroism from idealised models and, more importantly, his

demotion of the male figure from a position of superiority, by his corresponding promotion of the female. Bessie starts the play as a loud-mouthed fruit-vendor, accused of being fond of drink and with characteristic marks of verbal abuse and aggressivity but, by the end, she is shown to have her heart in the right place, with demonstrations of loyalty and kindness. When she appears in Act One, Bessie "is at bitter odds with her neighbours in the tenement, lacking the genteel refinement" (Benstock, *Paycock* 88). Nora is the first victim of her abuse and offensive manners:

> *As Nora is opening and shutting the door, Mrs Bessie Burgess appears at it. She is a woman of forty, vigorously built. Her face is a dogged one, hardened by toil, and a little coarsened by drink. She looks scornfully and viciously at Nora for a few moments before she speaks.*
>
> BESSIE. Puttin' a new lock on her door… afraid her poor neighbours ud break through an' steal… (*In a loud tone*) Maybe, now, they're a damn sight more honest than your ladyship… checkin' th' children playin' on th' stairs … gettin' on th' nerves of your ladyship…. Complainin' about Bessie Burgess singin' her hymns at night, when she has a few up… (*She comes in half-way on the threshold, and screams.*) Bessie Burgess'll sing whenever she damn well likes!
>
> *Nora tries to shut the door, but Bessie violently shoves it in, and, gripping Nora by the shoulders, shakes her.*
>
> You little over-dressed throllope, you, for one pin I'd paste th' white face o' you!
>
> FLUTHER. (*running over and breaking the hold of Bessie from Nora*) Now, now, Bessie, Bessie, leave the poor Mrs Clitheroe alone; she'd do no one any harm, an' minds no one's business but her own.
>
> BESSIE. Why is she always thryin' to speak proud things, an' lookin' like a mighty one in th' congregation o' th' people! (166-7).

Bessie's first appearance is announced negatively. She is far from polite towards her neighbours and even has a tendency towards aggressiveness. On the other hand, the same passage shows how O'Casey developed female characters far-removed from a conventional notion of docility, the prevailing pattern employed in Irish national drama. Challenging the conventional gendered scheme in relation to physical force, which tends to be the principal factor of distinction between women and men, Bessie's physical traits are more masculine than feminine. "*Vigorously built*", "*hardened by toil*" are signs of strength, not weakness. In addition, her aggressive manners, for instance, when she looks scornfully and viciously at Nora, speaks in a loud tone, and violently shoves the door in and grips her by the shoulders,

also demonstrate her distance from the traditional image of Irish women. When the author announces Bessie's aggressiveness, he also makes it clear that she is strong.

It is in the third act that Bessie begins to evolve from a negative figure to a heroic one. The change is born out of small acts of kindness, such as when she takes care of Mollser, bringing her milk when no one is looking: "*Bessie comes out with a shawl around her shoulders. She passes by them with her head in the air. When they have gone in, she gives a mug of milk to Mollser silently*" (210). "It is by contrast with Mollser's mother, Mrs Gogan, that Bessie gets her first footing with the audience and begins to counter the unfortunate impression she had been making" (Benstock, *Paycock* 88). O'Casey carefully prepares her trajectory leading up to Nora's self-sacrifice; he conducts her with a series of micro gestures and prepares the audience for the emergence of her macro gesture of compassion in the final act, when he officially determines her heroic role. Due to her process of transformation, her sympathy with Nora, initially a natural enemy, becomes credible. Even taking into consideration her repeated scorn, with a bitter curse upon Nora when she is shot, that is not enough to "dispel that earlier moment of solidarity" (Murray, *Sean O'Casey* xiii). Although accidental, her martyrdom is a sincere one (Benstock, *Paycock* 87). Her death is cathartic while Jack's is meaningless. Bessie's end carries several meanings. Besides being an act of bravery, her death also indicates a final stage, consolidating her transformation. As the play unfolds, so does Bessie's process of change. As Benstock observes:

> O'Casey, who was particularly interested in the woman as a potential for courage, manages to reverse a multitude of unfortunate impressions in order to salvage Bessie for heroism. His technique is to shock the audience with Bessie's offensiveness, maintain elements of the offending traits, introduce redeeming features halfway through, and develop those features until they dominate the situation. This assures both consistency of character development and a surprising but logical change. (*Sean O'Casey* 71)

Elsewhere Benstock argues that "It is as a mother that Bessie Burgess first shows the best aspects of her character" (*Paycock* 89); however, while she displays such a natural maternal inclination, she cannot be encapsulated in the conventional notion of motherhood, because she refuses to accept many of the controversial circumstances embedded in such a configuration. Developing Bessie as a mother with a son in uniform, O'Casey created an incongruity in terms of what was expected of an Irish mother. Her attitude towards the nationalistic impulse for a young Irish man, such as her son, was a far cry from the average perception. Her opinion about the consequences of the Easter Rising is manifestly contrary to the conventional belief, as she shouts:

BESSIE. There's a storm of anger tossin' in me heart, thinkin' of all th' poor Tommies, an' with them me own son, dhrenched in water an' soaked in blood, gropin' their way to shattherin' death, in a shower o' shells! Young men with th' sunny lust o' life dreamin' in them, layin' down their white bodies, shredded into torn an' bloody pieces, on th' althar that God Himself has built for th' sacrifice of heroes! (189-90)

In this respect, Bessie's motherhood is represented in opposition to the image of the willing sacrificial Irish mother, as embodied in Margaret Pearse, the mother of the leader of the insurrection. According to Moran:

O'Casey who had spent Easter week looking after his own bed-ridden mother, set about demolishing the image of the sacrificial woman with gusto. In particular, the women of *The Plough and the Stars* were supposed to act as an antidote to Pádraic Pearse's mother, who had become a kind of metonym for all the things O'Casey found unpalatable about contemporary nationalism. (*Staging* 41)

Like Nora, Bessie's connection to domestic life displays elements which stress the inauthenticity of the traditional consensus concerning women's reality. Although they are inserted in a context of domesticity, O'Casey reveals elements of these women which are not linked to the traditional domestic image; although Bessie is accustomed to home life, she is far from being passive and still. O'Casey does not present her as a mother in the first place, but as a street fruit-vendor who often bickers with her neighbours and is accused of being a boozer. But then, when she starts to reveal maternal traits, it is, in general, towards other female characters, so she can be seen as an "ultimate example of womanhood" (Wilson 327). She demonstrates a legitimate concern for Mollser and Nora's circumstances, which not only brings about her transformation as character during the play, revealing her capacity for "personal control", but also her "proactive approach to life" (Zimmerman 1995). If the Bessie Burgess of Act One is always looking for a quarrel with her neighbours, in Act Three the same character nurses her neighbour's life day and night. She does so until the moment she is shot trying to protect Nora, who in a state of madness, wants to go back out to the streets in search for Jack who has already died:

BESSIE. Hus-s-sh, Nora, Nora! He'll be here in a minute. I'll bring him to you, if you'll only be quiet – honest to God, I will.

With a great effort Bessie pushes Nora away from the window, the force used causing her to stagger against it herself. Two rifle shots ring out in quick succession. Bessie jerks her body convulsively; stands stiffly for a moment, a look of agonized astonishment on her face, then she staggers forward, leaning heavily on the table with her hands.

> (*With an arrested scream of fear and pain*) Merciful God, I'm shot, I'm shot, I'm shot!... Th' life's pourin' out o'me! (243-4)

Bessie's maternal attitudes thus also empower her in the sense that these traits lead her to social action, as psychological empowerment is not "simply self-perceptions of competence but includes active engagement in one's community" (Zimmerman 582). Her transformation is not limited to personal improvement, but is extended as a form of help to other people around her. "O'Casey gives her a heroic role greater than that fulfilled by the others…. [S]he indicates a humane instinct in caring for the sick among her neighbours" (Benstock *Paycock* 89). While the notion of force and control is undermined through the male representations, such as Jack, for instance, at the end, the power of the play is embodied in Bessie's surprising attitudes as she demonstrates humanity for her counterparts.

In *The Plough and the Stars,* Nora and Bessie are characters who close O'Casey's cycle of Dublin plays confirming the author's propensity for creating female figures superior to male ones. Hardened by the miserable conditions of life in the tenements, it is the women in *The Plough* who bear society's greatest burdens. Although, at first sight, Bessie and Nora's disastrous end may imply an idea of failure, Zimmerman observes that "social change, however, may take many forms and may not necessarily result in a power struggle" (Zimmerman 582). Not everyone has an equal chance of gaining power. Furthermore, there is no ideal form of undergoing the empowerment process and neither romanticised nor imagined and idealised outcomes. Like Minnie Powell, Nora and Bessie are embodiments of personal empowerment because their attitudes legitimise their relevance as subjects who are extremely important and necessary for the context in which they lived. Their characters are distinguished by competence, self-efficacy and action. They are fundamental figures for their family and community, a fact which extends empowerment from the individual domain to a collective impact. Nora is a character who "is born" empowered in the play. This is proved by her desire for improvement, her non-conservative femininity, her control over the affairs of and her house and her opposition to the notion of nationalism existing in the Ireland of her time. Since the beginning, Nora's process of empowerment is a difficult one on account of her social and economic circumstances, and it is drastically interrupted by the insurmountable hurdles posed by the nationalistic cause. In this sense, Nora's cycle of empowerment is one that does not close. She does not achieve tangible outcomes. Nonetheless, her influence and attitudes are far greater in importance and achievement than those of Jack. If Nora is a character who could not "save" her family and attain the improvement she wanted in life, her

subversive image remains as a symbol of resistance and power against the rampant forces of the Irish political system. Nora's pitiful end does not mean the triumph of nationalism over her power, but paradoxically denounces, once and for all, the dark side of it, something that she tries to do throughout the play. The outcome of Nora's process of personal empowerment is rooted in her strength in resisting and enduring oppression. Her representation and narrative constitute a symbol of feminine power which has transcended time and space.

In the same vein, Bessie's narrative cannot be reduced to one of frustrated experience. The personal process of empowerment experienced by Bessie is a more visible one than Nora's, as her transformation is evident throughout the play. She is initially represented in an oppressive condition due to social circumstances, and, above all, as a victim of nationalism for she has lost a son to the rebels. Bessie is primarily presented in an antagonistic portrayal to the idea of improvement or control of her attitudes. Her aggressiveness seems to have much to do with her dissatisfaction with the tyrannical nature of her circumstances, like other Irish mothers. Bessie's process of empowerment is inaugurated through the change of some psychological traits and it culminates in brave actions in favour of her community. As the plot unfolds, Bessie's change comes into play as she interacts with the other characters, and, chiefly through her maternal attitudes. "And as Bessie dies, it is clear that the main victims of the war rise to become the main heroes" (Wilson 327). She dies protecting another woman from the violence caused by political questions. Like Nora's tragic end, Bessie's death provides a reassessment of the consequences of the long-waited Irish revolution as it exposes the cruel aftermath it meant for many ordinary civilians. In this respect, Bessie's apparent failure in the final scene forms the bridge between the individual change and a collective context, since this last stage of her personal process of empowerment involves an assessment of what happens following her actions. The effect of Bessie's individual deeds make way for the impact of her action on other subjects.

To conclude, in *The Plough and the Stars* O'Casey redefines the legacy of the Easter Rising in rational terms but, more importantly, he does so making use of unconventional female imagery. It is difficult to know what working-class women thought of the Rising. Nonetheless, O'Casey endeavoured to give them a voice through his dramatic characters. Representing them as he did constitutes an inversion of the conventional notion of power. For O'Casey, the empowered images were not those of the leaders of the rising, nor of the men who died sacrificially for their country, but rather of those noncombatant women who bravely faced and challenged the unfortunate consequences in order to survive. O'Casey contested

male dominance, not only through the way he constructs his characters but, above all, because he ascribes the central meaning of the play to strong, autonomous female characters.

4.3 Female Representation in *Three Dublin Plays*: Individual and Collective Empowerment

O'Casey's *Three Dublin Plays* depict an Ireland in the aftermath of the Irish Literary Revival and its effervescent cultural and literary production, which had been led by influential and mostly upper-class figures. However, O'Casey was much poorer than the other playwrights of that period. He was not part of the elite; on the contrary, before writing became his livelihood, he was an ordinary labourer in Dublin. So, even though he was supportive of Irish nationalism, his primary concern was with the situation of the working class. The female portrayals constructed by the author highlight the bogus promise of "equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens" made by the Irish Free State, and they expose how internal power relations can cause much suffering for to marginalised individuals. In fact, structural factors and other forms of domination left poor Irish women in a situation of exclusion and oppression. They ended up in a wretched state where they saw themselves confined, with almost no hope of achieving freedom.

Looking at Ireland's current situation, in which Irish women have played a prominent role and achieved important triumphs, it is hard to think that a century ago a great number of their forebears were excluded from the public realm and the historical records. For the lower-class women from impoverished inner-city communities in Dublin the situation was even worse since they were completely left behind by history. Nonetheless, O'Casey shows they suffered most of the consequences of that long period of conflict and destruction. In this sense, "all three plays are bound together by war, its violence and tragic disruptiveness. O'Casey's humane response, his passion for honest dealing and clear thinking on the national question… underpins the Dublin plays and suffuses them with pity, anger and sorrow" (Murray, *Sean O'Casey* xiii). Besides their unfavorable social and economic conditions, the tenement dwellers in *Three Dublin Plays* witnessed the armed conflicts which occurred between 1916 and 1922, a period of devastation with a high cost in human life. Hence, even though they present different narratives, the plays' backgrounds and their political connections depict female characters suffering straitened economic and social circumstances.

In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal argues that one of the forms of understanding a dramatic character has to do with its association to the external world. This implies a consideration of different features of the character's inner self linked to aspects like self-expression, personal determination and dependence upon socio-political factors. Boal's proposal is based on what Brecht (1974) defines as the 'dramatic' and 'epic' forms of theatre. In the dramatic form, from a Hegelian perspective, the nature of the theatrical character is subjective. The character is the owner of its own will and has no limitations imposed upon its action. According to this view, exterior actions result from the character's free spirit. By contrast, the epic form, as envisaged by Brecht and Boal (78), sees the character as a subject which acts in response to economic or/and social forces so that it is not an absolute subject, but, rather, a direct object of external influences. It is known that O'Casey was well aware of current tendencies in European drama through his reading and through the productions staged at the Dublin Drama League. In January 1925, for example, O'Casey had the opportunity to see a performance of *Masses and Man*, by Ernst Toller, one of the German Expressionist playwrights who influenced Brecht so significantly. Christopher Murray argues that The Plough and the Stars, first staged at the Abbey a year after Dublin had its first contact with Toller's work, is very much in the modernist mode that Brecht was to develop so successfully:

> *The Plough and the Stars* is in fact unified in theme and structure to an intense degree in the modernist mode. The references just made to Chekhov, Shaw and Brecht merely indicate that O'Casey's imagination was very much in tune with the ironies and formal strategies of the greatest innovators in modern drama. But he worked through the form of a play in accordance with the pressure of his own convictions. This pressure led him to make associations in several levels at once and by that means to provide what Brecht was to call 'complex seeing'. (Murray 96)

The shocking realism of O'Casey's three plays at the Abbey Theatre is attributed not only to his great ability in constructing vivid and original characters but also, and more importantly, to his way of portraying them immersed in a suffocating environment which interfered significantly in their lives. "Like Brecht, O'Casey married references to wiser social upheaval in his work with subjective stories to create a sense of his class's real role in historical change. He often juxtaposed the reality of poverty in ordinary working-class homes with the hollowness of political rhetoric outside" (Pierse 53). This is especially true of his female characters, for whom the Irish revolutionary context had serious implications. Even though O'Casey's women are empowered subjects who have a significant degree of control over their lives, they exist in a social system regulated by inequal relations of power which

dominate their inner force. They are not fully free, as Hegel proposes for the subject character, saying that it is the entity which "determines all external action" (Boal 73). On the contrary, they are subjects constrained and disrupted by the environment. For this reason, O'Casey's female characters may be seen as Brechtian rather than Hegelian. Minnie, Nora, Bessie, Mary and Juno are all representations of subjects who, despite exerting power, are constrained by the tyrannical structure of the Irish context. They are affected by objective constraints such as poverty, violence and war, and subjective ones such as the conservative ideals, patriarchalism and Irish nationalism.

These female characters have the shared background of living in the tenements in poverty and miserable conditions. Secondly, although they are noncombatants, each of them has to deal with the harsh impact of war's violence on their lives. But, they experience different forms of pressure. Bessie Burgess and Juno are mothers who lose their sons in the national tragedy. Juno and Nora are married women who undergo many difficulties in their lives on account of their husbands' choices in life. Minnie Powell and Mary are lively young women who have jobs and whose force of life is circumscribed by social and economic disparities. Bessie and Minnie Powell lose their lives as victims of the armed conflicts occurring on the streets. Juno and Bessie face difficult moments trying to protect their family and community. Mary and Nora see their babies' future affected by traumatic events. Additionally, with the exception of Nora, all of them are women who work to financially support their families, Minnie, Juno and Bessie being sole breadwinners in their households. On an individual level, each of them has to deal with particular oppressive circumstances. Minnie lives on her own and has to work hard to earn her living, and to take care of herself because of her parents' early death. She suffers a tragic end because of her determination to protect someone she loves. Mary's interest in books and her engagement in life is often misunderstood by her unbearable father, and at the end of the play she is abandoned by her baby's father and will have to challenge the rejection of being a single mother. Juno has a life of suffering. Divided between work and home, she has to put up with Mary's time away from work, Boyle's alcoholism and indolence, Johnny's disabilities and eventual death, and, finally, Mary's unintended pregnancy. Nora fights a defiant battle against her husband's nationalistic aspirations and ends up with a ruined life. Finally, Bessie works as a street- vendor to sustain herself and stands as a mother whose son lives far from home because of his involvement in the war. At the end, Bessie's protective attitudes towards her community make her a fatal victim of the 1916 bloodshed.

These female characters attempt to do whatever is possible to change their respective circumstances; however, they are still objects of the system and their lives are thus regulated by these outer forces. When Mary is introduced in *Juno and the Paycock,* O'Casey states that, while her speech and manner are improved by her acquaintance, they are degraded by the environment (68). No matter how strong and determined they are, their circumstances do not offer them tangible opportunities to fully change life. This explains why Minnie, Nora and Bessie are representations of empowered women who seem to be defeated at the end of their respective plays, since they are unable to overcome all the oppressive factors imposed upon them. Their personal empowerment trajectories do not appear clear enough since they do not enjoy a successful outcome, neither for themselves nor for their community. However, "there is no final state of empowerment. Rather the empowerment process strengthens the ongoing capacity for successful action under changing circumstances" (Staples 31-2). In accordance with the approach proposed in this study, it is fundamental to distinguish process and outcome since empowerment is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which operates on distinct levels and may vary according to the subject's individual circumstances. The fact that these characters do not achieve complete empowerment does not mean that they cannot be considered representations of empowered women. What is important is that, during a period of their lives, they reveal their strength self-efficacy in confronting specific repressive circumstances. Their respective narratives serve to demonstrate how external factors are intrinsically associated with the process and may influence its outcome. Since Minnie, Nora and Bessie are objects of their social and economic circumstances, their actions are partially determined by them. Even as representations of women who challenge inequal power relations, one should not expect that they will all achieve a full life-trajectory of conquests and transformations.

The perception of these characters as individuals controlled by domineering forces is another element that transforms them into representations of personal empowerment, since the onset of empowered attitudes, as indicated by Carr, is an initial state of powerlessness, in which the subject must manage resources and mechanisms of power in order to alter oppressive circumstances imposed by cultural systems. The point of departure is a position of subjugation. Empowerment and feminist theorists explain this starting point by considering socioeconomic factors (Carr 13). Before displaying empowered attributes, the characters are initially represented as subjects who live in an environment surrounded by objective and subjective aggressions, and it is how they respond to specific contingencies which uncovers their empowered behaviour.

Like Brecht's plays, O'Casey's *Three Dublin Plays*, to a certain extent, provide room for sociological experiments. Sean O'Casey has been described as a 'slum dramatist' (Pierse 51). Before him, no playwright had represented this part of Ireland on the Abbey's stage. His plays were also innovative because, in addition to depicting people from the slums, his emphasis was on showing the reality of women. He did not only introduce a neglected area of the country into the national theatre, he also exposed the strength of female slum residents in struggling against powerful and oppressive forms of domination. Although these tenement residents were living menial lives, they were neither weak nor psychologically inferior. Even in the face of turmoil, O'Casey's working-class Irish women have a natural propensity to overcome hardship and keep going. Juno Boyle, who fully represents the notion of personal empowerment, overcomes oppression up until the very last moment of the play. Although she knows she is going to face difficulties in her new life, her final words and attitudes indicate her determination to survive. As an object character whose action corresponds to external influences, she is primarily portrayed in a state of powerlessness. The adversities Juno deals with during the play enable her to temper her empowered attributes to act as a strong and resourceful element before her family and community. In terms of experiencing empowerment, unlike Minnie, Nora and Bessie, whose personal stories of struggle are interrupted once and for all, Juno survives. When the play finishes, she is still a result of her interaction with the oppressive system in which she lives, but she endures it. In this sense, she is the absolute representation of the ability of the women of her class to overcome obstacles, demonstrating the possibility of a full process of change from oppression to empowerment.

As well as being examples of personal empowerment, another aspect to be considered when analysing these female characters is related to a broader question: the collective impact of their empowered attitudes. Their representation shows how individual forces may serve as a strategy for both the individual and the collective common good; several of them display a natural propensity to care for others, which means giving support and protection to their family members, neighbours and community. In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, for example, Minnie is taken into custody and even ends up dying due to her determination to protect Davoren. She takes a bag full of explosives into her room so that the man she loves does not have to face problems. In *Juno and the Paycock,* Juno Boyle is the finest example of a woman who lives to provide for others. Her personal actions are of little importance to herself and do not promote her individuality, but her struggle impacts on her family. In *The Plough and the Stars*, Bessie uses her power in service of the well-being of others when she gives care and attention to her neighbours, Mollser and Nora. Initially depicted as being aggressive

with her neighbours, she ends up losing her life for the protection of another woman. The process of personal empowerment for these characters consists of a contribution to the collective good. Although the characters in question are not women with great public achievements, their selfless attitudes constitute a significant contribution to their local community. Through an understanding of their own individual needs, they become aware of the oppressive circumstances of their own community. In this sense, these female characters are represented as models of a breakthrough in oppression which could work as an incentive for reflection and transformation outside the theatrical context.

The plots of the *Three Dublin Plays* reveal a larger narrative of a wider group of marginalised Irish women. The stories of Minnie, Nora, Bessie, Juno and Mary represent the real life of many Irish women from the tenements who were not weak and passive housewives, but were, rather, subjects who acted beyond what was expected for the female stereotype, not acting in line with the wishes of the Irish male-controlled view. As a result, O'Casey's dramatic personal accounts conferred visibility upon those courageous real-life female who lived through the revolutionary years, but who were excluded from Ireland's national project.

When drama reproduces reality, it also has the power to transform it. From this perspective, O'Casey's works can also be seen as the forerunner of another feature of Brecht's theatre: its social commitment. O'Casey's portrayal of working-class women provided a stage for Dublin's problems of social and economic order. His "dramas forced the Abbey's Dublin audience to think of the Dubliners not among them. He rejected all Romanticism and stuck to what was distinctly modern and realistic about the situations of Dublin's poor — men and women alike" (Wilson 327-8).

The capacity of drama to touch on social questions transforms it into an effective instrument for change, which, in the context of the present thesis, associates O'Casey's plays with the collective dimension of women's empowerment. The plight of the women in *Three Dublin Plays* extends beyond the dramatic sphere to touch on a real concern with oppressed Irish women from the tenements. Esslin understands that "the theatre and all drama can be seen as a mirror in which society looks at itself" (103), and, thus, plays an important role as a resource which may induce the members of the audience to think about their own reality. Seeing these female characters, the audience is able to engage with their stories at a level which goes beyond the purposes of aesthetics and entertainment. It is an interaction which provokes deeper reflection since O'Casey's plays were denouncing the dominant ideology of that time. For Rappaport, personal stories influence identity and behaviour, personal and

social change ("Empowerment Meets Narrative" 796). O'Casey's female portrayals served "as a guiding metaphor for community research and practice" (797). This helps to explain why O'Casey's fresh vision caused mixed feelings among audiences and critics, as exemplified by the riots that occurred during one of the performances of *The Plough and the Stars*. His way of representing women was an attack on all the demagogic and romantic idealism built into Irish female imagery. He touched on power relation questions by placing women as central characters and transferring the idea of superiority from masculinity to femininity. In fact, however, O'Casey was showing nothing more than what really happened in Irish society. He was writing about and for the oppressed people, raising questions about Irish society which needed to be discussed.

According to Rappaport, "people who seek either personal or community change often find that is very difficult to sustain change without the support of a collectivity that provides a new communal narrative around which they can sustain changes in their own personal story" (796). MacKinnon also proposes that members of oppressed groups are invisible to themselves and must "discover" their identity. So, when O'Casey created female narratives about individuals who, even in straitened circumstances, risk their lives in order to protect their family and community, he was providing a communal narrative that would lead other women to recognise themselves as oppressed subjects. They could go on to develop social support, new identities and selves. It is a reciprocal process. In the same way collective narratives may sustain personal life stories in order to enhance the goals of empowerment, "individuals, in turn, create, change, and sustain the group narrative" (Rappaport, "Empowerment Meets Narrative" 796). Faced with representations that exposed problems of social order, oppressive domineering structures, women's subjugation and unfair power relations, audience members could understand and master their own personal stories. Given that the plays depict empowered female attitudes before an oppressive reality, albeit in the personal domain, the reproduction of unexpected and controversial behaviours has the power to enable other individuals to understand and to question the mechanisms of power and control existing in the real world.

The purpose of my empowerment-oriented reading of O'Casey's plays has been to demonstrate that, in addition to the importance of conferring visibility to stories of the individual empowerment of Irish women, these texts work as narratives that continue to influence identity behaviour, personal and social change, just as they did in a period when drama exercised a great impact on the formation of Irish identity for women. Taking a different course from the prevailing national drama, O'Casey showed how women were

powerful individuals who were able to surpass difficult circumstances, whilst being in charge of many important questions of the family and of the community, acting as decision-makers and invariably taking on male roles. In a sense, the playwright exposed portraits of Irish women who, although numerous, were being denied an appropriate place in the public space. The way O'Casey applied notions of empowerment in the construction of the female characters of *Three Dublin Plays* may have functioned as a mechanism to sustain and strengthen the community narratives of the women of the Dublin tenements, precisely when Ireland was going through the process of independence. O'Casey's representation of personal empowerment gave a public voice to those stories and conferred visibility to the female empowered community.

5. CONCLUSION

Ireland has been metaphorically associated with a female figure throughout its history. More than simply poetic, this association encapsulates a question of power. During the long period Mother Ireland was a victim of the colonising English male, "for an equally long time, the lives of actual Irish women were arguably colonized by Irish men, at the same time both genders were colonial subjects of England" (Bradley and Valiulis 6). Placed in such a historical framework, Irish women have been classified as second-class subjects and perceived as powerless. The notion of inferiority tied to the female image exceeded the sociological domain and contaminated their theatrical representation on the Irish stage. The portrayal of the Irish woman of the early years of the twentieth century was embedded in a process in which the emerging definition of Ireland and its national identity had a significant influence on the drama produced at the Abbey Theatre. Considering the presentation of women on the stage, "it is possible to glean much information about cultural attitudes towards women in perhaps the most vigorous years of upheaval Ireland has experienced in recent times" (Wilson 291). Most twentieth-century Irish dramatic works reduced the image of Irish women to a notion of helplessness, as subjects with a subordinate capacity, when, in fact, real Irish women behaved very differently. They were theatrically represented as mothers, lovers, wives and daughters, generally from a conservative viewpoint.

In this regard, O'Casey's *Three Dublin Plays* cast a critical eye on the contradictions in the dramatic representations of women in the early decades of the twentieth century. In his plays about the conflicts before and after Ireland's independence, O'Casey was more concerned with the struggle of the women who cared for the civilians than with the soldiers who went out to fight. In this respect, besides their political and historical approach, *The Shadow of a Gunman, Juno and the Paycock,* and *The Plough and the Stars* touch on the controversies regarding gender expectations because, like Bernard Shaw, O'Casey represented women in his plays as agents of 'the Life Force', occupying a heroic status while men stand condemned to various forms of folly (Murray, *Twentieth Century Irish Drama* 99). O'Casey's plays denounce the discrepancies between the contemporary theatrical representations and actual Irish individuals. While social conventions dictated discriminatory rules in terms of exercising power, prescribing men as superior subjects, O'Casey created powerful female characters reflecting the real ones he knew in the tenements. The three plays

share a commitment to portraying poor female subjects in "controversial" mode for the Ireland of O'Casey's days. Critics recognise O'Casey's dedication to depicting women as powerful figures while men are usually representations of passivity, indolence and cowardice (Benstock, Kiberd, Moran, Murray, Wilson). In this sense, the feminine representations in *Three Dublin Plays* touch on gendered aspects on power.

O'Casey's life itself revealed much about his concerns with the feminine experience, which is confirmed in the reports of those who knew and lived with him. In his drama, the portrayals of the daily life of Dublin slum families emotionally and financially supported by feminine figures provided a framework for realising how strong the women from the tenements had to be in order to survive turbulent and violent years. Through the characters Minnie, Nora, Bessie, Juno and Mary, O'Casey recalled the true heroines from Dublin slums who confronted oppressive circumstances by exercising considerable power and performing roles in defiance of stereotypical constructions that placed them as inferior and submissive subjects. In a period when the stereotype of womanhood in Irish drama was determined by political influences, and the male figure was the only representation of humanity's active force, O'Casey's women were a type of subject which was apparently nonexistent, even though they demonstrated the real significance of power in their families and communities.

These characters thus embody characteristics which lead us to think of feminine empowerment. As formulated by Foucalt, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on, a form of individual power came into being, and, consequently, a real and effective incorporation of power became necessary, in the sense that thi power gained the bodies, acts, attitudes, and everyday behaviour of individuals (125). This led discussions on power to become a more plural debate, touching on aspects as such the overcoming of unequal power structures and relations. In this context, empowerment emerged as a concept seeking to explain the phenomenon which enables an individual, a group of people or an entire community to achieve more autonomy in order to master skills such as determination, self- efficacy and autonomy which would eventually lead to social change. Supported by theoretical considerations on empowerment, the present study has developed an approach focused on perspectives of personal and psychological empowerment, since O'Casey's plays are central on empowered female individuals. The immediate goal of the plays is to release characters from the oppressive conditions imposed by the system. This goal has a profound personal meaning for them and is a central aspect of their identities. Above all, these characters' attributes and attitudes display their inner force, and reflect their attempt to

increase their influence and interaction in the public space striving for change in the face of oppression.

Regardless of their success at the end of their respective play, O'Casey's female characters prove to be superior to their male counterparts because their engagement and struggle in life convey a notion of restoration. Even Minnie and Bessie's sacrifices offer an opportunity to rebuild a new life out of the ruins. On the other hand, the male characters in *Three Dublin Plays* are antagonistic representations to the notion of personal empowerment. In each of the plays male impotency is repeated in different characters, in different roles, but which all display a form of behaviour which places them in an inferior position in relation to women. Captain Boyle and Joxer, in *Juno and the Paycock*, for example, display some similarities compared to Seumas in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. They share similar characteristcs, such as laziness and cowardice. Johnny Boyle and Donal Davoren exhibit inertia, immobility and a tendency to stay at home. Jack Clitheroe is the character who is most vigorous, but his action, which brings no change or improvement for himself or his family, is concentrated on a vain attempt to attain a position of authority.

In *Three Dublin Plays,* women are depicted as being imperfect, just as men are, but they all are representations of individuals with autonomy in life. In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Minnie is described as being confident, hardworking and courageous, and since she has worked since her early years, she has achieved autonomy in life and does not need anyone to take care of her. She keeps her sense self-mastery during tense situations and is able to face violence and take risks to protect the person she loves. In *The Plough and the Stars*, Nora is alert, swift, full of energy and firm in her attitudes. Through the words of other characters, it is easy to see in her someone who seeks improvement in the different aspects of life. She controls everything in her house, but at the same time she cares for her appearance. She does not give up on her husband until his death. She undertakes a tireless struggle against nationalistic influences to keep Jack at her side. Bessie, who is initially depicted in terms of physical strength, ultimately uses it to protect those around her. Her actions reveal much more about her struggle and compassion than her words. In *Juno and the Paycock*, Mary is presented as a lively and intelligent girl. Her interest in books and in current affairs underline her efforts to fight against the influences of her degraded environment. Lastly, Juno rises above her oppressive situation to survive with her daughter. She is delineated as a truly empowered character because she is a combination of the many strengths in human nature. In fact, Juno is O'Casey's most complete experiment in terms of empowerment, a symbol of immense power.

However, while Juno and Mary have the opportunity to continue with their lives, the trajectory of Minnie, Nora and Bessie is interrupted by structural forces. If, on the one hand, they cannot be considered to be impeccable examples of empowerment because of their final "failure", they undoubtedly appear as archetypes holding the necessary elements for developing an empowered image. Thus, if we sum up in one character the features of the others, we arrive at an ideal symbol of female empowerment. O'Casey shows that self-critical awareness can be generated by people's perception of their situation. Empowerment practice is bolstered when an individual example of growth permits others who live in a state of deprivation to interpret the social dimensions of their own problems. The stories of Minnie, Nora, Bessie, Juno and Mary represent the real experiences of a large group of strong women who occupied a powerless position because of unequal gender and social dictates. Since the plays accommodate real-life cases of female empowerment, they also provide a process of collective interpretation which enables power to act with larger systems and communities. In this way, O'Casey's plays are important sources of information about the possibilities and limits of power as well as of individual freedom.

Addressing considerations on the power of theatre to provoke a shift in real life, the present thesis also went on to identify the collective repercussions of personal cases of empowerment portrayed in *Three Dublin Plays*. The plays contribute to an open discussion of the position of women in society. Just as Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* started a discussion about the position of women in Victorian marriage, O'Casey's representations allow a meaningful insight into the situation Irish women faced during the revolutionary period. As O'Casey's theatrical narratives were sharing experiences, feelings and behaviours from real life, they had the power to influence the spectators in terms of ontological positions and self-conceptions. Interpretation is inherently both individual and interactional. As the audience collectively reflects on new understandings of themselves, new strategies are formulated and action is provoked. In this respect, each of the female stories conceives of a second trajectory aiming at societal change, which is an inherent part of the process of empowerment. Approaching O'Casey's trilogy through this perspective, it is possible to conclude that the plays not only exposed the marginalisation of empowered individuals, but were also committed to a collective change for Irish society with respect to women's issues.

Bearing all this in mind, O'Casey's *Three Dublin Plays* emerge as a group of play very much ahead of their time in the way they envisage the female image. O'Casey surprised audiences at the Abbey with a nonconservative but realistic view of women. Despite being representations from the beginning of the twentieth century, the configuration of these

protagonists sheds a useful light on the more recent concept of empowerment. It is worth remembering that, when the playwright wrote the three plays, the term ‘empowerment’ did not have its current connotation. Nonetheless, through his female characters, O’Casey arise as one of the first Ireland’s playwright to introduce the idea of empowerment associated to poor women in the Irish theatre. The playwright was reproducing the power he witnessed in real women, which on the Irish stage was an innovation challenging fixed and incongruous narratives. It was a subversive image providing a form of refreshment from the traditional female image promoted in the Irish national theatre.

The three plays not only established O'Casey's reputation as a great Irish dramatist, but they are collectively responsible for bearing the playwright’s feminist credentials to this day. As such, O’Casey’s work was a driving force for the representation of Irish women because, while post-independence Ireland was subject to the repressive influence of the New Irish State and the Catholic church, he emerged as an artist who was aware of the inconsistencies women were having to face at that time. According to his own daughter, he was a progressive thinker who was very concerned about the women of Ireland (Independent.ie 2004). Indeed, over the years, O’Casey’s productions have been increasingly associated with women’s issues. The importance of his plays for the cause of women transcends time and continues to impact the Irish scenario. Almost a hundred years after their premieres, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars* have been revisited on national and international stages innumerous times. In 2018, the revival of a less well-known play, *Nannie’s Night Out* (1924), first produced between *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, provided further proof of O’Casey’s long- standing and current connection with feminine issues. Like the three full-length works, the one-act play is also about the people and episodes of transition and chaos from the playwright’s own range of experience in the world of the Dublin tenements in the 1920s, even though historical events in *Nannie’s Night Out* do not have the same importance as they do in the *Three Dublin Plays*. First performed by the Abbey on 29 September 1924 with seven performances, the play was not produced again until 1961. What seemed to be a forgotten work in no way comparable in importance to the three more famous full-length plays was given a new dimension during the 2018 Dublin Theatre Festival as an immersive performance which was considered to provide a catalytic understanding of contemporary issues, demanding urgent action. Reframing *Nannie’s Night Out, “The Lost O’Casey”* was an ANU production which resulted in recognition for the theatrical company by the Irish government agency for developing the arts, and three prizes in the 2019 *Irish Times* Irish

Theatre Awards: Best Movement for Sue Mythen, Best Actress Award for Sarah Morris, and Best New Play. The reworked play, which is not restricted to fiction, propels the protagonist, the lost Nannie, into present-day Dublin, at the centre of the work, in a performance which spins outwards from the stage onto the streets. Dividing its small audience into pairs or solo experiences, the cast's aim was to give everyone a different experience of the play. "This potent and timely project invites audiences into a thrilling reimagining of the work, inside the places, language and politics of the lost play in our changing capital… bringing the voices of communities and untold stories to the fore."[39]

O'Casey's original text talks about a poor woman tenement-dweller who has just been released from Mountjoy Prison. On her first night out from jail she gets drunk on methylated spirits and hits the town leaving chaos and confusion. Her representation shows how a homeless, alcoholic woman had very little or no opportunity in the unimproved conditions of the new Irish politics; poverty deformed any potential talent. In fact, Nannie witnesses the creation of a new State which has no plans to accommodate a woman like her. Despite being a neglected figure, "a Cathleen ni Houlihan of the slums, dirty, ragged and drunk", she is "also vital and full of life, an appropriate counter-image to the romantic and sentimental nationalist view of her" (Kosok 65). She proves to be a courageous woman when she tries to protect Polly, a shopkeeper, from a gunman. Despite being drunk, she comes in, grabs the man pulls him around the shop. The gunman breaks free and runs away. Polly is delighted with Nannie's action. O'Casey wrote several endings for the play; in the text O'Casey submitted, the protagonist dies, whereas the staged version depicts her being taken back to jail by three policemen.[40] Although the text raised significant issues regarding the housing crisis, homeless families, alcoholism and addiction, it signalised contradictory aspects of the condition of women faced with the complacencies of Free-State Ireland. The play resembles the *Three Dublin Plays* by contrasting male cowardice and female strength, for Nannie "is also an embodiment of that invincible vitality which gives the best among O'Casey's characters their resilience" (Kosok 65). For Murray, the protagonist "is a raucous, disruptive force who bursts into the Laburnum Dairy" (*Writer at Work* 157). Like the other female characters analysed, Nannie emerges as a further representation of women's power in O'Casey's Dublin plays. If, in 1924, *Nannie's Night Out* was a neglected play, its 2018 reframed production, along with *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The*

[39] In http://anuproductions.ie/work/the-lost-ocasey-2/

[40] According to Murray, Lennox Robinson, the play's director, persuaded O'Casey to change the ending.

Plough and the Stars, consolidates the extraordinary importance of O'Casey's vanguardist view of the power of women.

In closing, my thesis presented O'Casey's portrayals of empowered female characters in *Three Dublin Plays* as an attempt to confer visibility and an appropriate representation to those marginalised, but strong Dublin-tenement women. The importance of the playwright's protagonists extends beyond his own times due to his visionary understanding of the real position of women in society. Through his works, O'Casey was one of the few artists of his time who spoke about power with regard to gender expectations and, he was possibly, the only dramatist in the 1920s who applied notions of empowerment to his characters. Since to speak is to exercise power, when the author represented these women and gave them voice, he was challenging the prevailing silence about the disparities that had been imposed on Irish women for years. In this sense, his work also provided a pathway for change with respect to the reassessment of women's social roles. Whether theatre is a place of rehearsal, a form of practice for transformation, thus, O'Casey's plays formed an important rehearsal for a subsequent public demonstration of the issue of Irish women's empowerment. As reinforced by the rebirth of *Nannie's Night Out*, his plays continue to provide echoes for profound meditation because, "O'Casey's characters are destined to be remembered" (Benstock, *Sean O'Casey* 53), and, just like O'Casey's plays themselves, real Irish women may no longer be written out of history.

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