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Portrayals of Poverty in Twentieth-Century Irish Drama

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Abstract
This essay examines the portrayal of impoverished people in twentieth century Irish drama, comparing the situation of impoverished Irish people during certain periods in history to the drama produced during and about those periods. I explore the various causes of poverty in Ireland by looking at British colonization of Ireland, the role of the Church in social and economic affairs, and the effects of mass emigration. The issue to be investigated is whether or not the portrayal of impoverished people in twentieth century Irish drama is truthful to reality. Exploring this problem will give insight into how conscious Irish playwrights were of realistically portraying poor Irish people. The essay considers research by studying the plays of Ireland’s most well-known playwrights, historical Irish government documents, and scholarly articles written about the economic and political situation of Ireland. This analysis reveals that twentieth century Irish drama does give a fair view of impoverished Irish people. Some plays explore the situation of poverty directly and others present it as a background issue. Most playwrights explored here show an understanding of the realities of poverty in Ireland in the twentieth century and before. These playwrights explore the daily lives of impoverished people as well as their treatment by the British and Irish government.

Key Terms:
- British
- Drama
- Emigration
- Twentieth Century
- Famine
- Irish
- Poverty
Poverty is a situation commonly associated with twentieth century Ireland both by the Irish and by outsiders. Poverty affects every aspect of a person’s life. In twentieth century Irish drama, however, poverty is not always a main theme, but it is always a present element. More often than not, playwrights did not set out to make a statement about poverty in Ireland; they only portrayed their reality. That most people in twentieth century Ireland were poor is a stereotype. At the same time, it is a reality that the country has struggled with poverty for much of its existence. As such, it is not unusual that many characters in Irish drama live in impoverished conditions. This essay considers whether the various depictions in Irish drama are truthful representations of the Irish people. Specifically, do the situations of poor characters reflect the reality of the periods depicted in John Millington Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Riders to the Sea*, W.B. Yeats’s and Lady Gregory’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and *The Pot of Broth*, Lady Gregory’s *Spreading the News*, Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*, George Bernard Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island*, and Brian Friel’s, *Dancing at Lughnasa*? These plays depict British colonization of Ireland, the function of the Church in social life and the economy, and the consequences of large-scale emigration.

Although the playwrights considered here are Irish themselves, Irish people are capable of stereotyping and romanticizing themselves just as any other people are. This is especially true considering the various backgrounds of Irish playwrights. The socioeconomic background of a playwright plays a part in the way he or she portrays impoverished people and the political and social messages found in his or her drama. An Anglo-Irish Protestant playwright from a landowning family in the north of Ireland is likely to have a different perspective than an Irish Catholic playwright from a working class family in the Republic of Ireland.

Politics is greatly affected by economic status. Poor people tend to have less political power than wealthy people. Therefore, it is not surprising that a poor nation like Ireland would have far less political power than a wealthier nation like Britain. A result of Ireland’s poverty is that, historically, the country did not have the money to fund an adequate military. An Irish Army was not formed until 1913 (The Defence Forces). Ireland has often had to seek help from other countries to defend itself against Britain. However, even with the help of other countries, Ireland did not have the resources to be totally independent of the British until 1922 (Brown 33). The results of less political power are not just confined to armed conflict. Even in peace time, poor people suffer politically. Irish politicians, like politicians all over the world, are susceptible to bribery by the rich. Poor Irish people have to deal with paternalistic politicians as well as those who do not cater to their needs. Historically, this paternalism came in large part from government officials put in place by the British government. This is because Ireland was under British rule until 1922 when the Anglo-Irish Treaty was created and the Republic of Ireland was recognized as a sovereign nation (Brown 33).

Part of the reason that Ireland has been so poor is that the industrial revolution was about one hundred years late in coming to Ireland. When it finally hit in the late 19th century, Ireland was still an agrarian based society. One of Ireland’s biggest sources of income came through the export of food to industrialized countries. The continual export of food had a detrimental effect on Ireland. Even during the Irish Potato Famine from 1845 to 1852, Ireland did not stop the export of food and livestock to other countries. Poor people in Ireland did not have money to buy food and livestock. During the Famine, there was still enough food in Ireland to feed the people. However, the crops that remained during the famine were primarily exported for money and were not used to feed people (“The Great Irish Famine”).
One of the many results of widespread poverty is mass emigration. Ireland is a country that was greatly affected by emigration, partly because of the historical economy and landscape of Ireland. Because the countries Ireland interacted with were industrialized, it lagged behind them economically. There was a shortage of employment in Ireland (Brown 14-15). Although Ireland was a largely agrarian society, for most farming was not an option. Many land holdings were so small and unsuitable for farming that a person could not support a family from it. The reason that suitable farming land was so small is because of the nature of Irish farm subdivisions. It was a common practice in Ireland before the famine for parents to divide land between all the sons of a family. The land that these men inherited eventually became so small that they could not support their families from it. After the famine, land was only given to the eldest son to ensure that at least one son had enough land to support his family (Brown 19). The only option for a lot of other young men was to leave the country to find work. Although this resulted in many young men leaving the country, many women left as well. Emigration from Ireland was so massive that “by the early 1920s . . . 43 percent of Irish-born men and women were living abroad” (Brown 18). However, the emigration of men had a greater effect on the economic and cultural landscape of Ireland.

One of the effects of large scale emigration is an unbalanced ratio of men to women. Since traditionally the burden was on men to provide financial support for themselves and for their families, more men than women left to find work in other countries. This left a disproportionate number of single women in the country. The phenomenon is explored in Brian Friel’s 1990 play Dancing at Lughnasa. This play depicts the lives of five unmarried sisters living together during the summer of 1936. It is narrated from the perspective of Michael, the seven year old son of the youngest sister, Chris. The Anglo-Irish Trade War between the Free Irish States and the United Kingdom lasted from 1932 to 1938. One of the causes of this war was the money paid to absentee British landlords for their former Irish estates. The payment of these sums, called “Irish annuities,” began under the government of President William Thomas Cosgrove (“Irish Free State” 1). This war prolonged emigration because it cut off trade with one of Ireland’s biggest importers. Dancing at Lughnasa is set in this climate. The only men we see in the play are Gerry and Jack. Gerry, a Welshman, is the father of the youngest sister’s son and rarely visits his family. Jack is the sisters’ brother and has returned from a 25-year stay as a priest in Uganda. The women in the play are all struggling to support themselves and young Michael during a time when Ireland is at odds with the British superpower. Though the women are all single during the play, they all had suitors when they were young. The fact that all five sisters are single despite having suitors in their younger days could suggest two things. One suggestion is that the men they were interested in left the country. The other is that their suitors married other women and there were not enough men in the country for all the women to marry.

While some men immigrated to another country, others left Ireland to work on ships at sea. This work was often very dangerous, but as people were desperate for income, they had little choice in the matter. Impoverished people often have no choice but to accept dangerous or unfair working conditions. Working jobs like this came with a high chance of death. The phenomenon of young men being killed at sea is a central theme in John Millington Synge’s 1904 play, Riders to the Sea. In this play, each of the men of a family except one drowns while working as fishermen on the sea. The last son, while heading off to work, falls off a horse into the sea and drowns. Part of the tragedy of this play is that all the men in the family eventually die while they are out at sea. The youngest son, Bartley, knows that there is a great likelihood that he will also drown. However,
he is anxious to go out to sea and even asks his mother for a blessing before he leaves. The family’s continual acceptance of this work shows the desperation of their situation. Cathleen, the older daughter, says, “It’s the life of a young man to be going to the sea” (61). Cathleen indicates that this life is not unique to their family. Many young men on the west coast of Ireland looked for work on the sea at this time, in spite of the fact that this occupation could mean death.

Women often had to take care of themselves with no men to earn income or help with labor. Both Synge’s Riders to the Sea and Dancing at Lughnasa depict a group of women all living together in one house sharing the workload. In both plays, one sees how the family struggles with no men to help them. In Riders to the Sea, however, there is one man left in the family, but he is of no help to them as he leaves, like all the other men of the family, to work on the sea. The two young women are unmarried and the mother is a widow. This circumstance reflects the reality of life in Ireland in the twentieth century and during many time periods before and since.

Because so many women had to take care of themselves, they had to abandon the “daintiness” that is stereotypical of women in so many cultures. In many twentieth century Irish plays, women are depicted as rough and masculine. Sibby from W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory’s The Pot of Broth and Pegeen Mike from John Millington Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World are depicted in this way. The Pot of Broth is the story of a vagrant who cons two people into providing his dinner for the night. Sibby falls for the con. Her description reads like an exaggerated stereotype of an Irish woman. The tramp says of her, “A regular slave-driver that would starve the rats. A niggard with her eyes on kippeens, that would skin a flea for its hide” (12). For impoverished people, it is nearly impossible to live up to gender expectations or behave in ways that are considered appropriate. Women cannot afford to act like “ladies” when they have to, in a sense, fulfill both the woman’s and the man’s role. They must do what they can to survive. As depicted in Irish drama, few men in the early twentieth century had a problem with this behavior from women. The Playboy of the Western World is the story of a young man, Christy, who hides out in a small Irish village after trying to murder his father. Christy falls in love with Pegeen Mike, the tough daughter of a bar owner, even though it can be argued that she is more masculine than he is. Women are depicted this way in almost every Irish play. This is not true of only one time period. Women are depicted this way in the Irish plays from the early twentieth century as well as in the plays from the late twentieth century. There is only one play in which women are not depicted as tough: W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory’s Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the story of a young man named Michael who goes off to join the Irish Rebellion of 1798 after a conversation with a mysterious old woman. In this play, Bridget, Michael’s mother, is a married woman and depends on her husband and son for support. Although she fits a more traditional wifely and motherly role, she is still quite sassy and speaks her mind often. When her husband says how much he wished he had received a large dowry, she responds by saying, “Well, if I didn’t bring much I didn’t get much” (4). So, even the more feminine women are portrayed as tougher than women in other cultures.

The Irish have a long history of vulnerability to the British. Their poverty was one of the major reasons Irish people had to tolerate the British occupation of Ireland. Throughout much of Ireland’s history, the British have come to the island to colonize and to start industries. Basically, Ireland has often been a place for the British to make money and see to their own interests. We see this in George Bernard Shaw’s 1907 play John Bull’s Other Island which depicts an English man coming to Ireland to open new businesses that most Irish people would not have
the money to enjoy. The name of the play speaks of the relationship England has to Ireland. “John Bull” is a figure that is supposed to be the embodiment of the British people, specifically English people. Referring to Ireland as “John Bull’s Other Island” shows the ownership that England has often had over Ireland. Britain’s treatment of Ireland was often tolerated because the Irish had no alternative. The vast majority of Irish people could not sustain themselves without some intervention, directly or indirectly, from the British government or business people. Another reason this exploitation was tolerated is that many Irish people were tired of fighting the British. The tensions between those who wanted to continue to resist the British and those who thought the Irish should be happy for what they could get is exemplified in Sean O’Casey’s Juno and the Paycock. This 1924 play is set during the Irish Civil War of 1922 which occurs after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 (Harrington 198). In this play, Johnny Boyle, a Free Stater, believes that the Irish people can never be truly free until they are completely independent of Britain and all 32 counties of Ireland are under Irish rule. His nonpartisan mother, June Boyle, makes a snide remark about the resultant poverty from resisting the British when she says, “To be sure, to be sure – no bread’s a lot betther [sic] than half a loaf” (O’Casey 214). Her remark shows that many people had decided to accept British control of Northern Ireland if that meant they would have some stability in their lives.

We also see the Irish people’s vulnerability to the British in Lady Gregory’s Spreading the News. In it, there is an English magistrate who comes to town filled with stereotypical notions about the violence of Irish people. When a horrible rumor spreads around the town, he arrests two innocent men and throws them in jail because of his preconceived negative beliefs about Irish people. The ease with which he can do this shows how much Irish people’s lives and freedom were at the mercy of the British. It is significant that the British character is a removable magistrate. This detail shows that he was not elected by the people. Rather, he was imposed on them by a ruling British power. John Bull’s Other Island is another play where we see an Englishman come to Ireland with stereotypical ideas about the Irish. Tom Broadbent is carried away by his idealized view of Ireland. He says, “I saw at once that you are a thorough Irishman, with all the faults and all the qualities of your race: rash and improvident but brave and goodnatured; not likely to succeed in business on your own account perhaps” (Shaw 118). His attitude is both condescending and self-justifying. His views of Irish people give him exactly the excuse he needs to come to Ireland and impose his business plans. The fact that he would make such sweeping generalizations about Irish people when he knows little of them is indicative of a greater British disregard for the actual people of Ireland in favor of their idealized views. In the end, Broadbent ends up doing more harm than good with all the new business he wants to bring to Ireland. He rises to social, economic, and political power and ends up exploiting the land in such a way that the Irish people in the community are unable to benefit from any of his business ventures.

Poverty in Ireland led to and maintained dependence on the church, both Catholic and Protestant. In Ireland, the Church was one of the most powerful organizations. It had an active role in the government and had a great deal of influence on the people. This materialized itself in many ways. One way is that churches often fed the poor. Because of this, it was not unusual for a person to convert, at least outwardly, to another denomination for a guarantee of food. In Ireland, the Protestant church gave food to members of its religion and those who converted. People who converted were called “soupers,” so named because Protestant evangelists gave soup to those who converted to Protestantism (Harrington 42). There is mention of soupers in Lady Gregory’s Spreading the News. The character Tim Casey
says, “Sure you don’t think he’d turn souper and marry her in a Protestant church” (Gregory 42). The phrasing of his comment shows that “turning souper” was looked on with some disdain. However, the fact that there is a name for people who converted for such reasons shows that this was a common occurrence.

In other plays we see that people’s level of income had great sway over whether or not they follow the church. In Juno and the Paycock, the character Boyle expresses both pro-church and antichurch sentiments. When Boyle first gives his opinion on the church he criticizes it. This is partly because a priest is pestering him about working, and Boyle hates working. However, when he thinks he is to inherit a large sum of money, he praises the church. The ease with which Boyle switches sentiments about the church suggests that the way some Irish felt about the Church was largely influenced by how good or bad a person’s life was at the moment of consideration.

Another way that dependence on the church is depicted is by showing how much power the church had over people’s employment. We see this in Dancing at Lughnasa. In the play, Kate works as a school teacher and her brother Jack is a priest. Because he has lost his faith, Jack loses his position as a priest, although no one has told him this explicitly. Given the behavior of her brother, Kate is fired from her job as a teacher by the parish priest. In both of these instances we see how much control the church had over people’s livelihood. If people did not behave in a way that the church approved of, it was hard to survive.

Generally, the depiction of poverty in Irish drama has been in keeping with the realities of poverty in Irish life. The plays mentioned in this essay were set in the early twentieth century. This was a time of great change and great difficulty for Irish people. Three of the plays – The Pot of Broth, Riders to the Sea, and John Bull’s Other Island – were produced in 1904. This is around the same time that the Irish National Theatre Society and the Abbey Theatre of Dublin were established by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. The purpose of this society and theater was to stage plays that had a positive impact on Irish people and presented a positive picture of the Irish to the world. Lady Gregory wrote: “We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism” (402). They thought that the Irish were “weary of misrepresentation” and sought to present the Ireland that Irish people wanted to see on stage (Gregory 402). Most of the playwrights discussed – Lady Gregory, WB Yeats, Sean O’Casey, John Millington Synge, and George Bernard Shaw – put on plays at the Abbey Theatre in its early years. Therefore, they were true to the ideals under which the Abbey Theatre was founded.

Rarely is poverty a central theme in any of these plays, but it has various degrees of importance to the plot. In plays like Riders to the Sea and Dancing at Lughnasa, the economic situation of the characters is obvious. It plays a part in the characters actions and helps push the plot forward. In plays like Spreading the News and W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory’s Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the poverty is subtle and might be missed by those who are unfamiliar with Irish history and social customs. For instance, in Spreading the News, Mrs. Tarpey says to a British magistrate, “What business would the people here have but to be minding one another’s business?” (Gregory 37). This line tells of a people who had so little work where they lived that they mostly spent their days idle. Her saying this to a British magistrate shows the way that Britain imposed itself on Irish society. In Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Peter says, “The whole hundred pounds must be in Michael’s hands before he brings your daughter to the house.” This line speaks to a marriage custom among Irish people. For poor Irish men, it was customary to marry later in life. This is because they wanted to wait until their parents died so they
could move their new bride into their family house since they could not afford to buy a home.

The problem of being portrayed as a caricature is one that plagues all disenfranchised peoples. Tackling the subject of poverty in Ireland is a difficult task. An author must present the many ways that poverty affects people’s lives without creating a story in which people’s entire worldviews are formed by their economic situation. The differing backgrounds of the authors discussed in this analysis contribute to the varied depictions of impoverished Irish people. This varied depiction can also be attributed to the different major political events in Irish history that affected the Irish economy and society and, consequently, changed what it means to be poor in Ireland. Overall, modern Irish dramatists have been truthful in their representations of poor Irish people. The playwrights discussed were successful at depicting poverty in Ireland because they shied away from stereotypical depictions of Irish people. They have presented poor Irish people not as caricatures, but as real and varied.

Works Cited


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