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## JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK, A MODERN TRAGEDY?

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In the light of the various and distinct views represented by critics ranging from Kitto to Krieger, questions such as, "Is modern tragedy possible?", or "Does tragedy deal with the topical or the universal?", or, "Is democracy incompatible with tragedy?" present the difficult choice of either taking a circumscribed and spare stand as to what is tragic, or writing at least a book on the variety of possibilities in tragic form and vision in terms of an approach to a dozen representative plays or more. The first alternative causes hesitation at assuming a rigidity of mind necessary for strict labeling, and at the inevitable implication of inferior worth for plays which don't fit the "tragic" category. The second, earning the statement that tragedy can and does exist from age to age despite variations in form and philosophy, is a task beyond the necessary confines of this paper.

It may be obvious by now that the purpose of this paper is to point out the need to avoid, rather than impose, categories. Sticking to Aristotle's *Poetics* it would not take too great an effort to "prove" that Shakespeare wrote no tragedies, or, defining tragedy from a political base, to show that modern tragedy is impossible.

Our attempt therefore, will be to look at **Juno and the Paycock**, a modern play dealing with squalid and lowly people in a highly localized background, and see if in spite of its "modernity," it can have claim to tragic stature.

Even if we take a very loose definition of the term, the case against **Juno and the Paycock** is quite strong in terms of what a tragedy "should be." The characters in it are plebeian, part of the common populace of Ireland, showing no potentialities for exalted emotion, responsible moral choice or noble action. The play is not uniformly somber; comic, even farcical incidents precede and follow moments overcast with despair. The plot, or external action seems to be divorced from the internal action; it does not seem to be an organic part of the play, linked wholly with and vivifying the central meaning as in such a tragedy as *Antigone*. At times, indeed, it looks like sheer melodrama. Furthermore, **Juno and the Paycock** is highly topical and regional, dealing with the Ireland of 1922 and its concern for national freedom, a "non-universal" subject.

Despite these variations, however, or, rather, **because** of them, **Juno and the Paycock** emerges as an accomplished tragedy of universal import.

Let us look at the validity of the possible objections one by one.

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Most of the characters, true, are tawdry products of a naturalistic world. However, as we shall see presently, their ineffectuality and mediocrity only heightens the significance of the heroic strength Juno achieves at the end of the play. The exposure of Boyle's rascality or of Johnny's frenzied fear or the moral emptiness of Benthon creates an ethical squalor, a squalor which makes Juno's transcending it all the more of an achievement.

Juno is the spine, or rather, the tough and protective skin of the flaccid flesh and exposed nerve endings that make up her family.

Captain Boyle, her "struttin' paycock" of a husband is a liar and a braggart and totally irresponsible. He consistently and successfully avoids work, developing "terrible pains in me legs" and spends all of his time drinking with his "butty" Joxer, who is equally uninhibited. He is ready to lie without flinching or break into acting at any moment just to keep his ease. He gets furious at Jerry Devine for trying to find him a job and equally at Father Farrell. The former, he rationalizes, 'is not like a Christian at all... a Christian is natural but he's unnatural,' because Jerry never was "drunk in his life," nor was heard to curse. The latter belongs to the meddling clergy who are "havin' us mulin' from mornin' till night so that they may be in better fettle when they come hoppin' for dues!..." Yet he is quick enough to change his opinion of Father Farrell, as well as of his dead relative Michael Finnagan, according to wherever may his interests lie. As soon as he learns for instance that his 'prognosticator an' procrastinator' of a cousin has left him a fortune, he pours into. "I never expected that poor Bill ud die so sudden... Well, we all have to die some day... you, Juno, today... an' me maybe, tomorrow... It's sad, but it can't be helped..."

He is, of course, wildly funny, but nevertheless a complete scoundrel, unrestrained, self-indulgent and totally oblivious to his family. He meets Johnny's pitiful breakdown into terror with "Eeh, it's all nonsense; it was only a shadda he saw," and the possibility of Mary's sickness with, "A gradle wrong with her! First Johnny and now Mary; is the whole house goin' to become an hospital!" This makes for lack of empathy and human warmth towards other people as well. His reaction to the deep grief of their neighbors consists of 'Here, there, that's enough about things; they don't affect us, an' we needn't give a damn. If they want a wake, well, let them have a wake. When I was a sailor, I was always resigned to meet with a wathery grave; an', if they want to be soldiers, well, there's no use o' them squalin' when they meet a soldier's fate." This bravado about the dangers he confronted on the sea is typical of his constant boasting about his imaginary daring and boldness. His bravura, especially in the light of the fact that he was only a collier working between Dublin and Liverpool, reduces him all the more.

Lacking a moral and spiritual core, he fills his conversation with empty clichés such as "Chiselurs don't care a damn now about their parents," or, "If they have taken everything else from us, they've left us our memory." May we point out that O'Casey skillfully adds to the richness of the play by assigning metaphysical and ironical significance to some of these clichés such as, "What is the stars, what is the stars?" or, "The whole worl's in a state of chassis!..." He also weaves in the theme of betrayal, very important in Johnny's story, by having the ever shifting, ever mutually selfish friendship between Boyle and Joxer reflect it. More will be said on these later, in connection with the place of the comic in the play.

We can see Boyle's selfishness and lack of merit in both the children. Johnny is thoroughly immersed in his own destiny; nor does he gain our sympathy by what we learn about the cause of his terror: he has deceived Tancred and is responsible for his death. The fact that he was wounded fighting for Ireland's freedom does not raise him in our eyes, since, as we shall see later on, O'Casey is working against patriotic heroism in this play. His boasting about losing his arm in terms of "A principle is a principle," remains as meaningless as his father's clichés, for he has forsaken the much more important **human** principle of loyalty to a friend. The harshness of his reaction to the news of Mary's pregnancy is only another indication of his selfish isolation and lack of heart.

Mary does not deserve esteem either. She may have read Ibsen as an effort at self-improvement but one cannot help suspecting this effort of being as trivial as trying another ribbon in her hair. Her acquaintance with literature has only taught her to dislike her environment and to close herself to her family. She too lacks "the milk of human kindness"—she is indifferent to Johnny's needs, cruel to the love of Jerry Devine whom she obviously encouraged at one time, and yet insensitive enough to accuse him with "your humanity is just as narrow as the humanity of others." She substitutes for her lack of substance the learning she has been seeping in from Bentham whom she parrots. Even her love for Bentham, though believable and pathetic, can be seen as an infatuation with a man with "higher" qualities and a hope for bettering her circumstances.

I acknowledge that these analyses are rather harsh, displaying in turn a lack of sympathy on our part. But while feeling infinite pity for them and recognizing their problems, it is important to see their frailties in order to realize the worth of Juno's strength and valour in battling with and taking on herself their burdens. She stands out solid and lofty as a mountain in the moral desert of her world. Among the self-centered and petty human beings that make up the sand in the desert are Joxer, the parasitical free-loader; the lovable but equally changeable Mrs. Madigan (despite O'Casey's stage direction about her, her behaviour in the play, except for offering Mrs. Tancred a shawl, gives no indication that "her heart is generous"); the obviously (too obviously) villainous Bentham or Nugent whose awareness of death is in terms of "the respect for the Irish people's National regard for the dead."

We first meet Juno carrying in food for breakfast. She is literally, as well as metaphorically, the sustenance of her family, being their only breadwinner. The single aim which motivates all her action is to maintain and keep her family together. The immediate demands of this aim which means a fight for continuance against poverty make her a hard-headed realist. She is equally scornful about her husband's imaginary adventures and her children's impractical ideals. If she is skeptical about Mary's striking for principles, it is because she knows principles won't buy food. She encounters Johnny's heroic stance about the loss of his arm "I'd do it agen Ma, I'd do it agen; for a principle," with "Ah, you lost your best principle, my boy, when you lost your arm." Interestingly enough, in her revulsion against principles of dedication and valour, she emerges as the only dedicated and valiant character. Suspicious of dogmatic and theoretical notions of honour, patriotism, heroism which bring on hatred, war and death, she pragmatically abides by her own principles, immediately grounded on love and life.

She is, as her first name suggests both heroic and goddess-like, and, as her common last name suggests anti-heroic and earthy. This duality is played upon within the dialogue itself when Bentham refers to Juno's name in connection with "Homer's glorious

stroy of ancient gods and goddesses" immediately after which Captain Boyle comes out with the very prosaic explanation, "You see. Juno was born in June;... I met her in June... so wan day I says to her, 'You should ha' been called Juno, 'an' the name stuck to her ever since."

Having just referred to the "duality" of Juno Boyle's significance, I would like to point out that rather than remaining a duality, the heroic and the anti-heroic are one in Juno. Her heroism springs from her rejection of causes to die for and her determined clinging to preservation.

We may note that Boyle's egotistical instinct for self preservation is a horrid caricature of her warm and generous one. This distinction between the two should not mislead us however, into conceiving of Juno as an ascetic by nature, only too glad to bear the yoke of her profligate husband and happy to sacrifice herself constantly. Such a conception would reduce her motivation to the same self-indulgence common to the other characters. O'Casey carefully avoids the picture of the zealous sufferer by presenting Juno as somewhat of a shrew, insisting that her husband share the burden of supporting her family and grumbling about his escapades. She is eager enough to relax when assured by their "promising" financial condition, to sing and laugh with her guests. So much so, that, though moved by the sudden appearance and lamentation of Mrs. Tancred, she is willing to listen to her husband's advice and change from the infinite sympathy of "God help his pour oul' creature of a mother, for no mather whose friend or enemy he was, ne was her poor son," to the separation of "In wan way, she deserves all she got, she let the Die-hards make an open house of the place..." Her retort to Nugent in answer to his demand for "National regard for the dead" is further indication of the joy of life within her as well as of her impatience with impersonal abstractions.

This brief observation of Juno's joy contributes by ironic contrast to the tragedy of the third act. The short-lived happiness intensifies the loss of everything Juno has fought tooth and nail for all through her life.

One by one Juno faces the ruin and desertion of Mary, the loss of the legacy and finally the death of her son. Yet, one by one, each event, instead of breaking her down, brings out more stamina in her. Telling the news of Mary's pregnancy to Boyle, she is fully in control of the situation, meeting his selfish groans with "What you an' I'll have to go through'll be nothing to what poor Mary'll have to go through" If we attribute this calmness to her counting on taking Mary away, her reaction to the loss of the legacy gives us indication of the depth of her inner resources. She meets Johnny's violent and again selfish response to the news with "If you don't whisht, Johnny, you'll drive me mad. Who has kep' h' home together for the past few years--only me. An' who'll have to bear th' biggest part o' this throuble but me-but whinin' an' whingin' isn't going to do you any good." Although she is the person who will suffer most (the individual pains of her family are her own pains), she is the only one who encounters the situation with fortitude.

But it is in her last scene that Juno Boyle truly achieves grandeur. She has now been dealt the most terrible blow of all, the death of her son. Yet she tries to soothe Mary, "Hush, hush darlin'; you'll shortly have your own throuble to bear," and meets her outburst against God with "Ah, what can God do agen the stupidity o' men!"

She herself now rises above the "stupidity o' men" and their frailties by recognizing with "I forgot, Mary, I forgot; your poor oul' selfish mother was only thinkin' of herself" the impotence of selfishness. She takes upon herself the burden of Mary's troubles; also, realizing the mistake of her earlier separation from Mrs. Tancred's grief, she now identifies herself completely with it. She sees in young Tancred's death not the loss of a Die-hard or a Stater but the much more significant loss of a son. This identification is achieved dramatically as well, by the repetition of Mrs. Tancred's prayer, which, in this new context, assumes elegiac significance extending to all of suffering humanity, similar to Maurya's final prayer of universal dimensions in *Riders to the Sea*. Just as Maurya feels relief for the whole world, Juno too goes beyond her "thinkin' o' herself" to recognize and suffer universal grief.

We have seen that the weaknesses and pettinesses of the other characters only raise, do not detract from, Juno's tragic stature.

Let us now examine another possible objection to calling *Juno and the Paycock* tragic, the intermingling of the comic with the serious. Here we may begin by asking if the comic may not appear side by side with the tragic. This is how O'Casey answers the question :

Life is always doing it, doing it, doing it. Even where one lies dead, laughter is often heard in the next room.

There's no tragedy that isn't tinged with humour, no comedy that hasn't its share of tragedy--if one has eyes to see, ears to hear.

The inclusion of the comic therefore is not a failure but a deliberate attempt on O'Casey's part to present his vision. These do not lessen the tragic scenes, nor do they come only as "comic relief."

I'm not trying to suggest that the comic scenes have a deeper tragic significance or that they are not wildly, hilariously funny. Few scenes in drama are as extravagantly amusing as Captain Boyle's breaking in on Jerry's wooing of Mary or Joxer's jumping in from the roof in high ire and accosting Captain Boyle with gleeful sarcasm or the stealing back of Boyle's pants by Joxer and Nugent. These, as well as most of the drinking scenes between the "butties," Captain and Joxer, two of the funniest characters ever drawn, are full of rowdy, bustling hilarity.

But the comic scenes do not interfere with the underlying tragedy of the play, they simply co-exist with it, capturing thus the manifold diversity of life. O'Casey does not allow an arbitrary definition of tragedy to interfere with his attempt to create this rich texture. Johnny's terror-ridden scenes are on purpose scattered through the high-spirits of the Joxer-Boyle scenes; or, in reverse, the news of Mary's desertion by Bentham is immediately followed by the extremely funny scene in which Nugent and Mrs. Madigan "reclaim" their property. It is interesting to note that this reclaiming is the first sign of the series of misfortunes which are going to bring about the destruction of the family; yet, it is painted not in the gloomy tones of a dark foreshadowing, but in cheerful frolic.

The irony that is created by the comic scenes is of course one of their major values, contributing to the unity of the play. The constantly vacillating friendship between Joxer and Boyle is for instance an ironical counterpart to Johnny's playing false to his "friend" Tancred.

The height of O'Casey's achievement is, of course, in the final irony of the play. Immediately after Juno's beautiful final speech soaring into exalted poetry and her exit in magnificent dignity, Boyle and Joxer totter in, blindly drunk and blindly unaware of the circumstances, too drunk to notice that the furniture has been removed, much less be alert to the situation. They go on just as usual, staggering, stammering, complaining, boasting. Boyle still revels in his imaginary heroics and utters empty platitudes. Now of course these platitudes, especially the haunting "The whole worl's in a terrible state of chassis," gain grimly ironic significance in terms of Juno's actual confrontation of the "chassis," her refusal to be defeated by it and transcending it through her will to endure. What Boyle drunkenly and meaninglessly babbles about has been seen and rejected by Juno. The comic and the tragic are juxtaposed and fused together beautifully here.

We now turn to the question of the plot. Here, too despite the melodramatic overtones, we can justify the external action of the legacy and its loss on the grounds that it serves to give a final push to the destruction of the Boyle family by giving them a false sense of security which "gets them in deeper." Though not wholly linked with the central tragic action of the play, it quickens that action. Furthermore, this plot makes possible such scenes as the slow moving out of the furniture, bringing visually to the stage the disintegration they undergo, or the scene of Johnny's capture with the **turned backs** of the furniture movers remaining as stern symbols throughout.

Now for the final objection, the national, "local" quality of the play. We have seen by now that if anything this play is non-regional in theme. O'Casey questions again and again the meaning of dedication to Ireland, a dedication which brings about both Tancred's and Johnny's deaths and is grotesquely mimicked and robbed of sense in the mouths of Boyle, Joxer and Nugent who seem after all, ironically enough, to represent Ireland and the Irish character. The "murderin' hate" Juno refers to in her final speech is the product of illusions of heroic patriotism. Yet, of course, O'Casey can reach, can "earn" a statement about essential realities as opposed to national illusions **because** his play is deeply rooted in the Irish character he knows so well and because it captures so skilfully the Irish sentiment and the "local" dialect.

**Juno and the Paycock**, heroic in its anti-heroism, anti-heroic in its heroism, universal in its regionality, regional in its universality, presents an integral vision of the human situation, both tragic and comic; a vision of such wholeness that it surely defies being classified as non-tragic because democratic or non democratic, topical or non topical.

### ÖZET

"Çağımızda trajedi mümkün müdür?", "trajedi yöresel midir, evrensel midir?" veya "demokrasi ve trajedi aynı toplumda bulunabilir mi?"

Bu soruların cevabını çeşitli yönlerden aramak ve bu araştırmayı bir çok oyunu inceleyerek yürütmek mümkündür. Fakat bu etüd, O'Casey'in **Juno and the Paycock**'unu ele alarak şahısları, konuyu, toplumu tetkik etmekte ve sonuçta tabakadan, komedi ve dram bazen el ele veriyor, konu İrlanda ile ilgili, dolayısı her yönüyle Aristoteles'in prensiplerine aykırı olmasına rağmen (şahıslar aşağı ile evrensel değil) **Juno and the Paycock** gene de bir trajedi olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır.