

Universität GH Essen  
Fachbereich 3 (Anglistik)  
HS: **Sean O'Casey**  
Stuart Marlow  
SoSe 1998

Tragi-comedy

in

Sean O'Casey's

***Juno and the Paycock***

Eva Wilden

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Opening scene.....	3
3. Johnny.....	5
4. Mary.....	8
5. The inheritance .....	10
6. Captain Boyle and Joxer .....	11
7. Tragi-comedy.....	14
8. Conclusion .....	16
9. Bibliography and References.....	17

### 1. Introduction

The following essay deals with Sean O'Casey's drama *Juno and the Paycock* which was first put on stage in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in March 1924. The focus will be on the tragi-comic aspects of the play. Therefore, as *Juno and the Paycock* is a very complex and multi-layered drama, a number of crucial aspects

will have to be left out as e.g. the representation of gender, intertextuality or ideology.

## 2. Opening scene

Sean O'Casey himself gave his play the subtitle 'A Tragedy in Three Acts'. Accordingly, the opening scene<sup>1</sup> introduces a number of tragic aspects which affect in one way or the other the lives of the characters, especially of those the Boyle family. Mary is reading a newspaper article about the death of Robbie Tancred when her mother Juno comes in and asks whether her husband Captain Boyle has come home yet. Robbie Tancred is the son of Mrs. Tancred who lives in the same tenement house as the Boyle family. As is revealed in the conversation between Mary and her mother, rumours talk about Robbie being a member of the Die-hards. In a few sentences the historical setting of *Juno and the Paycock* and its more or less direct influence on the life of the characters is introduced.<sup>2</sup> Robbie has joined the Die-hards, a militant underground organisation, who fight against the results of the Peace Treaty of 1921. The reactions of Mary, Juno and especially of Johnny show their personal concern and the actuality of the event.

In the same simple and effective manner Sean O'Casey presents us other subjects which have an important role in the play and contribute to the family's inevitable downfall in the final Act: Juno talks about Captain Boyle's unemployment and his unwillingness to find new work; Johnny implies his desperate situation by his appearance and his reaction to Mary reading out the details of Robbie's murder; and Mary indicates her problematic relation to Jerry (and therefore the oncoming relation to Bentham) when she leaves hastily as he enters the stage. In this way Sean O'Casey already hints at the different tragic aspects of the plot in the first scene. In the course of the play these aspects are developed and elaborated. The description of Juno's appearance in the subtext contributes to the tragic atmosphere, too. Sean O'Casey generalises that "her face has now assumed that look which ultimately settles down upon the faces of the women of the working

---

<sup>1</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. pp.5-9; until enter Jerry Devine

<sup>2</sup> Kosok (1972), comp. p. 47: „Auf wenigen Seiten wird, ohne im geringsten die Wahrscheinlichkeit zu verletzen oder aufdringlich zu wirken, eine Fülle von bedeutsamen Informationen ausgebreitet. Die Situation der Familie als Ganzes und der einzelnen Familienmitglieder wird dargestellt; [...]“

class; a look of listless monotony and harassed anxiety [...]”<sup>3</sup>. In this way he indicates not only the situation of Juno, but of her tenement neighbours and of thousands of Irish working class people whose living conditions were extremely poor at the beginning of this century.

But, although Sean O'Casey called his play a tragedy and although a rather sad picture of the family's general situation is drawn in the beginning, there are already indications of a comic element in the play. The second thing Juno says about her husband is that he is probably “struttin’ about the town like a paycock with Joxer [...]”<sup>4</sup>. She also tells that he “[is] constantly singin’, no less, when he ought always to be on his knees offerin’ up a Novena for a job!”<sup>5</sup>. And, according to her description, Captain Boyle merrily sings a song when he first enters the stage<sup>6</sup>. He is lucky to have come in only a moment after Jerry left who had a job offer for him. The Captain is surprised because he did not expect Juno to be home. By talking to his fellow Joxer about an obviously imagined job offer he tries to please his wife and to instantly leave again because he is afraid of her. Naturally, Juno sees through the poor excuse. But the situation turns ridiculous by the Captain's and Joxer's pretentious talk about the details of the apparently non-existent job and because the Captain is so convinced that everybody believes his blatant lie<sup>7</sup>.

Captain Boyle's first appearance in Act One fascinates and amuses the reader and relieves the gloomy atmosphere of the opening scene. Juno brilliantly characterises the Captain when she says to him:

Ah, then, me boyo, you'd do far more work with a knife an' fork than ever you'll do with a shovel!<sup>8</sup>

She detects him once and again, e.g. when she tells the truth about the “Captain's” self-given title:

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!<sup>9</sup>

She also finds out his lie about not having “tasted a dhrop of intoxicatin' liquor”<sup>10</sup> within minutes<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, Jack Boyle keeps on trying to pull the wool over

---

<sup>3</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 6

<sup>4</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 6

<sup>6</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. p. 10

<sup>7</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. p. 12f

<sup>8</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 13

Juno's eyes. He goes on talking about the imaginary job offer and 'suddenly' his leg starts to hurt again when Jerry returns with his genuine job offer. By this childish behaviour he instantly gains the sympathy of the reader.

With Captain Boyle's appearance it becomes clear that *Juno and the Paycock* is not a tragedy in the classic sense. Although the historical context and the ruin of the Boyle family overshadows the whole play "it is clear that O'Casey wrote what we can more readily call 'tragicomedy'"<sup>12</sup>. The comic components not only serve as comic relief but have other, more important functions as well. In the following the different comic and tragic elements of *Juno and the Paycock* and their functions within the play will be analysed in more detail.

### 3. Johnny

*Juno and the Paycock* is set during the Irish Civil War 1921/22. But unlike *The Plough and the Stars* or *The Shadow of a Gunmen* the militant action plays a minor role and is not to be seen on stage. It is the Johnny plot line<sup>13</sup> which connects the play with its historical context. Johnny is the only main character who actively took part in the struggle against English oppression and in the Civil War. He is a proud patriot and, although he suffered two major injuries, he boasts that "I'd do it agen, ma, I'd do it agen; for a principle's a principle"<sup>14</sup>. But Sean O'Casey did not create a glorious, self-sacrificing and heroic character. Johnny's appearance is that of a victim: "[...] he is a thin delicate fellow [...] His face is pale and drawn; there is a tremulous look of indefinite fear in his eyes"<sup>15</sup>. The reason for this fear, his betrayal of his former fellow Robbie Tancred, is revealed gradually in the course of the play until as revenge Johnny is shot in the third Act by his former comrades. Johnny risked his life and sacrificed his health to fight for his ideal of a free and independent Ireland. With the betrayal of Robbie Tancred he committed a fault which not only erode his beliefs but inevitably leads to his miserable end – this makes Johnny the only genuine tragic character in *Juno and the Paycock*. But Johnny is an anti-hero. If there is something to set him above

---

<sup>9</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 14

<sup>10</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 14

<sup>11</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. p. 14

<sup>12</sup> Murray, p. 101

<sup>13</sup> Heinz Kosok (1972) wrote about three different plot lines within *Juno and the Paycock*: the Johnny action, the Mary action and the family action. Comp., p. 46ff

<sup>14</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 27

others it is his active commitment for the Irish independence whereas all other main characters are merely occupied with their lives (only Mary occupies herself with politics as well).

As Kosok lays down the Johnny plot line distinguishes itself from the other plot lines because only the end is shown on stage<sup>16</sup>; the crucial events of this line happened before the play: Johnny's participation in the Easter Rising and the fights on Conolly Street or his betrayal of Robbie Tancred. As a consequence we only see him in a state of waiting: he regrets his deed, feels guilty and anticipates a reaction from his former fellows because he knows how the Die-hards handle traitors. Johnny persistently appears in a gloomy and absent mood. While his family happily receives the news of the inheritance his only contribution to their joy is the remark that "We'll be able to get out o' this place now, an go somewhere we're not known"<sup>17</sup>. Johnny can only think of how to escape his persecutors. Even when a merry party with the new gramophone is launched he does not join in:

*Mrs. Boyle:* You didn't look at our new gramophone, Johnny?

*Johnny:* 'Tisn't gramophones I'm thinking of.

*Mrs. Boyle:* An' what is it you're thinkin' of, allanna?<sup>18</sup>

But Johnny cannot tell anybody. He has to cope alone with his tremendous feeling of guilt and with the impossibility to change the expected and inescapable outcome - a burden that weighs heavily on his shoulders. As we have seen in Act One he is afraid to stay at home all by himself<sup>19</sup> and cannot bear to hear Mary reading the newspaper article on Robbie's death<sup>20</sup>. It is also important to him that there is always a light burning in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary. Charles Bentham hits the nail on the head when in his boastful manner he pseudo-scientifically explains the nature of people seeing ghosts:

Scientists are beginning to think that what we call ghosts are sometimes seen by persons of a certain nature. They say that sensational actions, such as the killing of a person, demand great energy, and that energy lingers in the place where the action occurred. People may live in the place and see nothing, when someone may come along whose personality has some peculiar

---

<sup>15</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 8

<sup>16</sup> Kosok (1972), p. 46: "Während zwei der drei Handlungsstränge progressiv konzipiert sind, ist der dritte analytisch gebaut, zeigt also nicht den gesamten Ablauf, sondern nur die Schlußphase einer Ereignisfolge [...]"

<sup>17</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 29

<sup>18</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 35

<sup>19</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. p.9

<sup>20</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. p. 6

connection with the energy of the place, and, in a flash, the person sees the whole affair.<sup>21</sup>

Hearing this Johnny turns pale and instantly leaves the room because he thinks that Bentham actually described his own situation. Naturally, in a state of uncontrolled terror he sees the ghost of Robbie Tancred kneeling in front of the statue of the Virgin in the next moment. Panic-stricken he runs to his mother and only calms down when Bentham assures that the light in front of the statue is still burning. Johnny's overreaction shows his tremendous fear which has developed out of a feeling of guilt. He is paranoid and feels persecuted by people, in this case Bentham, who cannot possibly know about his betrayal.

Johnny is in a static situation. He is hopeless, he is unable to change the course of things and he has turned paranoid and hysterical. From the very first scene there is no way out of his dilemma.

Johnny's death is not only the end of his personal tragedy. On the one hand it is one facet of and a contribution to the ruin of the whole Boyle family. On the other hand it points to the innumerable deaths of people during the Civil War. Johnny's story is described in detail during the play whereas Robbie's death is just briefly portrayed. Juno sketches a number of other families who suffered a victim of the war:

*Juno*: hasn't the whole house, nearly, been massacred? There's young Dougherty's husband with his leg off; Mrs. Travers that had her son blew up be a mine in Inchegeela, in Co. Cork; Mrs. Mannin' that lost one of her sons in an ambush a few weeks ago, an' now, poor Mrs. Tancred's only child gone west with his body made a collander of.<sup>22</sup>

Both Mrs. Tancred's and Juno's lamentations on their sons' deaths show that on all sides of the war families suffer from the death of relatives in the same way:

*Mrs. Tancred*: [...] An' now here's the two of us oul' women [Mrs. Tancred and Mrs Manning], standin' one on each side of a scales o' sorra, balanced be the bodies of our two dead darlin' sons [...]<sup>23</sup>

*Juno*: [...] Maybe I didn't feel sorry enough for Mrs. Tancred when her poor son was found as Johnny's been found now [...]<sup>24</sup>

Kosok rightly lays down that the Johnny action serves to emphasise the representative character of *Juno and the Paycock*.<sup>25</sup> Johnny's death symbolises

---

<sup>21</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 37f

<sup>22</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 47

<sup>23</sup> Sean O'Casey, p.46

<sup>24</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 71

<sup>25</sup> Kosok (1972), comp. p. 50

and is a part of an endless chain of death and suffering that ran through the Irish population in the Civil War.

#### 4. Mary

In contrast to the Johnny plot line that functions both to represent a personal and a historical tragedy the Mary action is limited to her personal catastrophe which is closely connected to the family's ruin. Mary is a self-confident and self-educated young woman. Her political attitudes are revealed when she fights with her mother about the purpose of Trade Unionism. Mary and Juno show opposing attitudes and understandings of themselves:

*Mrs. Boyle:* Ah, wear whatever ribbon you like, girl, only don't be botherin' me. I don't know what a girl on strike wants to be waerin' a ribbon round her head for, or silk stockin's on her legs either; it's waerin' them things that make the employers think they're givin' yous to much money.

*Mary:* The hour is past now when we'll ask the employers' permission to wear what we like.<sup>26</sup>

Juno who belongs to an older generation is willing to subordinate herself to the patriarchal system of the early industrial society whereas Mary puts forward a modern and socialist attitude that her employers are not entitled to interfere with her private matters.

Sean O'Casey characterises Mary in the stage directions as follows: "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"<sup>27</sup>. These "opposing forces"<sup>28</sup> are the motif of Mary's behaviour and at the same time cause her dilemma: before she dropped him in favour of Charles Bentham, Mary used to go out with Jerry Devine, a member of the Labour Movement, who just like herself is acquainted with and proposes the ideas of socialism. He probably influenced Mary in her political attitude. But Jerry is a member of the working class himself and Mary on the other hand, according to the force "pushing her forward", is also interested in improving her personal situation and wants to climb the social ladder. Therefore she turns Jerry down when she meets the pretentious Standard English speaking would-be solicitor

---

<sup>26</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 7

<sup>27</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 5

<sup>28</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 5

Charles Bentham. Although Mary claims in the end that she did love Bentham<sup>29</sup> it is probable that she as well preferred him to Jerry for reasons other than love.

Before he disappears Mary (and everybody else<sup>30</sup>) sees Bentham as an opportunity to leave her working class background because he seems to be an intellectually educated and ambitious person. Ironically, Mary finally even sinks deeper in the social hierarchy because of Bentham whom she trusted to improve her status.<sup>31</sup>

Bentham's intentions are never made clear. He either purposely deceived Mary and her family or committed a fault when he wrote the will and then dodged out and left Ireland. Nevertheless, Mary is along with her family blinded by Bentham's appearance and pretension. Every time Bentham comes to see the Boyles they, especially Juno, clumsily make a big fuss about it:

*Mrs. Boyle:* (fussing around). Come in, Mr. Bentham; sit down, Mr. Bentham, in this chair; it's more comfortable than that, Mr. Bentham. Himself'll [Boyle] be here in a minute; he's just takin' off his trousers.<sup>32</sup>

Or:

*Mrs. Boyle:* (in a flutter). Here he is; here's Mr. Bentham!  
*Boyle:* Well, there's room for him; it's a pity there's not a brass band to play him in.

Bentham flatters Mary with compliments ("Oh, good evening, Mary; how pretty you're looking!"<sup>33</sup>) and she listens earnestly to him lecturing about Theosophy. Mary does not seem to be aware that her behaviour alters completely in the presence of Bentham. Normally, it is her who lectures people about her beliefs and tries to correct them about their opinions (as in the dialogue with her mother, see above). Now she listens admiringly to Bentham's effusions, gets corrected by him and does not even hesitate when Bentham carelessly comments on Robbie Tancred and therefore on the Irish struggle in general:

*Bentham:* The whole thing is terrible, Mrs. Boyle; but the only way to deal with a mad dog is to destroy him.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 65

<sup>30</sup> e.g. Mrs. Madigan: „I remember, as well as I remember yestherday, the day she was born [...] an' I remember sayin' to Joxer, there, who I met comin' up the stairs, that the new arrival in Boyle's ud grow up a hardy chiseleur if it lived, an' that she'd be somethin' one o' these days that nobody suspected, an' so signs on it, here she is to-day, goin' to be married to a young man lookin' as if he'd be fit to commensurate in any position in life it ud please God to call him!"<sup>33</sup>, Sean O'Casey, p. 41

<sup>31</sup> Kosok (1972), comp., p. 51

<sup>32</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 26

<sup>33</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 36

<sup>34</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 46

The self-educated, emancipated but in this case helplessly naive Mary falls for the pretentious show-off Bentham because of her ambitions to improve her personal social status. Thereby she betrays her political ideals and her origins. She finally has to realise that it was wrong to trust Bentham.

The scenes with Mary and Jerry are of special interest. Jerry seems to be obsessive about Mary even though she harshly turns him down. He adores her and obsequiously ridicules himself: "Let me kiss your hand, your little, tiny, white hand"<sup>35</sup>. In this adoration there lies an irony because of his name: Jerry *Devine*, an outspoken Socialist, obsessively loves a *virgin* called *Mary*. This irony turns bitter in the end when Jerry rejects Mary. In the first Act he swore that "No matter what happens, you'll always be the same to me"<sup>36</sup>. But when Jerry learns that Mary is pregnant by Bentham, that she is no *virgin* anymore, he, the non-Catholic Socialist, cannot help but react according to social conventions and morality. "My God, Mary, have you fallen as low as that?"<sup>37</sup> At the climax of her personal tragedy Mary is left alone by everybody except for her mother.

## 5. The inheritance

Mary's catastrophe is closely linked to the family's ruin. By accident she knew Charles Bentham before she introduced him to her family with the good news of the inheritance. The story of the legacy in itself is hardly important; it merely serves to frame the Boyle family's catastrophe which has a lot of different facets. The audience, obviously being in a superior position, may anticipate from the beginning that the will is somewhat suspicious. But the Boyles along with their creditors take the expected money for granted. They immediately start to borrow and spent money on furniture, clothes and the new gramophone, things they usually could not afford. At first everybody willingly lends them money; but after two months when the Boyles still have not seen a penny people start to become suspicious. The tailor Nugent takes back the suit he made for Captain Boyle, Mrs. Madigan takes the gramophone as substitute for her money and finally the new furniture is removed because the bill has not been paid. At the moment when the

---

<sup>35</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 18

<sup>36</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 17

<sup>37</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 66

Captain reveals that “the will’s a wash-out”<sup>38</sup>, when Mary’s pregnancy is revealed, when Johnny turns hysterical just before he is shot, at the moment when the family finally falls apart the removal of the furniture is like a symbol of the chaos that settles the family’s fate. The last but one scene in which Juno makes the crucial decision to leave her husband is set in an almost bare room. The emptiness of the formerly vivacious living room symbolises the end of the family.

With her decision to finally leave her husband Juno becomes the heroine of the play. Though the Captain gives a more simple explanation for the origin of Juno’s name it is clearly an allusion to the ancient Goddess who was the protectress of matrimony. Juno tries to keep the family alive<sup>39</sup> and endures the hardship of her situation and her husband’s folly. In this kind of heroism she rejects all abstract ideals, e.g. Mary’s socialism or Johnny’s patriotism. “Yet she becomes the moral centre of O’Casey’s play, which itself amounts to little more than an attack on all –isms and a celebration of those wives who pick up the pieces left in idealism’s wake”<sup>40</sup>. In the end Juno reaches the crucial conclusion:

*Mary:* My poor little child that’ll have no father!

*Mrs. Boyle:* It’ll have what’s far better – it’ll have two mothers.<sup>41</sup>

Juno picks up the pieces in her world shattered by men and decides to live independently. Thus she is the only character that goes through a development and learns something in the course of the play. The ancient Goddess Juno was associated with peacocks, her patron birds. Ironically, O’Casey uses this image “by giving his Juno a peacock of a husband who takes his name from the common association of strutting vanity.”<sup>42</sup> Instead of protecting Juno the ‘paycock’ is her parasite.

## 6. Captain Boyle and Joxer

The role of the so-called ‘Captain’ Jack Boyle constitutes a contrast to the personal tragedies of Johnny and Mary and to the family’s financial and general

---

<sup>38</sup> Sean O’Casey, p. 62

<sup>39</sup> Fricker, comp. p. 197: „[Jack] hebt damit unbewußt ihre [Junos] Rolle als Lebensspenderin und Lebenshalterin hervor.“

<sup>40</sup> Kibberd, p. 223

<sup>41</sup> Sean O’Casey, p. 71

<sup>42</sup> Krause, p. 99

downfall. With his self-important manner every appearance of Jack inevitably causes laughter, though sometimes mingled with mixed or even startled emotions. At the beginning of Act Two, e.g., Boyle plays the 'boss of the department' because of his newly achieved wealth. His play-acting is ridiculous because he cannot even pronounce the words properly with which he tries to impress Joxer:

*Joxer:* How d'ye feel now, as a man o' money?

*Boyle: (solemnly)* It's a responsibility, Joxer, a great responsibility. [...] Joxer, han' me over that attacky case on the table there. (*Joxer hands the case.*) Ever since the Will was passed I've run hundreds o' dockyments through me han's – I tell you, you have to keep your wits about you.

Already his self-given title 'Captain' indicates the ambivalent function the character of Jack Boyle assumes in the play. Although everybody knows that he never even was a sailor<sup>43</sup> (to say nothing about him being a "Captain") Boyle does not give up telling stories about his alleged adventures all over the world:

*Boyle:* Them was days, Joxer, them was days. Nothin' was too hot or too heavy for me then. Sailin' from the gulf o' Mexico to the Antanartic Ocean. I seen things, I seen things, Joxer, that no mortal man should speak about that knows his Catechism. Ofen, an' ofen, when I was fixed to the wheel with a marlin-spike, an' the win's blowin' fierce an' the waves lashin' an' lashin', till you'd think every minute was goin' to be your last, an' it blowed, an' blowed – blew is the right word, Joxer, but blowed is what the sailors use....

And his constant companion Joxer Daly never fails to support Boyle's effusions:

*Joxer:* Aw, it's a darlin' word, a daarin' word.

*Boyle:* An', as it blowed an' blowed, I ofen looked up at the sky an' assed meself the question – what is the stars, what is the stars?

[...]

*Joxer:* Ah, that's the question, that's the question – what is the stars?<sup>44</sup>

These pretentious but imaginative and richly elaborated tales amuse the audience; everybody knows that they are not true but that is what makes them fascinating, even more so because the Captain, like Don Quixote, believes in them himself. Just like Sancho Panza Joxer shrewdly tries to agree with the Captain and encourages him to tell his tales. Jack and Joxer have made up their own "illusionary world of fantasies and drunken bravado"<sup>45</sup> which saves them from having to face the terrible reality.<sup>46</sup> Naturally, in the real world the Captain cannot live up to his mock-heroic pretensions. Jack is even too afraid to go and look for the votive light after Johnny has seen the ghost. The Captain is a Falstaffian hero – a hero in theory.

---

<sup>43</sup> comp. above

<sup>44</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 23

<sup>45</sup> Krause, p. 101

<sup>46</sup> Fricker, comp. p. 195; Krause, comp. p. 101 and others

Joxer is Boyle's shrewd companion. Together they lead a number of those self-important and mock-philosophic dialogues and never fail to ridicule themselves. Joxer seems to see through the Captain's pretensions but plays along and swims with the tide whenever the Captain contradicts himself. Joxer is a scrounger, "his eyes have a cunning twinkle [...] [and] His face is invariably ornamented with a grin"<sup>47</sup>. He butters up the Captain as long as it is worthwhile but waits for every opportunity to take the Captain for a ride as in the last Act when he pinches Jack's bottle of stout. Joxer even openly mocks the Captain, who in turn does not seem to realise it, about his sailor tales<sup>48</sup>.

There is also another dimension to Captain Boyle's title: with all his self-important and blind recklessness and the little unimportant fights Jack leads all day long the character of Captain Boyle is an allusion to the Capitano in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Sean O'Casey created a caricature of the Irish rebels. Whereas those have a sincere reason for their combat Jack battles over trivialities: he fights with Juno about the breakfast<sup>49</sup> or with Johnny about taking off his moleskin trousers<sup>50</sup>. The caricature is carried to the extreme when the Captain brags that "there's goin' to be issued a proclamation be me, establishin' an independent Republic, an' Juno'll have to take an oath of allegiance"<sup>51</sup>.

Naturally, Jack has little success in "establishin' [...] [his] independent Republic" and in the next moment he anxiously hides Joxer outside because Juno comes home. In general he does the opposite of what he says: he eats his breakfast although in the same instant he claimed that "I've a little spirit left in me still! [...] Well, let her keep her sassige."<sup>52</sup> Concerning these trivial matters Boyle's self-contradictions are simple comedy. But tragically Boyle is a coward in the real world and generally fails to behave appropriately. Although his family lives from hand to mouth Jack simply refuses to work (or, as Krause put it, "sav[es] [...] himself from the deadly virtues of work"<sup>53</sup>) by allegedly getting pain in his legs

---

<sup>47</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 11

<sup>48</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. p. 30

<sup>49</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. p. 19

<sup>50</sup> Sean O'Casey, comp. p. 26

<sup>51</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 24

<sup>52</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 19

<sup>53</sup> Krause, p. 100

“whenever he scents a job in front of him”<sup>54</sup> (Juno’s words). Jack commits his greatest folly when he withholds the truth about the will. Again he simply ignores the realities and escapes to his own illusionary world. Jack even tries to borrow a new coat from Nugent when the tailor already comes to take back the suit because he does not believe in the forthcoming inheritance anymore. As usual Jack has not considered the consequence of his behaviour. Boyle multiplies the downfall of his family when he destroys its anyhow meagre financial basis. Characteristically, he does not contemplate his *own* faults at all but keeps to the illusion of his own infallibility: “What’s th’ world comin’ to at all? I ass you, Joxer Daly, is there any morality left anywhere?”<sup>55</sup>.

In contrast to the other main characters Captain Boyle and Joxer do not change or develop at all in the course of the play. In his formal analysis of *Juno and the Paycock* Kosok put forward that their appearances are static scenes worked into the three interwoven plot lines (Johnny, Mary and the family) which, nevertheless, play an important role in the construction of meaning.<sup>56</sup> The final scenes constitute the climax of Boyle’s indifference and inability. At the moment when the family falls apart Jack has nothing better to do than to escape with Joxer to a pub to spent the very last pennies. Returning home in a state of intoxication he utters: “I’m able to go no farther... [...]”<sup>57</sup>. Jack refers to his drunkenness; but again, without being conscious of it, he gets at the heart of his own situation. Juno has left him with Mary, Johnny is dead and he sits deeply into debts in the middle of his almost empty flat. Jack is at the end of his tether and literally can “go no farther”. Tragically, he does not even have the guts to face reality in this desperate moment but keeps to his illusions: “Captain Boyle’s Captain Boyle”<sup>58</sup> (Jack’s words) and he has no intentions to change himself.

## 7. Tragi-comedy

The combination of tragedy and comedy constitutes a crucial element of *Juno and the Paycock*. Although the appearances of Captain Boyle and Joxer create comedy

---

<sup>54</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 16

<sup>55</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 59

<sup>56</sup> Kosok (1972), p. 46: „Zwischen die drei Handlungsstränge ist eine Folge von statischen Szenen eingelagert, die keine Entwicklung erkennen lassen, aber für das Bedeutungsgefüge eine wichtige Rolle übernehmen.“

<sup>57</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 72

<sup>58</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 72

in the first place the function of those scenes goes far beyond comic relief. We may laugh light-heartedly over dialogues such as:

*Boyle:* [...] This is Joxer Daly, Past Chief Ranger of the Dear Little Shamrock Branch of the Irish National Foresters, an oul' front-top neighbour, that never despaired, even in the darkest days of Ireland's sorra.

*Joxer:* Nil desperandum, Captain, nil desperandum.

*Boyle:* Sit down, Joxer, sit down. The two of us was ofen in a tight corner.

*Mrs. Boyle:* Ay, in Foley's snug!<sup>59</sup>

But if we think twice the double meaning of Jack and Joxer being 'in a tight corner' and its tragical implication overrules the comedy and leaves us with a feeling of tragedy.<sup>60</sup> Guthke argues that, as in the foregoing example, the working together of tragedy and comedy is fundamental in modern Tragi-comedy. Both have an reciprocally intensifying effect.<sup>61</sup> O'Casey creates Tragi-comedy by means of juxtaposition, as e.g. in Act Two: the Act starts with one of the Captain's and Joxer's pretentious dialogues and the Boyle's tea-party. The first counterpoint to this merry situation is Johnny's hysterical overreaction which is followed by the cheery song contest. It is gravely interrupted by Mrs. Tancred and some neighbours who are about to go to Robbie Tancred's funeral. After this disruption of their joyful mood the Boyles and their visitors watch the funeral as if it was an entertaining spectacle. They leave to join in and the Act closes with the revelation of Johnny's guilt. The repeated alternation of tragedy and comedy results in a "clash of moods"<sup>62</sup>. On the one hand the tragical context gives the scene of the Boyle's wild party its relieving function. It points to the vital necessity to divert oneself occasionally in order to be able to survive in such a terrible situation. Thus the tragic elements allow a deeper insight than comedy would usually convey. On the other hand the comedy increases the bitter feeling of tragedy when a mother has to bury her son. This interaction of comedy and tragedy<sup>63</sup> is essential to *Juno and the Paycock*. Both mutually increase their effect.

Thus comic and tragic elements paradoxically become inseparable. They can even constitute themselves in one person at the same time, so as in Captain Boyle whose funny remarks very often have a tragic double meaning that goes

<sup>59</sup> Sean O'Casey, p. 41

<sup>60</sup> Luigi Pirandello gives an excellent example which describes the process of perceiving tragi-comedy: perception of comedy, reflection and then feeling of tragedy; mentioned in: Ran-Moseley, p. 59

<sup>61</sup> Guthke, comp. p. 65

<sup>62</sup> Murray, p. 94

<sup>63</sup> Guhtke, comp. p. 65

beyond the actual situation in which they are uttered. Guthke puts forward that in modern Tragi-comedy comedy and tragedy are identical and mutually dependant.<sup>64</sup> The simultaneity of the Boyle's party and of Robbie Tancred's funeral resembles the situation of the whole country: even during the Civil War the rest of the country does not stand still. The tragedy of war does not automatically exclude the possibility to lead a normal life. Ran-Moseley calls this simultaneity of opposites the "peculiar illogicality of modern tragi-comedy"<sup>65</sup>. The combination of opposites results in an "inconclusive double perspective, one lacking resolution, reconciliation or restitution"<sup>66</sup>. In the case of the above mentioned example from *Juno and the Paycock* we have a two-fold perspectives on the life in a tenement house: a mother who laments her son's untimely death whilst her neighbours go on with their everyday lives. There is no solution to this paradox but ordinary situation. Ran-Moseley uses the term of "duality"<sup>67</sup> to denote this synthesis of the incongruous. The whole play gives a range of dualistic and contrasting views on the Civil War, on politics, on religion etc. But none of these contrasts are solved, the play rather mirrors the existing points of view than favouring one or the other. "The incongruous and contradictory synthesis of tragedy and comedy manifested by the fool directly mirrors the ambivalent self-constructs of modern man, his problematic sense of self and his problematic interaction with society."<sup>68</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

*Juno and the Paycock* is a Tragi-comedy that vividly mirrors the life of working class people in Ireland around the turn of the century. In all his characters O'Casey successfully imitated different types of people that actually were to be found in the streets of Dublin. Every character represents a particular attitude towards life

---

<sup>64</sup> Guhtke, comp. p. 66

<sup>65</sup> Ran-Moseley, p. 58

<sup>66</sup> The 'inconclusive double perspective' is one of four qualities Ran-Moseley attributes to modern tragi-comedy; Ran-Moseley, comp. p. 58

<sup>67</sup> Ran-Moseley, comp. p. 58ff

and together they resemble the diversity and incongruity of modern society. The link-up and juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy is part of this illogic and non-resolvable situation. As we have seen every main character in *Juno and the Paycock* contributes to this complex relation between comedy and tragedy and the Captain even incorporates both in the same person. His and the other characters' sense of humour plays an important role which must not be underestimated. Just as the Captain who steadily withdraws into his illusionary world in order to escape reality the other characters' self-irony or gallows humour is a means of survival in their devastated world. They do not turn melancholic like Johnny but their humour helps them to survive and to carry the burden of their hard life. "In the midst of anti-heroic laughter there can be no total catastrophe. Where there is suffering and death no happy endings are possible, but where there is also laughter life goes on."<sup>69</sup>

## 9. Bibliography and References

Chothia, Jean, *English Drama of the Early Modern Period, 1890-1940*, Longman, London and New York, 1996

Fricker, Robert, 'Sean O'Casey: Juno and the Paycock', in: Horst Oppel (ed.), *Das Moderne Englische Drama. Interpretationen*, Erich Schmidt Verlag, Berlin, 2. überarbeitete Auflage, 1966, pp. 181-200

Guthke, Karl S., *Die moderne Tragikomödie. Theorie und Gestalt*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1968

---

<sup>68</sup> Ran-Moseley, p. 61

<sup>69</sup> Krause, p. 96

Kibberd, Deklan, *Inventing Ireland*, Vintage

Kosok, Heinz, *Sean O'Casey. Das dramatische Werk*, Erich Schmidt Verlag, Berlin, 1972

Kosok, Heinz, *Plays and Playwrights from Ireland in International Perspective*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1995

Krause, David, 'The Anti-heroic Vision', in: Kilroy, Thomas (ed.), *Sean O'Casey. A Collection of critical essays*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1975, pp. 91-112

Murray, Christopher, *Twentieth-century Irish Drama. Mirror up to nation*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, New York, 1997

O'Casey, Sean, *Three Plays. Juno and the Paycock, The Shadow of a Gunman, The Plough and the Stars and the Stars*, Papermac, London, 1994

Ran-Moseley, Faye, *The Tragicomic Passion. A History and Analysis of Tragicomedy and Tragicomic Characterization in Drama, Film, and Literature*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 1994