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شبكة المعلومات الجامعية

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**Reading History in Selected Plays by Sean O'Casey and
Frank McGuinness**

A Dissertation

**Submitted to the Department of English, Faculty of Arts,
Ain Shams University**

**In Fulfilment of the Requirements For the Degree of
Masters of Arts**

**By
Maha M. Sallam**

**Under The Supervision of
Prof. Waffia Mursi**

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Preface

The interplay between historical context and dramatic output is one of the major characteristics of Irish drama. The main purpose of this thesis is to investigate the mutual relationship between history and drama through undertaking a comparative reading of selected plays by Sean O'Casey (1880-1964) and Frank McGuinness (1953 -).

The principles of selection of O'Casey and McGuinness to be the subject-matter of the thesis can be summarized as follows: first, although they belong to different social and cultural backgrounds, their attitude towards the most crucial issue of Irish history _ namely the special relation between England and Ireland, is strikingly similar. Second, although their career as dramatists corresponds to different periods of history, it seems noteworthy that they choose to dramatize similar historical episodes. It should be pointed out that although O'Caseyan drama is arguably paradigmatic for the work of several contemporary Irish dramatists, who choose to follow the "O'Casey model" in their attempts to dramatize the Troubles of the North, the intertextual relation between the work of O'Casey and that of McGuinness justifies the undertaking of a comparative study between them.

Nine representative plays are selected from the O'Caseyan canon; these plays extend over a period of almost half a century, from the 1920s to the 1960s. As for McGuinness, his five plays included within the scope of this study represent the main works of his on-going creative activity.

The plays by O'Casey included in this study are: The Shadow of a Gunman (1923), Juno and The Paycock (1924), The Plough and The Stars (1926), The Silver Tassie (1928), The Star Turns Red

(1940), Red Roses For Me (1942), Oak Leaves and Lavender (1947), The Drums of Father Ned (1959), and Behind The Green Curtains (1961).

The plays by McGuinness included in this study are: Observe The Sons of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme (1985), Carthaginians (1988), Mary and Lizzie (1989), Someone Who'll Watch Over Me (1992), and Dolly West's Kitchen (1999).

The main criterion for the selection of the plays is that they deal with analogous historical episodes, even if these episodes belong to different periods, such as the civil strife of the twenties in the South, and the current sectarian violence of the North.

The course of the study follows two main lines. The first line of study is concerned with placing the plays in their historical context, taking into consideration the political, ideological, and social issues related to this context. This line of study foregrounds the above-mentioned mutual relationship between history and drama. The second line of study involves submitting the selected plays to a systemic comparative analysis that takes into account the different aspects of dramatic structure, themes, and techniques in each of the selected plays.

The thesis is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter is an introductory chapter that highlights the relevant historical episodes that feature as an integral part of the selected plays. It also offers an insight of the personal backgrounds of O'Casey and McGuinness.

The second chapter is entitled "War and Revolution". It explores the manner of, and the motives behind the representation of different types of war, whether liberation, civil, or international wars, within the context of the selected plays.

The third chapter _ “Ideology” _ presents a study of the ideological component of the selected plays, with special emphasis on socialism, religion, colonialism, and globalization.

The fourth chapter, “Social Issues: Social Change and the Turning Points of History”, explores such issues as women’s role in society, ambiguous sexual identities, class consciousness and group solidarity. These issues are contextualized within the selected plays, and explored in relation to the topic of representing the self and imagining the other.

The thesis attempts to build upon the body of scholarship that studies the work of the two dramatists _ an extensive body in the case of O’Casey and a rather limited one in the case of McGuinness _ and to contribute to this body especially in the domains of reading history and of comparing the approaches of both dramatists to questions of representation and interpretation of analogous historical episodes. The work of such critics as Robert Hogan, Jules Koslow, Heinz Kosok, and David Krause on Sean O’Casey is mainly focused on the dramatic techniques used during the various stages of his career as a dramatist, and although the thesis necessarily takes such work into account, its basic frame of reference is more in the line of work done by such critics and cultural historians as David Cairns, Shaun Richards, Declan Kiberd, Christopher Murray, Nicholas Grene, Anthony Roche, and Michael Etherton. These latter writers explore the work of O’Casey and McGuinness _ as well as that of other Irish dramatists _ in relation to its position within the mainstream of Irish drama, as well as its correlation to the political, social, and cultural context which produces this drama.

The argument of the thesis is sometimes in accordance with those reached by the above-mentioned critics, as is the case with

Cairns and Richards' argument about the legitimacy of O'Casey's revisionist approach to the Easter Rising in The Plough and The Stars, and in the case of Nicholas Grene's argument about McGuinness's Observe The Sons of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme being a redemption of the sin committed by W.B. Yeats's rejection of O'Casey's The Silver Tassie in 1928. On the otherhand, the thesis contests the allegations of Declan Kiberd concerning O'Casey's ideological inconsistency, as well as the widespread argument about O'Casey's so-called pacifism.

The basic frame of reference for the argument proposed by the thesis also includes the work of Edward Said, especially in relation to the two "moments" in the history of decolonization, Michel Foucault's argument about texts being an urgent response to specific historical needs, Raymond Williams' argument about the dramatic representation of revolutionary action, and Margot Gayle Backus's analysis of the relation between the images of the literary text and the complexities of the Anglo-Irish settler colonial order. Moreover, the argument of Gertrude Himmelfarb about the different approaches to studying the past in relation to historiography is adopted by the thesis in relation to writing drama texts.

Moreover, the thesis contributes an extensive study of the historical context of the selected plays, based on such key works as those of F.S.L. Lyons, R.F. Foster, Peter Rose, and Liam De Paor, applying the documented political, social, and cultural context of the selected plays to demonstrate its basic hypothesis about the mutual relationship between history and drama.

permanence among change
 unity amid diversity.

Synopsis

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same

The interplay between historical context and dramatic output has always been one of the major characteristics of Irish drama. In a way, Irish history and drama can be described as mutual constructs. Not only do specific historical moments create their own dramatic discourse that serves urgent needs, but also drama, through representation of history, attempts to interpret and reconstruct that history in relation to the present and the future.

The present thesis undertakes a comparative reading of history in a number of plays by Sean O'Casey (1880-1964) and Frank McGuinness (1953 -). Nine representative plays are selected from the O'Caseyan canon; these plays extend over a period of almost half a century, from the 1920s to the 1960s. As for McGuinness, his five plays included within the scope of this study represent the main works of his ongoing creative activity.

The course of the study follows two major lines. The first line of study is concerned with placing the plays in their historical context, taking into consideration the political, ideological, and social issues related to this context. This line of study foregrounds the above-mentioned mutual relationship between history and drama. The second line of study is involved with submitting the selected plays to a systemic comparative analysis that takes into account the different aspects of dramatic structure, themes, and techniques in each of the selected plays.

—The thesis attempts to build upon the body of scholarship that studies the work of the two dramatists — an extensive body in the case of O'Casey and a rather limited one in the case of McGuinness — and to contribute to this body, especially in the domains of reading history and of comparing the approaches of both dramatists to questions of

representation and interpretation of analogous historical episodes. The work of such critics as Robert Hogan, Jules Koslow, Heinz Kosok, and David Krause on O'Casey, and of Erian Cosgrove, James Liddy, and Kate Kellaway on McGuinness, is mainly focused on the dramatic techniques exploited by both dramatist, and while the thesis necessarily takes such work into account, its basic frame of reference is more in the line of work done by such critics and cultural historians as David Cairns, Shaun Richards, Declan Kiberd, Christopher Murray, Nicholas Grene, Anthony Roche, and Michael Etherton. These latter writers explore the work of O'Casey and McGuinness _ as well as of other Irish dramatists _ in relation to its position in the mainstream of Irish drama, as well as its correlation to the political, social, and cultural context that produces this drama.

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The thesis is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter is an introductory chapter that highlights the different historical episodes that feature as an integral part of the selected plays. This aims at both elucidating some of the ambiguities of the complex Irish history, and facilitating the interpretation of the plays under discussion.

Moreover, the first chapter offers an insight of the different personal backgrounds of O'Casey and McGuinness, thus foreshadowing the thesis' argument that the dramatic recreations of history by both playwrights are influenced, to a great extent, by their respective backgrounds.

The second chapter is entitled "War and Revolution". It deals with the manner of and the motives behind the representation of various types of war, whether liberation, civil, or international wars, within the context of the selected plays.

The third chapter _ "Ideology" _ presents a study of the ideological component of the selected plays, with special emphasis on socialism, religion, colonialism, and globalization.

The fourth chapter is entitled "Social Issues: Social Change and the Turning Points of History". It explores such issues as women's role in society, ambiguous sexual identities, class consciousness and group solidarity. These issues are contextualized within the selected plays, and explored in relation to the topic of representing the self and imagining the other.

The thesis argues that the concept of history and drama being mutual constructs is foregrounded in relation to all the selected plays within its scope. The thesis also claims that both Sean O'Casey and Frank McGuinness are deeply involved in and influenced by the contemporary actualities of their country and the world. Their preoccupation with history is mainly motivated by a desire to interpret present dilemmas as a preliminary step towards offering a solution for them.

However, according to the present study, the approaches to history adopted by O'Casey and McGuinness can hardly be called identical. Moreover, the solutions proposed by each as an escape route of