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***SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAYS OF
ANTON CHEKHOV AND SEAN O'CASEY:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY***

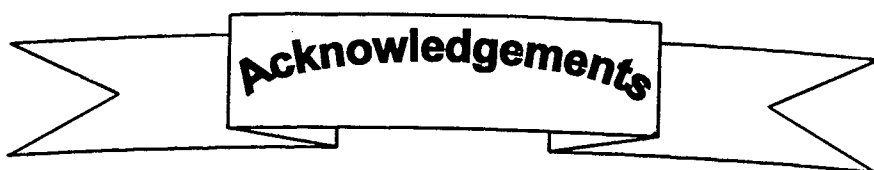
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A THESIS
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Anton Chekhov
(1860-1904)



Sean O'Casey
(1880-1964)

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Introduction

The drama of the great Russian playwright Anton Pavolovich Chekhov (1860-1904) as well as the drama of the well-known major Irish dramatist Sean O'Casey (1880-1964) evoke a strong appeal for critics, researchers and students of literature because of the plays' richness, uniqueness and openness for continuous criticism, discussion and analysis. The relationship between the two playwrights might seem distant for the first instant since they are not exact contemporaries as the above birth and death dates show, they speak and write in different languages and are, furthermore, from dissimilar cultures and different countries. The reader might be surprised why the present study combines such apparently different writers. However, strikingly enough to the reader's attention, this research proposes to prove that the relationship between Chekhov and O'Casey is quite evident.

The basic reasons why this present study juxtaposes both playwrights in comparison are the following. First, Chekhov exerts a strong influence on O'Casey, especially in technique. Secondly, both Chekhov and O'Casey occupy a remarkable significant place within English literature in particular and universal literature in general, for both are regarded as major playwrights of the twentieth century, master craftsmen of the theatre and universal dramatists whose literary influence still manifests itself up to the present day. Thirdly, their plays are still interesting living lifelike dramas. The real worlds which Chekhov and O'Casey portray in their plays are so familiar that no audience can feel alien to them. Their characters, no matter where they are drawn from, are human beings who suffer from universal problems and, hence, are raised to a general or universal level. How these playwrights mould their portrayed worlds in creative dramatic forms is unique and fascinating. If there are differences between the

two dramatists in age, education, profession, native language and nationality, these disparities do not absolutely stand in the way of comparing them.

Because of the so many noticeable affinities between the two dramatists, only one major similarity has been chosen for study in this thesis; namely, the use of symbolism. However, it is necessary to point out that this similarity is inseparable from many others. The aim of this comparative study is to examine how each playwright uses symbolism in his full-length plays and for what purpose and, consequently, to prove whether they are conscious symbolists or not. Meanwhile, the assessment reveals whether the universal Russian master Anton Chekhov has ever exercised any perceived influence on the Irish writer Sean O'Casey in using this technique. Some outstanding symbols, their types, forms, connotations and suggestions to the writer, the characters in the plays and the audience are also presented.

Symbolism is defined in Chapter I. The definitions try to clarify the confusion surrounding the term. In Chapter II a survey of the two playwrights' background is provided. This survey reveals how much the two writers come very close, especially, in the field of drama. The reasons behind using certain significant symbols are also exposed. Furthermore, this latter chapter divides each writer's plays according to the use of symbolism. Each writer's full-length plays can be divided into two major groups: one related to the early period of their drama and the other to the late period.

In the light of the definition of symbolism and the background of the two writers the following three chapters present a comparison between the symbolism of Chekhov and that of O'Casey in their full-length plays. Chapter III is a critical study of the symbolism of character. It shows how characters are

consciously made either analogies of real human beings with various social classes or various professions or symbolic representatives of certain abstract ideas. Many characters are treated in two ways: as symbols of real human beings and at the same time as symbols of abstract ideas. The chapter also relates characters to some symbolic allusions - literary, mythological and religious - which the two writers use and to the postmodern intertextuality. Hence, it exposes two kinds of symbolism: realistic symbolism and fantastic symbolism.

Chapter IV discusses some significant emblems as well as the symbolic use of spectacle. It presents various illustrations of both general and private symbolic objects assessing what they gain from the context they serve. It explains how these emblems are handled and how their openness for various interpretations as well as their function of self-revelation makes them complex and modern. Moreover, the analysis amplifies the care and importance the two dramatists give to almost every element on their stage - such as colour, costume, light, darkness, smell and movement, which make them come clearly close to the expressionists. These various symbolic elements together with the characters are eventually related and combined for two important purposes: to strengthen the meaning and effect of the two playwrights' works of art.

Chapter V focuses on the two playwrights' usage of sound in contrast to silence as symbolic means of communication. It explores some significant verbal and non-verbal auditory material in their plays. The examination exhibits the two writers' care for both the off-stage and the on-stage sounds which ultimately proves that even the silence and pauses in their theatres are evocative. The analysis of symbolism in the last three chapters shows that this symbolism, which is evident throughout the two writers' dramatic career, develops till it

reaches a stage of sublimity, very close to poetry, where realism and fantasy are subtly blended to serve their end.

The Conclusion summarizes the findings of this research. It sums up when, how and why symbolism is used in the plays of Chekhov and O'Casey. Symbolism is the link that connects not only all centuries but also these two playwrights who lived and wrote in two different cultures but shared similar climates and similar national spirits of change. Both the Russian Chekhov and the Irish O'Casey were social revolutionaries who asked - whether directly as in the case of O'Casey or indirectly as in that of Chekhov - for change. They were thirsty for freedom and for a new better life that would replace their terrible present. Symbolism is the indirect means they consciously chose to help them achieve their end. Therefore, they made it an integral part of their unique and effective drama. Finally, this thesis proves that Chekhov's symbolism is an anticipation of O'Casey's whereas O'Casey's is an extensive development of Chekhov's laconic symbolism.