

The Darling Men of Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*: An Early Postmodern Representation of Masculinity

SOHAIB MALKAWI  
Independent Scholar

**Abstract**

This article examines how Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*, written in 1924, anticipated the postmodern conception of gender, or more accurately, the postmodern deconstruction of gender as merely repetitive patterns of behavior. The focus is on how the play dramatizes the Foucauldian notion of the death of man in the neurotic and irresponsible behavior of the male characters. Taking the psychological vertical approach in the analysis, the article adds to the scholarly work that has been written about the play, which mostly focused on its sociopolitical and religious aspects. The analysis this article sets forth shows how O’Casey’s representation (or perhaps mal-representation) of male characters was symptomatic of the cultural upsurge that later came to be known as postmodernism. In so doing, the article makes a curious link between O’Casey’s representation of neurotic men and the more recent inception of postmodernism and its deconstruction of gender. This link, in other words, is between neurosis and deconstruction, between psychological disturbances and the much-celebrated postmodern theory that came later. Thus, the article concludes with the peculiar question of how much of postmodern thought was, albeit unconsciously, predicated upon psychological degeneration, especially when it comes to its deconstruction of gender dynamics.

**Keywords:** Sean O’Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, psychology, postmodernism, gender, deconstruction, modern drama, Irish drama, masculinity, feminism, gender roles

Most studies on Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* have centered on its religious and political significance. The biblical implications are manifest in Johnny Boyle’s constant retreats to his “miniature shrine” of Saint Anthony and his obsession with the votive light on the picture of Virgin Mary (Cardullo 257). The political is evident in the play’s background: the civil war between the Irish Republican Army and the Free State soldiers. This clash has taken its toll on Ireland with the large number of casualties among men, leaving the full burden of domestic responsibility on the shoulders of women. The play clearly exemplifies this social phenomenon in the familial drama of the Boyles.

Jack Boyle is a sixty-year-old washout who refuses to work and provide sustenance and support for his family. His constant complaint, whenever a job presents itself, and whenever his wife, Juno, urges him to work, is that he feels “crippled” with the “pain in [his] legs” (O’Casey 438), which we can easily doubt. The truth is that Boyle does not want to work; he only wants to keep drinking and singing with his friend Joxer. To compensate for her husband’s lack of responsibility, Juno is forced to go out and work, taking up the role of the masculine—by masculine I am not simply referring to gender; rather, I mean that “inner masculine” energy shared by both men and women (Deida xvii) – in addition to her maternal responsibilities as a mother. In this sense, Juno’s domestic duties are doubled. She points to this as she complains to Jerry, “I killin’ meself workin’, an’ he sthruttin’ about from morning till night like a paycock” (O’Casey 437). Fatherly care is thus lacking in the Boyle household. The family’s main masculine example is incompetent, providing the worst model for the son Johnny and his sister Mary. To compensate, both are bound to search – though unconsciously – for masculine energy outside the domestic realm. Johnny finds it in his temporary yet fateful affiliation with the IRA, and Mary finds it in her heterosexual relationships with Jerry

initially, and with Bentham later. Both prove to have severe consequences in the end, with Mary impregnated and then deserted, and Johnny killed by the Irregulars.

Boyle is not the only inept representative of masculinity in the play. Johnny, Joxer, and Bentham also fall in this category. All four men evince varying degrees of immaturity and lack of manliness. Boyle and Joxer are effeminated men, singing and drinking all the time. They are merely driven by their desire for pleasure – their Dionysian instincts. I will explicate shortly how singing and drinking are typically associated with the feminine aspect of the self. Johnny, on the other hand, is a coward, and Bentham is a manipulative trickster.

The aim of this article is to provide a psychological analysis of Boyle, Johnny, and Bentham, in juxtaposition with Juno and Mary, in order to show how O'Casey's representation of masculinity reflects and anticipates the postmodern conception of gender as only repetitive patterns of behavior. But before that, I will outline the postmodern view of man I am trying to prove that the play, written in 1924, foresaw. We should note that postmodernism, in its initial stage, only started back in the 1970s (Connor 1).

According to Paul Sheehan, from the perspective of the postmodern mind, man has suffered from an "identity crisis" which culminated in "Foucault's pronouncement of the 'end of man'" (32). Man does not hold the central stage anymore. Supremacy cannot be granted as his birthright, and the attributes that constitute manhood are not fixed; rather, maleness, as well as femaleness, is "not an inert category with fixed attributes, but a contingent *doing*, a 'stylized repetition of acts'" (Sheehan 34). Thus, gender is now dependent on the habitual actions of the individual rather than certain on fixed traditional assumptions. In this line, maleness is contingent upon masculine actions of aggression and movement, working in the world and outside the domestic sphere. The post-Jungian analyst Phil Goss describes such characteristics as "transcendent" (22). Femaleness, on the other hand, is contingent upon feminine acts of repose, staying at home, nurturing, celebration and relaxation. Goss describes such acts as "immanent"

(22). The transcendent is a function of what Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, calls the “*animus*,” while the immanent is a function of what he calls the “*anima*” (7).

The immanent acts mentioned above correspond to Boyle and Joxer’s compulsive desire to drink and sing – to rest all the time. Thus, the two are effeminated men: unconsciously magnifying their inner feminine – their negative anima – while suppressing their masculine, which usually dominates and defines the male psyche. Juno, the most self-aware and realistic character in the play, testifies to her husband’s lack of responsibility and familial negligence when she confronts him: “If there was e’er a genuine job goin’ you’d be dh’other way about – not able to lift your arms with the pains in your legs! Your poor wife slavin’ to keep the bit in your mouth, an’ you *gallivanting* about all the day like a paycock” (O’Casey 438; my emphasis). As Boyle disregards his domestic duties as husband and father, Juno takes up the burden of going out there to provide sustenance for the family. She magnifies her animus, her inner psychic image of man, and pursues the traditional masculine act of bringing home the bacon. In this sense, she becomes the man of the house, while Boyle slinks into inactivity and, in his wife’s words, keeps *gallivanting*, i.e. wandering about in search of pleasure. Boyle’s evasive response to his wife’s confrontation evidences his incredulousness and obvious guilt: he says, “It ud be betther for a man to be dead, betther for a man to be dead” (438). His death wish is ironic in that it reflects his already deadened masculinity – his deadened desire to confront the world and its responsibilities. This deadness parallels what psychologist Anthony Clare describes as the “dying phallus” (qtd. in Goss 44). In other words, Boyle’s *phallic position* as the head of the household is greatly circumscribed as he *shrinks* away under Juno’s sense of direction and responsibility.

Juno’s dedication to the service and wellbeing of her family is in total contrast to her husband’s resignation and crass negligence. Her devotion to her family is not only reflected in the doubled responsibility she finds herself obliged to take – the maternal duties in addition to fulfilling the masculine role of

providing sustenance – but also in her insistence upon staying rooted in “material reality” as opposed to getting lost in abstracted “principles” (Prizel). Juno questions Mary’s decision to go on a strike after her employer has dismissed, presumably unjustly, one of her colleagues. The daughter’s insistence on doing so as a way to stand up for her “principles” provokes her mother into making an ironical statement devaluing such “principles” as mere abstractions devoid of any material practicality. She says: “an’ when I go into oul’ Murphy’s tomorrow, an’ he gets to know that, instead o’ payin’ all, I’m goin’ to borry more, what’ll he say when I tell him a principle’s a principle” (O’Casey 436). Juno’s suggestion is that holding true to such principles is inadequate in light of the present material status of the family. The Boyles need to hold on to money, not to empty principles, in order to pay their debts and sustain themselves. This observation on Juno’s reflects her sense of practicality and awareness of the family’s circumstances. It reflects her commitment to the household as a unit. In contrast, the other family members are deeply self-absorbed: Boyle, as mentioned earlier, in his aimless pursuit of pleasure; Johnny in his fears of retaliation from the Irregulars; and Mary in her unrealistic attachment to principles and naïve trust in Bentham.

While Juno is absorbed in her concern over the family, the male members, Boyle and Johnny, remain idle and dysfunctional. Their inertia and disturbed psychological status are reflected in their material existence, their bodies. The stage directions tell us that Boyle’s “cheeks ... are puffed out, as if he were always repressing an almost irrepressible ejaculation” (O’Casey 437). The description’s emphasis on phallic repression, the restriction of ejaculation, is indicative of impotence and regression, i.e. lack of manliness. Failing to achieve sexual release from accumulated tension, the body remains in a highly charged condition, and masculine energy is denied its full expression. This repression suggests masculinity’s regression into a defective barren status, a male who cannot bear offspring. If Boyle could have been once physically capable of having children, his attitude now clearly shows that he is incapable of supporting his entire family. In other

words, he fails as the man of the house; he is incompetent and unproductive, unable to fulfill his masculine role as father and husband, undertaking nothing for the sake of his children and wife. On the contrary, he manifests the worst model of masculinity for his children, being driven by his blind pursuit of pleasure, and his inability to cope with reality.

Johnny's body also manifests his troubled psychological status, especially his continuous fear, which prevents him from playing an active role in helping his family. His eyes have a "tremulous look of indefinite fear" in them, "The left sleeve of his coat is empty, and he walks with a slight halt" (O'Casey 436). His body reflects his inner reality: fear is evident in his eyes, his reaching out to the world is deficient after losing his left arm, and his sense of being grounded in reality is blurred with a twisted hip that disorients his bearing. Johnny's fear of retaliation from the Irregulars clouds his perception and obscures his thinking to the point where he becomes obsessed with the idea of redemption. His obsession is manifest in the two shrines he constructs in the small circumference of his family's two-roomed tenement house. He has a votive light directed on a miniature statue of Saint Anthony in the inner room and another one on the picture of Virgin Mary in the living room. Johnny evinces his psychological fixation in his nagging compulsion to ask his mother whether the lights are still on or not:

JOHNNY [from the inner room]. I hate assin' him for anythin'. ...  
He hates to be assed to stir. ... Is the light lightin' before the  
picture of the Virgin?

MRS. BOYLE. Yis, yis! The wan inside to St. Anthony isn't enough,  
but he must have another wan to the Virgin here! (437)

This short exchange shows how easy it is for Johnny to drift into an obsession with the light, which, being a symbol of consciousness, indicates his fear of losing it and sinking into the unconscious. Johnny moves from asking his father if he needs anything, with two pauses in between, and then asking about the

light. The pauses are perhaps indicative of preoccupation; he might have been praying to St. Anthony inside. Alternatively, he might have been sitting and doing nothing except thinking. Regardless, by enshrining their small apartment in such manner, with votive lights on St. Anthony and the Virgin in all rooms, Johnny clearly evidences his anxiety and fear – his desire to sanctify himself after sin. Unlike his father’s indulgence in singing and drinking, Johnny represents the repentant ascetic who denies himself the joys of living and succumbs to dread and constant prayer, motivated by his anxious anticipation of vengeance from the IRA. Like his father, however, Johnny represents another instance of the “dying phallus.” He is, after all, unable to exercise his masculinity for the benefit of his family; he is incapable of fulfilling the man-of-the-house role his father leaves empty. The masculine energy represented by the phallus, and associated with characteristics like “*strong direction and purposiveness*” in life (Deida 87), is lacking in both Boyle and Johnny.

To compensate for this lack, as mentioned earlier, Juno and Mary are bound to magnify their inner masculine potential and provide for the family. But whereas Juno remains realistic and does not harbor any principled thoughts, Mary’s yearning to escape her family’s deadening circumstances, along with her clinging to principles, and her unconscious desire to unite with a masculine figure who represents a promise to materialize these objectives – all lead to her eventual downfall. Mary’s longing to flee her family’s circumstances is evident in the stage description: “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” (O’Casey 435). Thus, Mary’s psyche is torn between these two opposing forces, and, naturally, she will be attracted to anything or anyone who represents the sophistication of books and the breakaway from her family’s circumstances. This representation becomes manifest in Bentham, as evidenced in his formal speech – as far remote from the Irish dialect – and philosophical rant about the “Universal Life-Breath” (446). Blinded by her naivety and longing for change, Mary promptly leaves Jerry,

a man who truly loves her, for Bentham, whose sudden appearance, after hearing about the family's inheritance, she never questions. Subsequently, Mary is impregnated and deserted, aggravating the tragedies of her family.

With the impurity of his intentions, hubris, and obvious material concerns, Bentham comes to represent another case of Anthony Clare's "dying phallus" (concept qtd. in Goss 44). Again, it is important to conceive of the phallus here as a mature representation of masculinity – moral goodness and uprightness – rather than simply a productive physiological potency. Bentham's stage description limits his inner characteristics as an individual and puts an emphasis on his external appearance: "[H]e is a young man of twenty-five, tall, good-looking, with **a very high opinion of himself generally**. He is dressed in a brown coat, brown knee-breeches, grey stockings, a brown sweater, with a deep blue tie; he carries gloves and a walking-stick" (O'Casey 442; my emphasis in bold). From this overt focus on his appearance and the materials associated with it, we can easily infer the shallowness that surrounds Bentham's character – his superficiality and material preoccupations. The only comment about his inner self – his thoughts and feelings – is that he thinks highly of himself, which reflects what Goss calls the "problem of male inflation and hubris ... [or] the overblown masculine" (230). The characteristics of this problem are manifold; and they can take the form of an egoistic behavior, casual disregard for others, or the ability to trick people by virtue of excessive confidence.

Bentham clearly exhibits his self-assurance and persuasiveness in his spiritual and scientific rants about "Theosophy" and ghostly encounters, in addition to his formal straightforward speech (O'Casey 446). All these affirm his confidence, which intensifies Mary's attraction to him. His material interest in the family's inheritance and hypocrisy with regard to being genuinely interested in her, however, become evident when he suddenly disappears leaving no trace behind, after he finds out that the Boyles' heritage is lost. He reveals himself to be, after all, an unmanly hypocrite, deceiving Mary into loving him, sleeping

with her, and then deserting her in pregnancy. Mary confides in her mother about her feelings for him after his disappearance: “I love him with all my heart and soul, mother. Why, I don’t know” (451).

The tragedy of the Boyles seems to be a direct result of the immaturity and unmanliness of these three men: Boyle, Johnny, and Bentham. All three represent varying manifestations of a stunted masculinity. Boyle, as we have seen, is an absent father lost in his search for pleasure – always singing and drinking with his friend Joxer. Johnny is immersed in dreadful asceticism, fostering imaginative hopes of redemption from the Irregulars. Bentham is a hypocrite, a shallow trickster who deceives Mary and the Boyles in hopes of material gain. But whereas Bentham at least attempts to alter his corporeal conditions by virtue of deception and sex, Boyle and Johnny slink into inactivity and dysfunction, the former wasted in pleasure island and the latter disabled by phobic dread.

Because of their unmanly behavior and lack of moral uprightness – symbolized by the phallus – all three come to represent an early example, an anticipation, of the postmodern deconstruction of gender as a stable set of expressions determined by birth. In other words, manliness – true masculinity or maleness – cannot be simply affirmed by having a phallus. Rather, like gender, it must be “performatively constituted” (Sheehan 34). Maleness depends on what you do; it is not an already determined biological fact. Maleness is exercised in masculine behavior, evident in aggression, assertiveness, and direction; whereas femaleness is exercised in feminine behavior, evident in tenderness, affection, and indirection. As we have seen, the attitude of Boyle and Johnny is marked by indirection and is driven by emotions: Boyle is merely motivated by impulsive low-class pleasure, Johnny by dread. Bentham perhaps is more mature than these two but his intentions are hypocritical and marred by material concerns. Juno and Mary, on the other hand, evince a sense of direction and assertiveness: Juno in her grounding of the family’s problems in material reality, her devotion to the household, and in urging her daughter and husband to commit themselves to work; Mary’s assertiveness is apparent in her holding true to principles for the sake of her

colleagues. In this sense, the two women exhibit more manliness and uprightness—more phallus—than all three men, the phallus being a “symbol of the reproductive force of life” (“Phallus”).

This focus on real life performance in determining gender, denying its constitution of a stable identity by virtue of biological necessity, is marked in Judith Butler’s deconstructive feminist critique of the term as a fluid behavioral construct, affirmed by repetitive action:

Gender ... is not an inert category with fixed attributes, but a contingent *doing*, a ‘stylized repetition of acts.’ It points towards a destabilization of identity: ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted ... *Gender attributes*, then, do not express a stable identity preceding the act of performance and enduring through time. Instead, *they consist in a provisional repertoire depending on reiteration for its existence, and hence are potentially fluid and variable.* (qtd. in Sheehan 34; my emphasis)

Subjectivity, identity, and gender are thus fluid and tentative, entirely dependent on constant reiteration and performance in the real world. This gives the individual a chance away from determinism: masculine or feminine behavior becomes a choice. When this choice is repeated constantly – i.e. when it becomes a habit – gender identity is constituted and is maintained as long as the behavioral pattern continues. For example, a man with a longstanding feminine attitude will develop a gender identity that is marked by receptiveness and yielding, as opposed to masculine characteristics such as aggression and resistance. This fluidity of gender construction resonates with Simone de Beauvoir’s dictum that “[o]ne is not born a woman, one becomes one” (qtd. in Flynn 99). From a postmodern sensibility, the same statement applies to men.

Perhaps the play’s title itself foreshadows this postmodern perspective. The main female character is named Juno, a reference to the queen of the Olympian gods and protector of marriage, a role Juno adheres to throughout the play. Jack, however, is deprived of

his human identity and is dubbed “the Paycock.” The woman, on the one hand, is deified and empowered (a hint at the feminist movement); the man, on the other hand, is reduced to an animal, to the Id impulses, to a beast incapable of relating with humans. This latter point coincides with the Foucauldian notion of the death of man and the postmodernist subversion of traditional gender hierarchy with the woman going up (as a deity) and the man going down (to an unconscious animal).

To conclude, I have tried to show how the representation of men in O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* anticipated the postmodern deconstruction of gender identity, traditionally conceived as a fixed binary set of assumptions and behaviors attributed to men and women. In postmodernism, this defining line between man and woman has been blurred and erased. Gender identity is no longer fixed and is now performance-based. In other words, it is constituted by virtue of behavioral patterns reiterated over time. The men of the play (Boyle, Johnny, and Bentham) exhibit immature and cowardly behavior, befitting boys rather than men. Each one, as we have seen, represents a distinctive version of Clare’s conception of the “dying phallus” (qtd. in Goss 44) – the amoral and dysfunctional phallus – the phallus being a symbol of uprightness and righteousness. By contrast, Juno and Mary hold true to this phallic symbolism. The two evince honesty, direction, sensibility, and commitment. They also show readiness to act and engage in the circumstances of their lives, as opposed to Boyle and Johnny, who slip into inactivity and dysfunction.

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