
| RESEARCH ARTICLE**On the Evolution of Class Struggle Thought in Sean O'Casey's Plays****Yaxin Guo***Southwest Jiaotong University, School of Foreign Languages, Chengdu, China***Corresponding Author:** Yaxin Guo **E-mail:** 2693633170@qq.com

| ABSTRACT

Sean O'Casey (1880-1964) is one of the proletarian playwrights in 20th-century Irish literature. Through a careful examination of O'Casey's plays with close reading, a discernible trajectory in the evolution of class struggle thought can be found. In his early work, *The Harvest Festival* (1918 or 1919), the protagonist Jack began to develop the thought of class struggle. In *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), the third play of his "Dublin Trilogy", O'Casey reflected on the class struggle within the context of Irish nationalism with the portrayal of a marginal character, Covey. By the 1940s, he returned to the theme of class struggle in *The Star Turns Red* (1940) and *Red Roses for Me* (1942), demonstrating a deepening exploration. The evolutionary process of class struggle thought exhibited in the plays is essentially a mirror of the playwright's ideological evolution. The formation of O'Casey's class struggle thought stems not only from his personal life experiences but also from the international context. Examining O'Casey's class struggle thought reveals that he is not merely an anti-war playwright as traditionally interpreted, but rather a playwright who attaches great importance to the class struggle as a means to fight for freedom and liberation, thereby providing a more comprehensive interpretation of his political stance.

| KEYWORDS

Sean O'Casey, class struggle, the proletariat, ideological evolution, Irish plays

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1. Introduction

Sean O'Casey (1880-1964) is a distinguished Irish proletarian playwright, known for his realistic tragicomedies that depict the lives of people in the slums of Dublin against the backdrop of the war. The "Dublin Trilogy", consisting of *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), establishes O'Casey's place in the history of Irish drama. "After Synge, the next truly world-renowned dramatist to arise from the Irish theater was Sean O'Casey," as Sternlicht (2010, p. 87) noted¹. O'Casey's plays are closely related to his political attitudes. Some scholars often regard him as an anti-war playwright. Kaoru Imanishi (2011) argued that O'Casey "was a pacifist, so naturally his themes represented such beliefs" (p. 125). What's more, Duan Hongjia (2021) analyzed in her thesis the development characteristics of the anti-war attitude in O'Casey's "Dublin Trilogy". However, an examination of his creative trajectory reveals a clear thread of the evolution of class struggle thought, with the proletariat as the primary subject of struggle.

Current research on O'Casey's proletarian thought primarily focuses on the following aspects: the shift in his focus from nationalism to the working class (Imanishi, 2011; Krause, 1997; Newsinger, 2004; Spears, 2013), his profound depiction of the oppression suffered by the working class (Phillips, 2010), the formative influence of the 1913 Dublin lockout on his political stance and its connection to his red drama (Esslinger, 1963; Harris, 2007), and the view of O'Casey as a great socialist writer who gave voice to the lower class (O'Brien, 2012).

¹ The original sentence begins with "AFTER SYNGE" in full capital letters; here, it is slightly modified to "After Synge" to conform to the sentence format.

Nonetheless, few studies have specifically focused on tracing the evolution of class struggle thought throughout his writing career. Therefore, this study will employ close reading to scrutinize representations and the evolving process of class struggle thought in O'Casey's early plays, *The Harvest Festival* (1918 or 1919) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) and his plays of the 1940s, *The Star Turns Red* (1940) and *Red Roses for Me* (1942). Through this analysis, it will reveal the evolution of O'Casey's thought on class struggle and explore the reasons underlying this thought. Ultimately, this study will demonstrate that O'Casey should not be seen solely as an anti-war playwright as traditionally interpreted, but as a playwright who places significant emphasis on class struggle as a means of pursuing freedom and liberation, thus offering a more comprehensive understanding of his political stance.

One of the most famous lines from *The Communist Manifesto* states, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx & Engels, 2007, p. 9). Lenin (1986) defined class struggle as "the struggle of the broad masses of the powerless, the oppressed, and the laboring people against the privileged, the oppressors, and the parasites" (p. 169). He further emphasized that it is also "a struggle of wage workers or proletarians against private owners or the bourgeoisie" (p. 169). This definition identifies the opposing classes and reveals the inherent conflict of oppression and resistance. In a capitalist society, the proletariat, who are deprived of the means of production and reliant on selling labor, stand at the bottom of the social hierarchy and become the primary target of exploitation. The class struggle, therefore, manifests as resistance to the economic, political, and ideological domination of the bourgeoisie. As a playwright from the working class, O'Casey vividly portrays the proletariat's plight and resistance, imbuing his works with a strong sense of class consciousness and social critique.

2. The Initial Manifestations of Class Struggle Thought in *The Harvest Festival*

The Harvest Festival is one of O'Casey's early works that were not received and staged. Set against the backdrop of a church-organized Harvest Festival, the play discloses the reality of prevalent poverty among the underclass that is concealed in the name of gratitude for the harvest.

As a wage laborer, the protagonist Jack is portrayed as a proletarian imbued with a spirit of resistance and a sharply critical attitude toward his oppressed social condition. He realized that, in order to maintain its daily operations, the church had to accept donations from capitalists and indoctrinate the lower class to endure poverty and oppression. This served to ensure the upper class's privileged position, revealing the fundamental alignment of interests between the church and the bourgeoisie. Consequently, Jack transformed from a devout believer into a skeptic of religious rituals and the thought of gratitude for the Harvest Festival. He asserted that "there is no thanksgiving in the decoration of your churches with corn and fruit and vegetables while one man or woman or child, ay, or beast in the field or bird in the air is hungry" (O' Casey, 1979, p. 13).² As a member of the Trades' Union, Jack actively promoted the slogan "you were fightin' a battle for freedom and a better life" (O' Casey, 1979, p. 8). He also asked in highly inflammatory terms, "why shouldn't the workers go in motor cars, and their wives wear silks an' satins like the rich" (p. 8), thus poignantly exposing the profound inequalities that existed in society at the time.

During the strike, when Mrs. Duffy asked Jack if the strike would end soon, he excitedly stated that "I am not so eager that the men should take some of the power out of the employers hands as I am that they should take, the men should take the whole power into their own" (O'Casey, 1979, p. 30). This idea is in line with Lenin's notion of class struggle. Taking a more radical stance, Jack argued that "I am not so eager that the men should gain the right towards a living wage as I am that they should overthrow the wage-system altogether" (pp. 30-31).

In the second act of the play, Jack was injured by a blackleg hired by a capitalist during the strike and ultimately sacrificed his life. His advocacy of class struggle was met with firm rejection from the churchwarden, Mr. Williamson, the church curate, Mr. Bishopson and the synodsmen and leading man, Sir Jocelyn Vane. In the end, Jack's body was carried towards the Union Hall by his fellow members.

In *The Harvest Festival*, although the Trades' Union and strike activities are referenced, the workers' struggle takes a primitive form, such as smashing employers' windows, demonstrating limited strength and achieving no substantive gains. The protagonist, Jack, can be regarded as the embodiment of an early awakening proletarian, yet his awakening remains largely confined to verbal self-expression. O'Casey's portrayal of this awakened figure reveals insights into his early political thought.

3. The Breakthrough of Class Struggle Thought in *The Plough and the Stars*

Set against the backdrop of the Easter Rising, *The Plough and the Stars* demonstrates the historical predicament of the Irish proletariat being sacrificed in the struggle for national independence.

In *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey vividly portrays the anti-heroic warriors represented by Jack and Brennan and the civilians focused on family, like Gogan and Nora, during the war. However, it is also important not to overlook Covey, a non-central character distinct from others in his discourse and thought.

²In this paper, all quotations in plays are retained the original wording and spelling from the source texts, even though some of the linguistic forms differ from contemporary English.

In the first act, while other workers were rejoicing at being able to stop work to participate in the demonstration and listen to the revolutionary speech, Covey showed his dissatisfaction with the propaganda of the uprising. He said, "Didn't you hear them cheerin', th' mugs!" (O'Casey, 1985, p. 111). Furthermore, when Fluther lamented that the meeting was coming to an end, Covey argued that it was full of "blasted nonsense" (O'Casey, 1985, p. 137).

Although Covey staunchly opposed participation in the Easter Rising, this did not mean that he held a wholly negative attitude towards struggle. In the third act, he stated, "If they were fightin' for anything worth while, I wouldn't mind" (O'Casey, 1985, p. 147). Unlike Jack and Brennan, who chose to join the Irish Citizen Army and participate in the Easter Rising, Covey focused on the symbolic meaning of the flag, as reflected in "th' design of th' field plough, bearin' on it th' stars of th' heavenly plough" (O'Casey, 1985, p. 118). In his view, this flag was "a Labour flag" and "should only be used when we're buildin' th' barricades to fight for a Workers' Republic!" (p. 118).

Based on his class identity, Covey deeply contemplated the nature of the Easter Rising and its potential outcome. For him, only "th' war for th' economic emancipation of th' proletariat" was worthwhile to fight (O'Casey, 1985, p.134). This indicated his rejection of combining the cause of workers' liberation with Irish national independence. Covey soberly recognized that even if the working class joined the Irish Citizen Army, supported the Easter Rising to achieve success and won national independence, it was difficult for them to gain genuine freedom as he questioned, "What's th' use o' freedom, if it's not economic freedom?" (O'Casey, 1985, p. 130).

Additionally, through the play, Covey studied Jenersky's thesis on *th' Origin, Development, an' Consolidation of th' Evolutionary Idea of th' Proletariat* (a fictional book title in the play) and repeatedly mentioned the labour movement, the mechanism of exchange and the relationship between value and the cost of production in the dialogue, which demonstrated that he was profoundly influenced by proletarian ideology and possessed a basic understanding of the working class's condition.

In *The Plough and the Stars*, the character Covey prompts reflection on the dilemma between national and class identities faced by the working class within Irish society. Against the backdrop of prevailing Irish nationalism, he exhibits a sober awareness of the proletarian struggle. Although Covey's understanding of proletarian theory is neither comprehensive nor profound, he has developed a strong class consciousness regarding his own class identity. However, Covey can still be regarded as a spokesperson for O'Casey, expressing the idea of class struggle through violent revolution to achieve economic freedom and liberation based on his class characteristics. This character setting implies the playwright's political thinking and stance at that time, which are distinct from the anti-war interpretation mentioned in previous studies.

4. The Deepening of Class Struggle Thought in *The Star Turns Red* and *Red Roses for Me*

After *The Plough and the Stars* was staged in 1926, O'Casey continued to devote himself to the creation of new plays. However, after the rejection of the play *The Silver Tassie* by the Abbey Theater, he left Ireland and settled in London. By combing through the plays written by O'Casey, it became evident that *The Star Turns Red* and *Red Roses for Me* "mentally returned to the Ireland of his youth, to those basically Irish characters and scenes" (Esslinger, 1963, p. 53). In these plays, O'Casey once again turned his attention to class struggle, with a particular focus on the proletariat, bringing the theme of resistance to a new dramatic climax.

In *The Star Turns Red*, O'Casey does not specify the time in which the play takes place, only indicating that it is set tomorrow or the next day. Additionally, he points out that the play is dedicated "to the men and women who fought through the great Dublin lockout in Nineteen hundred and thirteen". In the play, Jack, Michael and Julia are all communists led by the proletarian leader Red Jim to fight the fascist Saffron Shirts and their allies, the Christian Front.

In the third act, a bitter conflict erupted between communists represented by Red Jim and church priests over the ownership of Michael's body. Michael, a member of Jim's Union, was attacked by a fascist in the Saffron Shirts. Confronted by her father's death, Julia transformed her grief and anger into strength, expressing confidence in the ultimate victory of the labor movement. She said to her father, "You will hear it ["The Internationale"] voiced by the workers of the world ere you wither into the clay that will shortly hold you tight!" (O'Casey, 1940, p. 121). At the end of this act, the body of Michael was lifted by his comrades amid the drumbeats.

When the Brown Priest claimed that workers' current outcries and actions were less effective than patiently entrusting their demands to God, Jack directly refuted him with "Where's the bread we've prayed so long for? ... I tell you that the clenched fist alone can gather the corn that the earth can give!" (O'Casey, 1940, p. 129). Red Jim also expressed his strong dissatisfaction and proposed a violent struggle to defend their rights. This struggle could put an end to a situation in which "Who hath filled the wealthy with good things and hath sent the poor empty away" (O'Casey, 1940, p. 135). In Red Jim's view, he called on his comrades with fierce confidence, saying that "Now we stand up, we turn, and go our own way, the bent back changing to the massed majesty of the Clenched Fist!" (O'Casey, 1940, p. 136). In the fourth act, Red Jim led workers to carry out the revolutionary movement and occupy the mayor's residence. The truce proposed by fascists and their allies indicated an attitude of surrender. However, Red Jim expressed his insistence on continuing the struggle.

The red star, the red flag and *The Internationale* are repeatedly mentioned in the play, becoming the identity symbols and spiritual guides of communists to inspire them to stand firm and fight to the end. The ending of the play, "The Red Star glows, and seems to grow bigger as the curtain falls" (O'Casey, 1940, p. 184), demonstrates the playwright's optimistic attitude towards

proletarian class struggle. In this play, O'Casey delves further into the politics of labor "as a global battle between fascism and Communism" and explicitly "incorporates this crisis [the Dublin lockout of 1913] in Irish labor history into the wider domain of the international workers' struggle" (Harris, 2007, p. 359).

Another red play, *Red Roses for Me*, is a four-act play with some autobiographical features. The story centers on the main character, Ayamonn, who leads the masses in the struggle for their rights. Initially, Ayamonn did not intend to go on a strike, believing that the capitalists would certainly agree to their demand for a one-shilling weekly wage increase. After realizing that wages would not rise as expected and that the authorities would use every means to suppress workers' assemblies, he resolutely disregarded all warnings and determined to lead the masses in the strike.

In the third act, O'Casey vividly portrayed the hardships of the underclass represented by Ayamonn's neighbors. His neighbors listlessly sold their goods near the bridge, complaining that "Sorrow's a slush under our feet, up to our ankles, an' th' deep drip of it constant overhead" (O'Casey, 1985, p. 300). Faced with this situation, Ayamonn called on them to unite and defend their rights with "Friend, we would that you should live a greater life; we will that all of us shall live a greater life" (O'Casey, 1985, p.308). Moreover, by stating "Our strike is yours," "A step ahead for us today," and "another one for you tomorrow" (p. 308), he underscored solidarity and a shared future for the workers' struggle to gain mass support.

Furthermore, O'Casey also employs expressionist techniques to integrate aesthetics with political expression. In the third act, the bleak scene transformed into golden brilliance, with vehicles charging like chariots heading to the front lines. At this time, it seemed that the atmosphere was filled with the aura of war. The originally lifeless people rose to their feet and began to sing and dance under this light. This setting symbolized that they would embark on the path of struggle, choosing to resist for their happiness. In the fourth act, Ayamonn's resistance movement gained broader support with neighbors joining in. But ultimately, he sacrificed amid frenzied repression.

Although the struggle of Ayamonn was merely for an extra shilling in wages, it held great significance, just as Sheila remarked at the end of the play, "Maybe he saw the shilling in th' shape of a new world" (O'Casey, 1985, p. 328). In this play, O'Casey concretely demonstrates the unity of the working class in fighting against the authorities to secure their rights, further showcasing the struggling spirit of the proletariat.

There are many parallel elements between this play and the earlier play *The Harvest Festival*, such as Jack being the character in both, the conflict over church burial for a labor martyr and the involvement of the strike. However, upon comparison, it becomes evident that the character of Jack in *Red Roses for Me* undergoes significant development. He not only puts this idea into practice but also truly embodies the principle that the labor movement serves the interests of the overwhelming majority. He witnesses the hardships faced by the lower classes and calls on them to join the resistance, uniting to defend their rights and strive for a better life. This shows that O'Casey has developed a deeper understanding of the class struggle, as reflected in more complete characterization and plot setting.

After examining the four plays, it should be noted that in *The Harvest Festival*, Jack, a worker with the thought of class struggle, only appears in the first two acts of the play. What's more, only a few direct descriptions of the strike movement were mentioned in the play. In *The Plough and the Stars*, the story primarily revolves around the nationalist event of the Easter Rising. The character Covey, representing the proletariat, occupies a marginal position without much portrayal. In contrast to these earlier works, *The Star Turns Red* and *Red Roses for Me* place the labor movement at the center of the play. Class struggle becomes the principal conflict, and committed communists are depicted as key figures in the movement in these plays. Both Red Jim in *The Star Turns Red* and Ayamonn in *Red Roses for Me* are constructed as emblematic proletarian leaders. Through impassioned speeches and decisive actions, they mobilize workers and the broader masses to join the fight for equality and liberation. This process of unified struggle fosters a heightened awareness of shared class identity among the workers, leading to the development of a stronger proletarian consciousness and a firmer commitment to revolutionary action.

5. Reasons for the Formation and Development of O'Casey's Class Struggle Thought

From the initial emergence of class struggle thought in *The Harvest Festival* to the contemplation within the Irish social context in *The Plough and the Stars*, and the deepening exploration in his two revolutionary plays, *The Star Turns Red* and *Red Roses for Me*, the evolutionary process of class struggle thought in O'Casey's plays is demonstrated. By tracing the factors that prompt the formation and development of this thought of O'Casey, a comprehensive understanding of its process can be gained.

O'Casey was born into an ordinary Protestant family in Dublin. After the early death of his father, his family plunged into poverty. From 1903 to 1911, he worked for the Great Northern Railway. It was this personal experience of labor that gave him a deep understanding of the realities of the working class and a strong empathy for their plight. He found that workers worked as hard as their jobs demanded, earned barely enough to support their families, and faced the constant threat of dismissal. Therefore, O'Casey came to realize that his labor was treated as "a commodity", which would be "bought and sold, used and discarded like the tools of his unskilled trade, the hack, shovel, sledgehammer and hod" (Lowery, 1981, p. 66).

As a result, he began to reflect on social injustices and the working class's realities from the working-class perspective. This firsthand experience was fully demonstrated in his plays, which predominantly centered on workers' lives. The impoverished background and long-term experience in working-class conditions helped him form the foundation of class identification, driving his firm commitment to challenge class oppression.

Although O'Casey possessed the basis of his later proletarian struggles with working-class identity, he initially chose to be fully committed to the cause of Irish republicanism, and his ideology underwent a process of transformation from nationalism to socialism. While working for the Great Northern Railway, he was active in various organizations, including the Gaelic League, the Gaelic Athletic Association, and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, demonstrating a passionate commitment to Irish national independence. O'Casey aspired to revive the Gaelic language and culture in Ireland and to reverse the process of Anglicization. For O'Casey at that time, the future of the working class was completely linked to Irish national independence.

It was not until the Dublin lockout of 1913 that O'Casey realized middle-class nationalists lacked genuine sympathy for the workers' cause. The strike's failure and the nationalists' actions prompted O'Casey to fundamentally rethink nationalism. He concluded that a successful movement for Irish independence must be grounded in working-class principles. This ideological shift led him to embrace class consciousness and commit fully to proletarian struggle. In *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey uses the character Covey to condemn the nature of the Easter Rising and argues that the working class must prioritize its economic emancipation.

The revolutionary ideas and actions of working-class leader Jim Larkin (1876-1947) had an indelible influence on O'Casey's choice towards class consciousness and proletarian struggle. In the work of *Sean O'Casey and His World*, it is recorded that O'Casey hailed Larkin as "the saviour of Dublin" and expressed that "I found it [faith] when Jim Larkin came to Dublin and organized the unskilled workers" (Krause, 1976, p. 12). Like Larkin, O'Casey placed his faith "in the people and the need to live a better and fuller life" (p. 12). Specifically, Larkin's founding of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) in Dublin, his development of mass strikes, and his powerful, galvanizing speeches as the leader of the labor movement collectively urged workers to fight for their rights.

Inspired by Larkin and this movement, O'Casey subsequently became active within the ITGWU and contributed extensively to its newspaper, *The Irish Worker*, expressing his views on the political situation. Ultimately, Larkin's call for working-class solidarity, combined with O'Casey's practical involvement in strikes, led him to serve as a strong believer and supporter of Larkinism.

O'Casey was also profoundly shaped by the dramatic shifts within his historical context as he deepened his interest in proletarian thought, particularly the victory of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. For O'Casey, this victory demonstrated the immense promise and power of proletarian revolution, reinforcing his conviction that the proletariat could ultimately achieve its liberation through struggle. Throughout his life, he regarded the Soviet Union as "the only society which would take the human achievement out of the hands of the elite and the profit-makers and bring it to his class, the working class" (Lowery, 1983, p. 134). O'Casey's personal family and work experiences, his reflections on nationalism, his following of workers' leader Jim Larkin, and the triumph of the October Revolution in Russia collectively contributed to the formation of his thought on the class struggle of the proletariat.

A wave of interest in communist thought swept across Europe as the international landscape evolved during the 1930s and 1940s. This prompted O'Casey to develop deeper political reflections on the class struggle of the proletariat. The Great Depression sparked urgent social problems, such as strikes and unemployment that demanded solutions. The crisis of capitalism, along with its inherent contradictions and imbalances, created fertile ground for the rapid rise of fascist forces in countries like Germany and Italy.

During the Second World War, the rapid ascension of fascist forces posed a severe threat to global order and security. Many Western communists demonstrated unity, transcending national boundaries to engage in the anti-fascist struggle from an internationalist stance. Consequently, the Second World War can be viewed as a pivotal moment for European communism in establishing itself as a significant political force. Sassoon (2010) observed that "in the West communism reached the zenith of its influence and power in 1945-46" (p. 83).

As the prospect of communism in Europe appeared increasingly favorable, O'Casey's portrayal of proletarian struggle in his work correspondingly intensified, characterized by greater revolutionary thoroughness and optimism. This distinctive feature is vividly manifested in *The Star Turns Red* and *Red Roses for Me*. Taking *The Star Turns Red* as a prime example, the play situates the proletarian struggle firmly within an international political context. It extends the scope from the labor movement to the confrontation between communism and fascism. Set against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, the play deliberately subverts the actual historical outcome. The play concludes with the triumph of the working class, celebrated by singing *The Internationale*, while the fascists are forced to cease. This dramatic resolution powerfully conveys the playwright's resolute commitment to the struggle and his profound confidence in its ultimate success.

6. Conclusion

As an Irish playwright of working-class origin, O'Casey shows concern for the plight of the underclass during wartime and offers a humanitarian judgement of the destruction and cruelty of war in his plays. However, to simply categorize O'Casey as an anti-war playwright fails to fully reflect the complex thought of war presented in his works. By juxtaposing the thought of class struggle embodied in the above plays, the deepening process of class struggle thought with the proletariat as the main body is fully revealed. Additionally, the formation and development of O'Casey's class struggle thought can be outlined based on a comprehensive analysis of these plays. This study shows that O'Casey should not be regarded merely as a traditional anti-war

playwright, but also as one who sees class struggle as a crucial means of achieving freedom and liberation, thus demonstrating a more complex and profound political stance on his part.

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