



The Glamour of Grammar: Orality and Politics and the Emergence of Sean O'Casey (Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies,)

Colbert Kearney

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Levels of education and, consequently, of literacy were low in the Dublin tenements at the beginning of the 20th century, and this facilitated the persistence of an oral tradition which stretched back for thousands of years. This book is an analysis of O'Casey's Abbey plays in the context of the oral culture in which they were set. Because they were powerless in a culture dominated by those who had reaped the advantages of education, the tenement dwellers were dazzled by the apparent magic of literacy and in awe of those who wielded its power. O'Casey uses this to dramatize the ease with which the poor were seduced into what he saw as a bourgeois revolution which brought them nothing but suffering and death.

Although Sean O'Casey's Abbey plays *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Plough and the Stars* are universally admired for the richness of their language, this is the first authoritative analysis of the plays in relation to the linguistic and political culture at the turn of the century. Levels of education, and consequently, of literacy were low in the Dublin tenements and this facilitated the persistence of an oral tradition which stretched back for thousands of years. What might strike the modern reader as extravagant in the language of O'Casey's characters would be quite normal in an oral community where all communication was performative.

Because they were powerless in a culture dominated by those who had reaped the advantages of education, the tenement dwellers were dazzled by the apparent magic of literacy and in awe of those who wielded its power. O'Casey uses this to dramatize the ease with which the poor were seduced into what he saw as a bourgeois revolution which brought them nothing but suffering and death. It is hardly surprising, then, that the villains in these plays are educated intruders who speak a language strikingly different from that of the tenement dwellers.

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