

Mrs. Tancred: a foil and a mirror



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Sean O'Casey's drama *Juno and the Paycock* details the slow, painful degradation of the Boyle family in war-torn Ireland in the early 1920s. Juno remains strong and calm throughout the course of the play, even though she suffers from a drunkard, good-for-nothing husband, an illegitimately pregnant daughter, and a dead son. The last of these—Johnny's death—elicits perhaps the most emotional response from Juno, and rightfully so. After learning of her son's demise, Juno launches into a speech that she borrows from another son-less mother—Mrs. Tancred, a relatively minor character found only in the second act. . These shared words force the reader to consider Juno and Mrs. Tancred in comparison to one another and, when examined closely enough, one discovers that, while Mrs. Tancred foils Juno in appearance and emotional composition, she and Juno share ...When Mrs. Tancred enters the scene (121), she is described as “ a very old woman, obviously shaken by the death of her son.” She is obviously defeated by the untimely death of her son and even hints at the probability of her own death, saying “ I won't be long afther him” (122). The death of her son has seeped into her very being and has wreaked havoc on her; she is small and weak and has no use for life any longer. Juno, on the other hand, is described as a woman that, “[w]ere circumstances favourable, she would probably be a handsome, active, and clever woman” (72). Juno is always in a state of motion and is arguably the only true example of life in the play. She is never short on words and possesses a sort of vitality that one could easily believe impossible in Mrs. Tancred. Accordingly, Mrs. Tancred is a woman of extremes while Juno is far more balanced, controlled, and calm. Mrs. Tancred looks the part of the mourning mother; one can imagine her hunched over, pale, and cold even needing a shawl from Mrs. Madigan (122). She speaks in

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extremes, as well. When a neighbor, trying to console her, assures Mrs. Tancred that her son will be buried “like a king,” she insists that she will live “like a pauper” (122). Directly after that, Mrs. Tancred launches into a speech about carrying her son from the cradle as well as bringing him to his grave (122). There is no middle ground, no area of compromise for Mrs. Tancred: her son may die like a king, yet she lives poor; the only noteworthy experiences of her fallen son’s life are his birth and untimely death. In a latter speech she implores the Lord, asking Him to replace their “hearts o’ stone” with “hearts o’ flesh,” to replace “murdherin’ hate” with “Thine own eternal love” (123). For Mrs. Tancred, things are black and white in a world of grey. Juno, on the other hand, is far more balanced and controlled than Mrs. Tancred appears. When Juno first expects Johnny is in trouble, the reader is explicitly told that she reacts calmly to the news. There are very few stage directions at this point; it seems that Juno barely moves at all, spending most of her energy consoling Mary and figuring out how to salvage what is left of their lives. After being told that a man was found by the police and they think it may be Johnny, Mary throws her arms around her mother, moaning, “Me poor, darlin’ mother!” (153). Instead of giving into emotion, however, Juno tells Mary to “Hush, hush, hush darlin’; you’ll shortly have your own throuble to bear” (153). Furthermore, when Mary admits to Juno that she “dhread[s]” seeing the body of her dead brother, Juno reacts rationally and kindly, saying “No, no, you mustn’t come—it wouldn’t be good for you. You go on to me sither’s an’ I’ll face th’ ordeal meself. (155). Even in an incredibly difficult moment, Juno still considers what is best for Mary and continues to rely on herself for strength. She even manages to plan their future, saying “We’ll go. Come Mary, an’ we’ll never come back here again...

I've got a little room in me sither's where we'll stop till your throuble is over, an' then we'll work together for the sake of the baby" (154). In the midst of tragedy, Juno manages to control her emotions and, without resorting to extremes, makes logical decisions that should make the best out of the situation. While Mrs. Tancred and Juno seem like very different characters, they share the important similarity of a dead son. Mrs. Tancred makes a heartfelt speech in Act II about her son, saying: Ah, what's the pains I suffered bringin' him into the world to carry him to his cradle, to the pains I'm sufferin' now, carryin' him out o' the world to bring him to his grave! ... O Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets, when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets! ... Sacred Heart of the Crucified Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone...an' give us hearts o' flesh! ... Take away this murdherin' hate...an' give us Thine own eternal love! (122-23) After finding out about Johnny's death, Juno, in her sadness, remembers Mrs. Tancred: Maybe I didn't feel sorry enough for Mrs. Tancred when her poor son was found as Johnny's been found now... Ah, why didn't I remember that he wasn't a Diehard or a Stater, but only a poor dead son! It's well that I remember all that she said—an' it's my turn to say it now...(155) These shared words between the two women force the reader to compare Mrs. Tancred with Juno. Mrs. Tancred sets a precedent for Juno, an example for her to follow. Yet only Juno can fully realize the dehumanizing effects of war because of her initial reaction to Mrs. Tancred's son's death; she admits that she saw Mrs. Tancred's son as a Diehard, not a as man, not a as son, not a as human. War reduces people to sides; good and bad, right and wrong, for and against. People cease to be people in wartime, unless a loss is suffered. In order for Juno to grow in her dynamism, she had to feel the sting of

mortality through the death of Johnny; only then can she—and the reader—realize that she and Mrs. Tancred are really not that different. Both Mrs. Tancred and Juno are struggling to get through this period of war, poverty, and squalor; they are simply at different points in their struggle—Mrs. Tancred, near the end and Juno, just beginning. Works Cited O'Casey, Sean. "Juno and the Paycock.." Selected Plays of Sean O'Casey. New York City: St. Martin's Press Inc, 1954. 69-157.