

# O'casey presents his views of war in act ii of 'the silver tassie' essay sample

War



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The opening set design is important in introducing key issues to the play. Immediately we are given a contrast between religious, sacred imagery and the destruction and suffering caused by the war. Throughout this scene O'Casey is looking at the relationship between war and religion (Christianity in this case) and whether God has deserted man, or perhaps more likely, man has deserted God. The use of the monastery as a Red Cross station is an indication that religion is still comforting and a caring force for the soldiers; however, its destruction hints that war is too great a power for Christianity to overcome. Even the statue of Christ on the cross is broken, with an outstretched hand towards the Virgin Mary who appears on a stained glass window. Between the rubble and broken stone of the monastery wall is a destroyed landscape. We are able to recognise dead bodies in the ruins and the barbed wire of the front line, which stretches across the horizon. The hand of Jesus is a sign of desperation, suggesting that his crucifixion was not enough to save mankind. The image of the gun is integral to O'Casey's presentation of war, as it is hoisted up 'At the back, in the centre, where the span of the arch should be' almost as a new god.

This idea is replicated at the climax of the Act where the men are going into battle. The use of repetition and verse creates a prayer like ode to the gun, which is valued as highly if not higher than God. They crouch at the gun base and ask that 'it may not fail (them) in (their) time of need'. The soldiers singing in unison 'We believe in God and we believe in thee' ends each stanza like a hymn or reading in a church. The gun is now their protector, and they possibly feel as if God has forgotten them despite his 'mighty memory'.

The character of the Croucher, who begins the scene, plays the role of a prophet and O'Casey uses him to outline the futility of war. He predicts the absolute destruction of the soldiers and the disintegration of the army into a 'valley of dry bones'. Religious music is used in the background of this scene, a Latin voice that creeps in occasionally and sings of peace - an ironic reminder of how far removed the soldiers are to peace of any kind. While Croucher depicts a mammoth scene of obliteration, this high holy voice is almost absurd. However, the combination of Croucher's words and the pious singing creates a sombre moment of reflection, and we know that this Act will be more serious than the last. We realise that O'Casey will use this scene to express his feeling of disgust and sorrow towards the war.

A popular theme of anti-war literature is that of frustration and revulsion towards those at home and in power, people who seemed to be totally oblivious and indifferent to the sufferings of front-line soldiers. O'Casey uses certain characters to display this view, such as the Visitor and Staff-Wallah who are exaggerated caricatures of army officials. The Staff-Wallah has an unmatched enthusiasm for war and the organisation of the soldiers, which suggests a misunderstanding of the grave situation these men face. He hops in and out of the scene reading army documents about gas masks and procedure, and encouraging the men to attend a lecture for 'amusement and mental development'. These proposed activities surely display and unawareness of the soldiers and their priorities, they are not understood by their officials and not really treated with respect.

The Visitor is used by O'Casey to attack the authoritarians of the war, those who send men off to die but do nothing. His language is that of an upper class general, official, quickly spoken with hints of a private education, 'Infra dignitatem, boy, infra dignitatem'. The Visitor has a reluctance to do anything remotely dangerous, and a cheery attitude makes him a comic character. His outlook on the war is not realistic, he loves the idea, but not the actual fighting of it – 'it's an experience; by God, it's an experience.' O'Casey turns him into a cowardly paranoid character – 'I thought I heard a buzz' and also an absurdly idiotic character at times, 'Nurses too gloomy. Surgeons too serious. Doesn't do.' O'Casey is turning these persons of authority into objects of ridicule, again outlining the farce of war. The chants of the soldiers also signal the differences between those at the front and those controlling the battles. They sing about the Corporal who 'eats well', 'sleeps well' and 'whores well' but only does the 'thinking for the Tommies', not the actual fighting. A parcel is the method that O'Casey uses to demonstrate how little the English at home understood of their suffering. The football that one soldier receives 'To play your way to the enemies' trenches when you go over the top' perfectly displays this lack of understanding.

O'Casey's use of humour is very important as a juxtaposition against the Act's tragic elements. He uses the humorous characters of Staff-Wallah and the Visitor and then looks at the soldiers. This contrast creates a situation of idealism versus reality, which I feel to be an important aspect of the play.

The soldiers all speak to one another in colloquial repetitious verse, enhancing the sense of weariness, suffering and quiet desperation:

2nd Soldier: Perhaps they have forgotten

3rd Soldier: Forgotten

4th Soldier: Forgotten us.

This method of speech, where O'Casey gives the soldiers a shared voice, shows us that anti-war sentiment was not limited to a few. He is suggesting that all soldiers shared these poor conditions and exhausting situations. The use of verse sharing also creates the impression of tight-knit community between the soldiers, as if they have nothing left but one another. Their silent sharing of cigarettes and smoking reinforces this feeling of solidarity – as does their shared protest against the Visitor, who strikes a match on the statue of Christ. O'Casey is also using this moment to show a total lack of respect for anything, whether it be God or Man, on the part of the commanding men.

Overall O'Casey uses a variety of methods, including caricatures, set design, music and humour. However one of the most important is language. He can change the mood and purpose of the scene depending on the type of language used. The use of verse is particularly essential in creating more solemn a tone. The soldier's chanting is often very serious and displays more than anything, the attitudes of O'Casey towards the war. I feel that the writer sympathises with the ordinary fighters such as Barney, and tries to give them a voice in this scene. They represent the reality of war and give us a fairly sombre but strong anti-war message.