

Boucicault-O'Casey-Hansberry: Tracing a Line of Influence

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Abstract

In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway after a successful tour. This remarkable performance featured a black cast, and staged a generation that was beginning to find intellectual sources of race pride. By contrast, exactly 100 years earlier, in 1859, the 'great dramatic "sensation"' of the New York stage had been Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, a play set on a plantation and which describes blackness as shameful. In form and in subject matter, these two plays appear to have little in common, but this essay traces a connection between the two. The connection is this: the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey felt inspired by reading and performing the work of Boucicault, and, in turn, O'Casey provided a 'point of departure' for Hansberry when she scripted her best-known play. By examining these moments of connection, the essay examines a significant if counter-intuitive line of influence.

Keywords

Dion Boucicault, Lorraine Hansberry, Sean O'Casey, Irish theatre, Black theatre

Hi, everyone. I'm a 'black playwright'. ...

'Just – just say the first name that comes to mind.'

'Dion Boucicault?'

'Who is that?'

'He's a playwright. He's dead. He wrote in the nineteenth century.'

'I've never heard of him.'

'Yeah—no one cares about him anymore. He's dead.'¹

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In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway after a successful tour. It was the first play by a black woman to appear on Broadway, the first Broadway production with a black director (Lloyd Richards), and won praise from influential critics. In the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson wrote that the play 'has vigor as well as veracity and is likely to destroy the complacency of any one who sees it'.² The Broadway performance was met with persistent applause, cries of 'author', and at one point the star of the production (Sidney Poitier) lifted Hansberry over the footlights to join the cast in receiving the audience's acclaim.³ This play, written in the style of a post-Ibsen realism, draws attention to the problems and the joys of everyday working-class African-American domestic life. Hansberry portrays the Youngers, a black family living on the South Side of Chicago during the 1950s, and highlights the overcrowding, poor living conditions and intra/extra-familial stress produced by 'housing discrimination', the Jim-Crow residential segregation that served to perpetuate the inequalities of slavery. She shows the aspirations to a middle-class American life that such families might have, and how prejudice might throw up obstacles to those aspirations. But *A Raisin in the Sun* also stages a generation that is beginning to find intellectual sources of race pride: as one of her characters tells a racist white character, 'we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this is – this is my son, who makes the sixth generation of our family in this country'.⁴ The play was so skilfully wrought that, with this play, Hansberry won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Aged only 28, she became the youngest writer ever, and first black writer ever, to gain this prize.

Exactly 100 years earlier, in 1859, the 'great dramatic "sensation"' of the New York stage had been *The Octoroon*, a play set on a plantation and which describes blackness as shameful. The piece was written by Dion Boucicault, an author characterised by Sarah Meer as 'contradictory on the slavery question'.⁵ Boucicault, after all, wrote in an 1855 letter that he 'had entered strongly into defense of the institution of Slavery', and in 1861 he commented in *The Times* that 'I found the slaves, as a race, a happy, gentle, kindly-treated population, and the restraints upon their liberty so slight as to be rarely perceptible'.⁶ The term, 'octoroon', means 'one-eighth blood', and Boucicault's play tells the tragic story of Zoe, a woman who has been raised as white but is the daughter of an enslaved, mixed-race mother: her deceased father has technically owned his daughter as property. In contrast with Lorraine Hansberry's play, on Boucicault's stage an African-American inheritance is portrayed as a curse: it is what condemns Zoe to slavery and keeps her from her beloved. Zoe declares that her black heritage is 'the ineffacable mark of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black ... the one black drop gives me despair, for I'm an unclean thing'.⁷ Although some New York spectators discerned an anti-slavery message in *The Octoroon*, and Boucicault himself did at times emphasise this interpretation, the *New York Times* declared, 'Nothing in the world can be more harmless and non-committal than Mr. Boucicault's play. It contains no superfluous appeals – no demonstrations in favor of the "down-trodden" – no silly preachings of pious negroes'.⁸

At first appearances, then, there appear to be few similarities between Hansberry's domestic realism and the melodrama of Boucicault, between the nuanced and varied

portrayal of African-American life that Hansberry explored and the work of Boucicault in which, according to the *New York Times*, 'negros are negros, and nothing more'.⁹ The two dramatists appear to have engaged with a radically different set of social priorities and theatrical forms. However, in this essay, I will highlight an overlooked point of connection between these two acclaimed dramatists from different eras of the US stage.

The connection is this: in the late 1800s, a boy in Dublin called John Casey had become entranced by performances of Boucicault's melodramas. These plays made a profound impression upon Casey, to the extent that he spent time acting out scenes from them with his brother, and he even performed in a public version of *The Octoroon* in about 1899. By the 1920s, this Dubliner had become so fascinated by the playhouse that he opted to pursue his own career as a dramatist, and Hibernicised his name to Sean O'Casey. O'Casey's 1924 play, *Juno and the Paycock*, is set in a Dublin tenement during the Irish Civil War, and became a smash hit for the Abbey Theatre. But *Juno and the Paycock* owes a great deal of its plot and theatrical effect to Boucicault's work.

In this essay, I will examine the ways in which O'Casey's drama emulates and echoes aspects of Boucicault's earlier play *The Octoroon*. But I will also point forward to the way in which O'Casey's theatre, in turn, affected Lorraine Hansberry, with Hansberry emulating something of the characterisation, theatrical plot points, and dialogue of the earlier works. Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 1948, and there she saw a production of *Juno and the Paycock*. She found a deep affinity with the drama, noting that 'The play was *Juno*, the writer Sean O'Casey – but the melody was one that I had known for a very long while. I was seventeen and I did not think then of writing the melody as I knew it – in a different key – but I believe it entered my consciousness and stayed there'.¹⁰ By the time that she wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry drew upon elements that would have been familiar to O'Casey, and which are also recognisable from Boucicault's work. All three plays are driven by money and the need for it, and there is a close affinity between the Boyle family in O'Casey's work and the Younger family as described by Hansberry, particularly when we compare Captain Jack Boyle's fecklessness and delusory behaviour in *Juno and the Paycock* with Walter's similar traits in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry and Boucicault may be separated by a century, and by very different racial and artistic attitudes, but through the work of Sean O'Casey there is a discernible, if overlooked, point of contact between the writers.

In this way, my essay is pointing to a long and complex chain of interrelations between Irish and African-American cultures, and my thinking follows the example of scholars who have been increasingly interested in exploring such connections. Tracy Mishkin's important 1998 study *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances* traces some notable links between Irish and African-American writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with Mishkin pointing out that 'Once conquered or enslaved, both Irish people and African Americans suffered under an oppressive system'.¹¹ Similarly, in 2007, Michael A. Chaney argued that 'the Harlem and Irish Renaissances both emphasized the ambassadorial task of the arts in facilitating self-government and liberation from colonial power'.¹² A somewhat more complex relationship was described in 2009 when Peter D. O'Neill and David Lloyd published their edited collection *The Black and Green Atlantic*. In their introduction to this volume, O'Neill and Lloyd point out that, although

there are notable affinities between two historically oppressed people, there also remain questions about why the Irish in the United States did ‘not show greater solidarity with their fellow oppressed’.¹³

In addition, in recent years Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ play *An Octoroon*, an astonishing Brechtian adaptation of Boucicault’s original play, has become extremely well known. Jacobs-Jenkins’ work won an Obie award after premiering in 2014 and was ranked in a 2018 critics’ poll in the *New York Times* as the second greatest American play of the previous quarter century.¹⁴ In this play, we find onstage depictions of both the black playwright Jacobs-Jenkins himself and of a Boucicault who is marked as Irish (he first appears in a torrent of ‘feck’s and ‘feckings’). The two playwrights confront and insult one another, indicating something of an uneasy creative line of influence. *An Octoroon* emphasises the shortcomings of Boucicault’s representations of African Americans, with Jacobs-Jenkins’s play giving voices to black characters who are comical, marginal, or silent in Boucicault, even as Jacobs-Jenkins’s script insists on the impossibility of knowing how nineteenth-century enslaved people really talked. *An Octoroon* delivers an ironically distanced retelling of Boucicault’s sensation drama, and there is much self-referential commentary about race and the construction of performed theatre (‘I grossly underestimated the amount of white men I actually would need here’ says Boucicault at one point).¹⁵ But, in addition to Jacobs-Jenkins’ surreal, metatheatrical, and ironic take on Boucicault, there is also a realist line of descent that comes through Sean O’Casey and Lorraine Hansberry. Counter-intuitively, Hansberry could put African American voices on Broadway partly because of an indirect inheritance from Boucicault.

As Christopher Morash points out, Boucicault enjoyed enormous success with the New York production of *The Octoroon*. In the play’s first week at the Winter Garden Theatre in 1859, it earned \$1,363 for Boucicault and his wife, Agnes Robertson, who both acted in the show, although when they asked for more they were dismissed and the play continued for another two months without them. The following year, Boucicault wrote *The Colleen Bawn*, producing it lucratively at the Laura Keane Theatre in New York, and then arranging for a London production that ran for ten months, longer than any earlier show in that city’s history. Queen Victoria attended three performances, with Boucicault and his wife earning £23,000 by the end of the first year in London.¹⁶

Boucicault then took *The Colleen Bawn* to Dublin for a twenty-four-night run in April 1861, and in Ireland he was greeted with great excitement. The *Catholic Telegraph* hailed the way that Boucicault’s play, being written by an internationally famous Irish-born author and actor, would potentially contradict the traditional stage Irishman of the melodramatic stage: ‘instead of a blundering blockhead, with jigs, howls, and shillelaghs, we have the true son of the sod represented, bold and courageous even to recklessness, with all his virtues and virtuous errors, ready to sacrifice his life to save that of a fellow-creature’.¹⁷

In her study of Boucicault, Deirdre McFeely emphasises that ‘By the end of the run, the Dublin press, ably assisted by Boucicault’s self-publicity, had established *The Colleen Bawn* as an accurate and truthful picture of Irish rural life, and it is striking that the press of very different shades of political opinion were at one on the subject’.¹⁸ McFeely writes, ‘Throughout the Irish newspaper coverage generated by

The Colleen Bawn, there is a clear emphasis on Dublin: a Dublin theatre; a Dublin audience; a national drama, but for the Dublin stage. Boucicault is welcomed to the city not just as an Irishman but also as a Dubliner'.¹⁹

Boucicault's work subsequently became a mainstay of Dublin drama in the late 1800s. The Queen's Royal Theatre in the Irish capital became a centre for such plays, especially under the management of J. W. Whitbread, who ran the venue from 1883 to 1907. As Mary Trotter points out, the Queen's theatre developed 'an industry' of producing Boucicaulian melodramas on Irish themes.²⁰

During the late 1900s, one of those Irishmen who found himself deeply impressed by Boucicault's drama was the young John Casey (1880–1964), who would later find fame as the playwright Sean O'Casey. O'Casey had encountered Boucicault's work at the Queen's theatre, which he attended in his youth. As he recalled in 1964:

the Queen's was the theater of the lower middle-class and the tradesmen section of the proletariat. It was the theater of the melodrama, and here I saw Conn The Shaughraun, who was known as 'The life of every funeral and the first fiddler at every wedding', written by Dion Boucicault, from whom, unconsciously, I absorbed technique, especially my delight in 'a good curtain' at the end of the act.²¹

The Queen's theatre was not, however, the only location in Dublin at which the young O'Casey was able to discover the work of Boucicault. On Abbey Street there stood the Dublin Mechanics' Institute, a venue established in 1824 for technical education, although by the end of the nineteenth century known as a theatre and lecture venue, and variously referred to as 'Princess Theatre of Varieties', 'The People's Music Hall', 'National Theatre of Varieties', and 'Hibernian Theatre of Varieties'.²² By the 1890s, the Mechanics' Institute was scarcely a salubrious theatrical location, but O'Casey's older brother, Archie, worked as an actor there. In O'Casey's autobiographical writing (which is, somewhat confusingly, written in the third person), the playwright remembers how his brother befriended Tommie and Bill Tarlton, two thespians who were viewed by O'Casey's family as 'two mouldy down-at-heels mummers who snatched up a few frayed shillings a week by cod-acting in the Mechanics, a well-soiled, tumble-me-down theatre in Abbey Street, where no respectable man or woman would dare to be seen'.²³ Nonetheless, the connection provided O'Casey with an insight into the world of the theatre, and he remembered admiring a box of stage properties:

[O'Casey] fingered fondly the lovely things in the basket. It was filled with the costumes for *Macbeth*, *King Henry the Sixth*, *Richard the Third*, *The Colleen Bawn*, *The Octoroon*, and other plays ... This is what Tommie Tarlton said in the face of their fright an' their fury:

*Shakespeare was a great choice: but Dion Boucicault was really quite as great a choice as Shakespeare. Shakespeare's good in bits; but for colour and stir, give me Boucicault!*²⁴

Elsewhere in his autobiographies, O'Casey writes of how his brother befriended another actor at the Mechanics' Institute, Charlie Sullivan. O'Casey writes:

Charlie Sullivan, who did things of great magnitude when the theatre was the theatre, to an audience who knew what acting was; when he played the great Conn the Shaughraun, the great Shaun the Post, in *Arrah-na-Pogue*, and the greatest Miles-na-Coppaleen the world, or even Ireland, had ever, ever seen; filling the playhouses throughout the civilised world with laughter ... But now, with the world's people fading into ignorance and low regards, he had to do the best he could for the drama by playing in the Mechanics' Theatre, in Abbey Street, strutting the stage there before a rough-and-randy crowd who came to while away the time ... Here Charlie played all the Irish plays, mixing them with *The Octoroon*, *The Corsican Brothers*, or *Saved From the Sea*, Johnny [O'Casey] enjoying them on a free pass from a front bench in the pit, his brother Archie having a small part in each of them, training himself for a fuller future.²⁵

O'Casey's autobiographies are highly fictionalised and at times bear very little resemblance to historical reality, but his comments about encountering Boucicault's plays at the Mechanics' Institute are reiterated several times in his personal letters. For example, in a letter of 1962 he wrote:

I had acquaintance with the theater when I was very young. My brother (one of three) was a member of a company which played melodramas of the time on the stage of a theater which was part of a workers Institute; and in one play, CONN THE SHAUGHRAUN, when an actor fell sick, I was called on (though then only 14 years of age) to play the part of the priest in that play; a play I knew by heart, and still remember a lot of it. The author was a Dublin man, of French ancestry, named Dion Boucicault.²⁶

As O'Casey indicates in that letter, he may not only have been watching the work of Boucicault at the Queen's Theatre and the Mechanics' Institute, but he may also have joined a production.

Subsequently, in 1904, the Mechanics' Institute was purchased for the National Theatre, the new venture by Augusta Gregory and W. B. Yeats. This organisation combined the old premises with the neighbouring building, which had previously been the city morgue, and it became known as the Abbey Theatre.²⁷ Yeats viewed the establishment of the Abbey as being antithetical to the energies of popular melodrama: he hated such sensation plays and had deliberately co-founded the playhouse to provide the antidote to such 'buffoonery and easy sentiment'.²⁸ But, by contrast, O'Casey celebrated the Mechanics' Institute as a formative site where he learned much about stagecraft, and he seems to have relished the fact that the Abbey building had once been a site of melodrama. His own dramas of the 1920s would smuggle melodramatic elements back onto the stage of Yeats and Gregory's playhouse. As O'Casey told Horace Reynolds in 1938, the dramas that the playwright saw in his youth 'were mostly in the old Queens & the old "The Mechanics" that is the old Abbey, minus The Morgue. The plays, "The Shaughraun", "Arrah na Pogue" "Colleen Bawn" "The Octoroon", all Boucicaults!'²⁹

As well as encountering Boucicault in the professional theatre, the O'Casey brothers mounted amateur productions themselves. They formed the 'Townshend Dramatic

Society' and rented some unused stables on Hill Street, where they performed sketches to audiences of forty or fifty people, who paid tuppence for admission.³⁰ Amid the white-washed walls of the old stables, with old, second-hand lanterns as footlights, and with cast-off canvas from the Queen's Theatre providing the set, they performed 'the scene between Corry Kinsella and Harvey Duff in *The Shaughraun*'.³¹ The two brothers also 'played scenes from *The Octoroon*, especially that between Jacob McClusky [sic] and Salem Scudder ... Johnny [O'Casey] doing McClusky [sic] and Archie doing Scudder'.³²

O'Casey repeatedly mentioned *The Octoroon* as prominent among the plays that he associated with his youthful experience of theatre. For example, in a letter to James P. Halon in 1962, O'Casey wrote: 'Dion Boucicault was a Dublin man, and wrote over 100 plays, of which I saw 5 – THE SHAUGHRAUN, ARAGH NA POGUE [sic], THE COLLEEN BAWN, THE OCTOROON, and THE CORSICAN BROTHERS. He was a very fine craftsman, a writer of melodrama'.³³ In 1963, O'Casey wrote to David Krause: 'B.[oucicault] wrote over 100 plays. I knew and saw 2 others, THE OCTOROON and THE CORSICAN BROTHERS; and I knew these plus the 3 you mention [*The Collen Bawn, Arrah na Pogue, The Shaughraun*] almost off by heart'.³⁴

So what exactly were O'Casey and his brother watching and performing in Dublin in the late 1800s? Boucicault's play *The Octoroon* revolves around a failed legacy. At the start of the play, George Peyton returns to the United States from a trip to Europe, and discovers that he has inherited Terrebonne plantation in Louisiana. His uncle, Judge Peyton, had owned Terrebonne, but had mismanaged his finances, drew money 'like Bourbon whiskey from a barrel', and has now died.³⁵ His widow tells George that he is now the heir to the estate. But there is a problem: the judge was tricked into signing a document that signed half of the estate over to McClosky, the treacherous overseer. Scudder then arrived as a new manager, but only succeeded in ruining the remaining half of the estate with inept inventions and supposed improvements, such as new cotton gins and steam sugar mills, that failed to work. McClosky is unambiguously villainous: signalled, for example, in his *Macbeth* paraphrase 'Fair or foul, I'll have her'.³⁶ Scudder, by contrast, deeply regrets his role in the estate's downfall, and despite seeing McClosky's malevolence is unable to kill him. The dastardly McClosky tells George that the inheritance is worth little: the plantation is going to be sold and the slaves auctioned.

O'Casey remembered that he and his brother performed the scene in which the villainous McClosky is confronted by Salem Scudder, a kindly figure who was formerly Judge Peyton's business partner. Scudder wishes that he could save Terrebonne, but he has no money. In his autobiographies, O'Casey stated that his brother had played Scudder and he himself had played McClosky, presumably in the part of the play that includes the following lines:

Scud. ... Now, Jacob McClosky, you despise me because you think I'm a fool; I despise you because I know you to be a knave. Between us we've ruined these Peytons; you fired the judge, and I finished off the widow. Now, I feel bad about my share in the business. I'd give half the balance of my life to wipe out my part of the work. ...

- McClosky. Ask the color in your face; d'ye think I can't read you, like a book? With your New England hypocrisy, you would persuade yourself it was this family alone you cared for; it ain't—you know it ain't—'tis the "Octoroon;" and you love her as I do, and you hate me because I'm your rival. That's where the tears come from, Salem Scudder, if you ever shed any—that's where the shoe pinches.
- Scud. Wal, I do like the gal; she's a—
- McClosky. She's in love with young Peyton; it made me curse ... Fair or foul, I'll have her—take that home with you!³⁷

We find a key idea here that would flow into the writing of O'Casey. This part of *The Octoroon* presents the idea that the loss of an inheritance might be connected to sexual and racial transgression. Judge Peyton had no children with Mrs Peyton, but does have one daughter, a woman named Zoe. The mother of Judge Peyton's daughter was an enslaved woman, and in addition Zoe is one-eighth black. George Peyton, has fallen in love with Zoe, but he is not the only one to harbour such feelings. As McClosky's argument with Scudder indicates, both of those men also desire her. McClosky has defrauded the estate, feels deeply excited by the idea that he might possess both the property and Zoe, and does actually buy her during an auction scene. McClosky also manages to kill a young enslaved boy, frames someone else for that murder, and explodes a steamboat. However, McClosky's crimes are exposed by the end of the play and he is killed. Zoe nevertheless believes that she will have to remain apart from her true love George, despairs at having been sold, and, in the original version of the play, ends the tale by swallowing poison and committing suicide.

Sean O'Casey used some similar ideas in his own best-known and most fully achieved writing. Like *The Octoroon*, the plot of O'Casey's 1924 play *Juno and the Paycock* revolves around a spoiled inheritance. O'Casey presents the impoverished domestic life of the Boyle family, who live in a Dublin tenement during the Irish Civil War of 1922–3. The father of the family, Captain Jack Boyle, is a feckless figure who spends his days avoiding work and drinking in spite of his family's poverty. Nonetheless, the family's fortunes appear to improve when Charles Bentham, who is a teacher as well as a lawyer's apprentice, discloses that the Boyles have inherited the estate of a dead cousin, and the family embarks upon a spending spree. However, Bentham has filled out the legal documentation incorrectly, and he flees to England, leaving the family ruined.

The moment at which the Boyle family realise what has happened to the inheritance comes when the father, Jack, announces to his family:

- Boyle. ... the Will's a wash-out!
- Mrs. Boyle. What are you sayin', man – no money?
- Johnny. How could it be a wash-out?
- Boyle. The boyo that's aafter doin' it to Mary done it to me as well. The thick made out the Will wrong ... I'm tellin' you the scholar, Bentham, made a banjax o' th' Will ...

Mrs. Boyle. Now I know why Bentham left poor Mary in th' lurch; I can see it all now – oh, is there not even a middlin' honest man left in th' world?³⁸

Bentham has ruined the Boyle family, but he is scarcely guilty of the same level of mal-evidence as McClosky, the character who destroys the inheritance in Boucicault's play. There is no indication that Bentham spoils the will on purpose: it merely appears to have been a case of inept phrasing. As Captain Boyle puts it, Bentham is a 'thick'. Yet there are nevertheless some notable points of comparison between Bentham's role here and that of the villain in Boucicault's play.

When the young Sean O'Casey had acted in *The Octoroon*, he had apparently played McClosky. McClosky is evidently an outsider to the estate. It is clear, when he first arrives at the plantation, that he is not liked by the other characters, and is marked as different from them. The estate is in Louisiana; McClosky is labelled 'a bit of Connecticut hardware'.³⁹ Boucicault, in making the villain a New Englander, was able to negotiate the sectionalist tensions raised by the topic: Southerners in the audience would be less likely to object. O'Casey remembered that, in his youth, he acted in the part of the play where Scudder castigates McClosky in the following terms:

Let me proceed by illustration ... D'ye see that tree? It's called a live oak, and is a native here; beside it grows a creeper; year after year that creeper twines its long arms round and round the tree—sucking the earth dry all about its roots—living on its life—over-running its branches, until at last the live oak withers and dies out.⁴⁰

Scudder tells McClosky that the locals call this parasite 'The Yankee hugging the Creole', to express their contempt for Northern swindlers like him.⁴¹

When O'Casey came to write *Juno and the Paycock*, he created another family whose expected inheritance is ruined by an outsider, in the shape of Charles Bentham. Bentham is scarcely presented as a likeable or sympathetic figure. By contrast with the other characters, he appears a self-regarding and rather pretentious prig, who singularly fails to understand or empathise with the world of the Dublin tenement around him. For example, when he learns that the mother of the Boyle family is called 'Juno', he declares:

Bentham. Juno! What an interesting name! It reminds one of Homer's glorious story of ancient gods and heroes.

Boyle. Yis, doesn't t? You see, Juno was born an' christened in June; I met her in June; we were married in June, an' Johnny was born in June, so wan day I says to her, 'You should ha' been called Juno', an' the name stuck to her ever since.⁴²

Such moments emphasise the snobbish separatism of Bentham, whose ironic name underscores that he is really concerned only with the greatest happiness of himself. As O'Casey's biographer, Christopher Murray, states:

The impact of Boucicault's plays on O'Casey's own work was ... considerable. It was to come in the use of song, of comedy, and of colourful if somewhat stagey characters within a story-line invariably pitting light against dark, decency against villainy, high spirits against snivelling subordinates of the powerful, corrupt forces in authority.⁴³

In Boucicault's play, McClosky's ruination of the Peyton estate is connected to his sexual desire for Zoe, and O'Casey recycled the interconnection between financial ruin and sexual villainy in *Juno and the Paycock*. After it becomes clear that Charles Bentham has utterly spoiled the Boyle family's chance of the inheritance, it also transpires that he has left Mary, the daughter of the household, pregnant. The religious resonance of her name, and Bentham's fleeing the country without saying a word to her about either her own condition or that of her family, serve to compound the sense that he has done something profoundly wrong.

As we have noted, in *The Octoroon*, part of McClosky's motivation for wishing to gain possession of Zoe is a homosocial one: he is aware that he has a love rival for Zoe in the shape of George Peyton, something that, as McClosky puts it, 'made me curse'.⁴⁴ O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* constructs a similar love triangle, with Bentham competing for Mary's attention against the socialist neighbour, Jerry Devine. However, in O'Casey's play neither of the two suitors emerge as particularly admirable figures. After Bentham ruins the family and abandons the pregnant Mary, she meets with Jerry, who expresses his devotion to her but is quickly appalled when he realises that she is carrying another man's child:

Mary.	Oh, Jerry, Jerry, you haven't the bitter word of scorn for me after all.
Jerry [passionately].	Scorn! I love you, love you, Mary!
Mary [rising, and looking him in the eyes].	Even though ...
Jerry.	Even though you threw me over for another man; even though you gave me many a bitter word!
Mary.	Yes, yes, I know; but you love me, even though ... even though ... I'm ... goin' ... goin' ... [<i>He looks at her questioningly, and fear gathers in his eyes.</i>] Ah, I was thinkin' so You don't know everything!
Jerry [poignantly].	Surely to God, Mary, you don't mean that ... that ... that ...
Mary.	Now you know all, Jerry; now you know all!
Jerry.	My God, Mary, have you fallen as low as that? ... God knows, I'm sorry for you, Mary. ⁴⁵

Jerry indeed fails to come to Mary's aid, and the play concludes on a tragic note

In performance, this work enjoyed considerable success, helping to keep the Abbey Theatre solvent and making O'Casey's name in the UK and also in the United States.

In 1948, the young Lorraine Hansberry enrolled at the University of Wisconsin. She later declared that seeing a production of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* here inspired her love for theatre. In 1959, Hansberry gave an interview for the *New Yorker* magazine, in which she emphasised the pre-eminent position that O'Casey held for her:

I'm aware of the existence of Anouilh, Beckett, Dürrenmatt, and Brecht, but I believe, with O'Casey, that real drama has to do with audience involvement and achieving the emotional transformation of people on the stage. I believe that ideas *can* be transmitted emotionally.⁴⁶

Shortly afterwards, on 12 May 1959, Hansberry was interviewed on the radio by the American author Studs Terkel, and she emphasised that, 'Yes. I love Sean O'Casey'. She continued:

When I speak of the O'Casey that I love, I mean things like *Shadow of a Gunman* and *Juno* ... This, to me, is the playwright of the twentieth century accepting and using the most obvious instruments of Shakespeare. Which is the human personality and its totality. I've always thought this is profoundly significant for Negro writers: to use. Not to copy. There's no reason to copy. The material here is too rich to copy anybody. But as a model, as a point of departure. O'Casey never fools you about the Irish, you see. You've got the Irish drunkard, the Irish braggart, the Irish ... Liar. Who is always talking about how he's going to fight the revolution when the English really show up, you know he runs and gets under the bed and the young girl goes out to fight with the Tommies, you see, and so forth and so on. And the genuine heroism which must naturally emerge when you tell the truth about people. This to me is the height of artistic perception.⁴⁷

Hansberry appears to have taken O'Casey's downtrodden characters as a 'point of departure' when she created her 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*, and she particularly highlighted the affinity between the two hard-working mothers of the plays. As she put it:

women have become the backbone of our people in a very necessary way ... The Irish reflect this, I think. There's a relationship between Mother Younger in this play and Juno which is very strong and obvious. I think there's always a relationship perhaps, I don't know that much about Irish history but there was probably a necessity why, among oppressed peoples, the mother will assume a certain kind of ... role.

She also said, 'I think, as a matter of [fact?], there are parallels between Negro speech, even urban Negro speech in America, and urban Irish speech', and although the vocal cadences in *A Raisin in the Sun* are often different from those of O'Casey, we find Hansberry, like O'Casey, giving an urgent theatrical vibrancy to nonstandard dialect forms by using them to express a range of emotion.⁴⁸ Indeed, she was sufficiently knowledgeable about O'Casey's personal circumstances to realise that the Dublin writer was then based 'in Devonshire in England', where he lived between 1938 and 1964.⁴⁹

The very title of *A Raisin in the Sun* may be linked with O'Casey's work. The line actually comes from Langston Hughes' poem 'Harlem' (a piece also known as 'A Dream Deferred'). Hansberry explained:

I've often said that the glory of Langston Hughes was that he took the quality of the blues and put it into our poetry. And I think when the Negro dramatist can begin to approach a little of that quality you might almost get close to what O'Casey does in putting the Irish folk song into play.⁵⁰

A few years earlier the black writer and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson had written the prefaces to his 1922 and 1931 poetry anthologies, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, and had cited the example of the Dublin playwright J. M. Synge by saying, 'What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form which will express the racial spirit by symbols from within'.⁵¹ By 1959, Hansberry was also looking at the Abbey Theatre, but was admiring not Synge but his successor at that playhouse, Sean O'Casey.

In terms of plotting, a number of similarities can be discerned between Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. If O'Casey's play opens with the Boyle family living in poverty in the tenements of Dublin during the Irish Civil War, Hansberry's play presents the Younger family living in poverty in a small apartment on Chicago's South Side in the years after the Second World War. If Captain Jack Boyle is the impecunious father figure of O'Casey's play, then Walter Younger provides Boyle's counterpart in Hansberry's work, with Walter struggling to support his family. However, the members of the Younger family anticipate that their situation is about to improve: they are about to receive almost \$10,000 because the patriarch of the family has died and so his life insurance policy is about to pay out a lump sum. The matriarch (Mama) and her two adult children (Walter Lee and Beneatha) all have different plans for the money: Walter Lee plans to open a liquor store business, Mama plans to buy a house in a largely 'white' neighbourhood, and Beneatha – while insisting the money is her mother's – harbours ambitions of going to medical school and becoming a doctor. Mama puts down a deposit of \$3,500 on the house, and gives the rest of the money to Walter Lee, although she asks him to set aside \$3,000 for Beneatha's tuition. She tells him, 'It ain't much, but it's all I got in the world and I'm putting it in your hands'.⁵² However, Walter Lee gives the money to his streetwise friend Willy Harris, who is supposed to help get the liquor business off the ground. Willy, however, simply absconds with the money, leaving the family's plans in ruins. As Mama reflects:

You mean ... your sister's school money ... you used that too ... Walter? ... I seen ... him ... night after night ... come in ... and look at that rug ... and then look at me ... the red showing in his eyes ... the veins moving in his head ... I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty ... working and working and working like somebody's old horse ... killing himself ... and you – you gave it all away in a day⁵³

When the Younger family try to escape by moving to the 'white' neighbourhood, the hostile residents try to buy them off, emphasising again the centrality to the play's narrative of money and the need for money.

Peter L. Hays noted in 1972 that a number of parallels existed between *A Raisin in the Sun* and O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. He pointed out that 'both plays are set in urban tenements, and both involve families as protagonists ... In both works, strong women support their families psychologically and monetarily'.⁵⁴ Furthermore, 'Each family has a bright daughter with intellectual pretensions and a passion for women's rights ... Both families are plagued with fair-weather friends, and both plays end with a younger woman pregnant with a child that will be a financial burden'.⁵⁵ But above all, as Hays put it:

Perhaps the most visible similarity is the device of the legacy: both families wait with hope for the money that will solve their problems and give them the opportunity to escape the ghetto of possibilities in which they live. In both cases the legacy falls through – in *Juno* it never arrives, due to the lawyer's stupidity, although the Boyles have already spent much of it on credit; in *Raisin* Walter is fleeced out of most of the insurance money when he insists on investing in a scheme his mother warned him against.⁵⁶

As we have seen, O'Casey himself derived the central plot device, the legacy, from Boucicault's *The Octoroon*.⁵⁷

Additionally, in both O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, and in Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, the problematic inheritance is connected with sexual rivalry. Hansberry, too, intertwined the theme of ruined family finances with a Girardian triangle. In *A Raisin in the Sun* the adult daughter of the family, Beneatha, has an educated and affluent boyfriend, George Murchison, who, she implies, is willing to 'give up his own culture' and assimilate into white culture.⁵⁸ Murchison (like Bentham in *Juno*) remains standoffish when faced with his girlfriend's family, and makes literary allusions that remain obscure. Just as Bentham bewilders Mary's father with a reference to Homer, Murchison baffles the Youngers with a classical allusion:

George ... (To Walter.) Good night, *Prometheus*.
Beneatha and George exit.
Walter (to Ruth) Who is *Prometheus*?
Ruth I don't know. Don't worry about it.
Walter (in fury, pointing after George) See there – they get to a point where they can't insult you man to man – they got to go talk about something ain't nobody never heard of!
Ruth How you know it was an insult! (To humour him).
Maybe *Prometheus* is a nice fellow.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, Beneatha attracts another suitor, Joseph Asagai, a Yoruba student from Nigeria, who teaches Beneatha about her African heritage. Whereas George sees her un-straightened, cropped hair and asks 'What have you done to your head – I mean

your hair?', Asagai asserts that straightening her naturally 'crinkly' hair constitutes a form of 'mutilation'.⁶⁰ By the end of the play, Asagai helps Beneatha to 'stop moaning and groaning' about the loss of the money, and invites her to join him in a new life in Nigeria, where she will practice medicine.⁶¹ The dilemmas are different in each play, but they all contain a fascinating pair of duelling suitors: McCloskey and Scudder; Devine and Bentham; and Asagai and Murchison.

As we saw in Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, McCloskey's melodramatic villainy propelled the plot, by ruining the inheritance. In O'Casey's play, Bentham's despoilment is a product of pompous incompetence. Subsequently, when Hansberry created *A Raisin in the Sun*, she exposed the systematic racism that prevented the advancement of black men and women in mid-twentieth Chicago. Hansberry herself knew about such injustice from real life. The play dramatises her own family's experience: they too had moved into the all-white neighbourhood of Chicago's Washington Park in 1938, a 'hellishly hostile' place according to Hansberry, where a brick was hurled through the window and where the family members found themselves issued with a court order to leave the neighbourhood.⁶² The experience is reflected on stage in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* when the fictional Karl Lindner, a white representative of the neighbourhood into which the Youngers plan to move, attempts to dissuade them:


at the moment the overwhelming majority of our people out there feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of the community, when they share a common background. I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities.⁶³

He seeks to adopt a reasonable and neutral tone, yet his language of 'our people' and 'their own communities' is euphemistic and mendacious. Lindner may be banal, but he nonetheless embodies a distinct kind of moral evil.

Of course, O'Casey was no cut-and-paste man, and what he took from Boucicault was rearranged and thoroughly reimagined. Ultimately, O'Casey created work that had a very different social setting and theatrical form from that of his famous predecessor. If Boucicault looked, in *The Octoroon*, to the plantations of the American South in order to create sensation drama, O'Casey looked to the tenements of Dublin in order to create a domestic tragedy of protracted and irreversible impoverishment. Hansberry herself, while feeling fascinated by O'Casey's work, again thoroughly reinvented the ideas that she found in his work. As she put it, O'Casey provided a 'point of departure' rather than a template to be followed rigidly. Thus the cultural milieu and overall storyline of *A Raisin in the Sun* look very different from those of *Juno and the Paycock*, as Hansberry deployed a form of kitchen-sink realism to examine the dilemmas of the black working class of South-Side Chicago during the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, as I have attempted to show here, Hansberry enjoyed and admired O'Casey's work, just as he admired and enjoyed the work of Boucicault. It may feel counterintuitive to link *The Octoroon* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, two plays that deal so

differently with the racial politics of the United States during two such different eras. Yet, by examining the echoes and coincidences between the texts created by these three writers, it is nevertheless possible to trace a long line of theatrical influence.

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Notes

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5. 'The Octoroon', *New York Times*, 15 December 1859, p. 4; Sarah Meer, 'Boucicault's Misdirections: Race, Transatlantic Theatre and Social Position in *The Octoroon*', *Atlantic Studies*, 6:1 (2009), 81–95, 92.
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31. *Ibid.*
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50. Hansberry, 'Interview with Lorraine Hansberry', p. 90.
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53. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 100.
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55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*
57. O'Casey had also seen Boucicault's smash hit *The Colleen Bawn*, which also revolves around a landed family that has fallen on hard times.
58. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 59.
59. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 63.
60. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 58, p. 42.
61. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 105.

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