Nannie's Night Out was first performed at the Abbey Theatre on 29 September, 1924 but it was not published until 1963. Just like Kathleen Listens In, this play also was not held in any worthy esteem even by the dramatist himself. This is the only play where background situations or events are not used to interact with the events on the stage. It is because of this that the play lacks complexity, and the elements of conflict, irony, contrast and juxtaposition are missing. The play on the surface of it attempts a farcical portrayal of rather petty events. It exploits the Baucicaultian tradition of using slapstick theatricality. O'Casey's lukewarm interest in the play is also discernible in his allowing different versions of the ending of the play. The play has an echo of the braggarts who appeared in O'Casey's earlier plays such as Grigson, Peter, Covey, Seumas Shields and it looks forward to the farcical hilarity of The End of the Beginning, A Pound on Demand and The Bed Time Story. Nannie's predicament anticipates the more fully worked out character of Jannice in Within the Gate. O'Casey's notable technical innovation in this play, which he has not repeated elsewhere, is his use of a choric commentator in the character of the Ballad Singer. His characteristic device of using dual stage is used here also in a very effective manner. The off-stage action concerns
the opening ballad sung by the Ballad Singer before the curtain rises and the intermittent noises made by Nannie throughout the play.

The play has been ignored by O'Casey's students because it does not have any properly developed plot and lacks solidity of characterization and does not have any apparent serious dramatic intent. But as our analysis below will demonstrate O'Casey, even in this small piece, has exploited his experimental acumen. We have seen that in all the plays of O'Casey's Irish phase, or even those of his later career, comedy or farce intervenes and punctuates the serious action. Here the technical premise has been reversed. It is the serious which intervenes, the farcical situation. To say that the play does not have serious dramatic purpose is unfair because, as we have political criticism and satire at the core of *Kathleen Listens In*, we have here social criticism subtly integrated in the story of Nannie. Nannie's situation also recalls Rosie's situation in *The Plough and the Stars*. Rosie may well be developed into the dissipated Nannie because of social and economic compulsions. In fact Nannie is envisioned into the image of Kathleen (Ireland), which too have become destitute and is collapsing economically, socially and politically after its independence in 1921. Thus the contemporary historical background, though not explicitly brought into the play is,
in a subtle manner symbolically hinted at.

The play begins with an interaction of nostalgia for the past nature and beauties of Ireland contained in the ballad's following lines:

For Ireland is Ireland 'Enro' joy an' throu' tears.  
Hope never dies throu' they long weary years;  
Eage age has seen countless, brave hearts pass away,  
But their spirit still lives on in they men of to-day!  

The singing of the Ballad Singer takes place off-stage. The nostalgic song is contrasted with the setting of the play which is realistic:

A small dairy and provision shop in a working-class district. The shop is about as large as a fairly sized room; a small counter, on which are a crock of milk and a butter-weighing scales. At Back, a window filled with a medley of sweets, soap, penny toys, cigarettes, sauce, balloons, etc. At the end of counter, Right, is a railed-in till; on this is hanging a notice: "No Credit Given". Beside the notice is a price list, written with coloured chalks on black millboard. At Back, in a prominent position, are some small dressed dolls.

The opening stage-direction gives an impression of the realistic atmosphere of the play. The singers do not appear on the scene but their presence is felt by their

2. Ibid.
songs. When the Ballad Singer appears on the scene even then the ballad continues to be heard sung by the woman Ballad Singer. O'Casey has used the technique of dual stage to represent the two worlds of the play— the lower middle class, represented by the shop and Joe, Johnny, Jimmy and Mrs. Pender and the other world which exists no more and can atmost be recalled in the nostalgic singing of the Ballad Singer first off-stage and later on stage. Mrs. Pender is the central character in the outer drama. Joe, Jimmy and Johnny appear one after the other in the manner of the structure of interruptions. Here we find parallelism between the theme of Nannie's Night Out and The Shadow of a Gunman. As in the latter play Donal Davoren is interrupted by a series of apparently disconnected happenings, Mrs. Pender also in Nannie's Night Out is bothered one after another by her three lovers.

The play has two strains of plot— one comic and the other tragic. These two strains develop independently towards the end of the play. The story of the play is comical. It is about the romance of three old men, oul' Johnny, oul' Jimmy and oul' Joe, with the equally old widow, Mrs. Pender, who is the owner of a provision store in the tenements. All the three old men want to marry her and so in order to win her love they behave comically as youthful lovers by dressing themselves in a ridiculous
manner and presenting flowers to their beloved with the conventional compliments of young lovers. They criticise each other for the demerits which all of them have. In order to win her favour each of them talks boastfully about himself before their beloved and tries to outwit his rivals. But their hypocrisy and cowardice are exposed when a robber suddenly appears and tries to rob the old woman before their eyes. Comically all of them demonstrate their cowardice and surrender to the robber. Suddenly Nannie, a drunkard and semi-mad woman, who has just come out of jail, grips the robber, fights with him and finally makes him to flee. Consequently all the three suitors are rejected by their sweet heart who decides to live alone for the rest of her remaining life. Nannie, who demonstrates her bravery unknowingly in the outdoing of the robber, dies towards the end of the play due to a heart attack.

The outer drama concludes in Mrs. Pender's deciding to live single. Mrs. Pender's peace is restored through the sequence of comic happenings of the lovers whereas Donal Davoren's (The Shadow of a Gunman) eventual security is attended through a series of serious and even tragic debacles. We find that O'Casey is capable of transforming a tragic situation into an utterly comic situation. But the serious thrust of the play is the story of Nannie whose significance in the structure of the play has been ignored
by the critics. The deeper drama, in fact, deals with Nannie's story which has not been dramatised systematically by O'Casey because he has interfused it in the comic structural pattern of the play.

The stage-direction introduces the two major characters of the main plot of the play, Mrs. Pender and Johnny. Mrs. Pender, a widow, "is a tall, straight, briskly moving woman, of about fifty; age hasn't yet taken all the friskiness of youth out of her." One of the three lovers, Johnny, "is an elderly, stout, rubicund visaged man approaching sixty; his skin is tight on the body, like the tensely drawn head of a drum. His moustache is closely cropped. He is in his shirt sleeves, and is wearing a jerry hat." We see that O'Casey has brought into the elements of the grotesque in the description of the wooers. The other two suitors of Mrs. Pender have also been ridiculed by O'Casey in their description.

The action of the play begins without exposition with an element of suspense. Johnny asks Mrs. Pender, "An' she shot you right between th' two eyes with it"? This suspense is revealed later on and then we know the story of a petty quarrel between Mrs. Pender and Doran, a customer over the

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp.503-4.
rotten egg. Now Johnny and Mrs. Pender indulge in a romantic talk. Johnny suggests Mrs. Pender to marry him, so that she feels secured. He says, "As long as they know you're a lone widda, they'll stop at nothin'. The sooner you get buckled, polly, th' betther."\(^5\) From romantic talk they pick up politics as the topic of their conversation. They talk about the differences among politicians in the Dail (the Irish parliament) over different issues. The Irish government wants to introduce the new Divorce Bill in the Dail. But Mrs. Pender does not understand politics. She disinterestedly says, "I don't know what th' Doyle is doin' at all; ah, I suppose th' only thing to do, is to put our trust in God."\(^6\) Here we see that O'Casey, in the very opening of the play, has introduced romance, politics and religion in the play. As Johnny goes out, the off-stage voice of the Ballad Singer is heard. The stage-direction gives an impression of the impoverished condition of the Ballad Singer. "The under life of his profession has soiled him a good deal; he has all the cuteness of his class; there is a week's growth of beard on his chin.... He wears a heavy, tattered top coat."\(^7\) He requests Mrs. Pender to give him something but his request is rejected which is a criticism on the bourgeois class who have no care for the poor. The Ballad Singer gives a vivid picture of the poor

---

economic condition of the slum-dwellers and its cause:

Eleven o' them me an' me Mot has ... eleven chiselurs to keep... eleven livin' an' two dead... now if it was only two livin' an' eleven dead, I'd have an aysier conscience.  

Thus here we see, and also will see later on, that the Ballad Singer serves as a commentator on the social, economic and political conditions of Ireland. Amidst his comical groaning of his life, the voice of Nannie is heard outside in the distance which is full of life. Her appearance on the stage is brought suddenly without any previous hint. Her sudden appearance on the stage interrupts the conventional plot of the play, because it is Nannie now who dominates the stage. As we proceed we find that the main thrust of O'Casey in this play is social criticism. Through Nannie's condition he criticises the society which is responsible for the present condition of Nannie. We come to know at her first appearance on the scene that she has just come out from the 'Joy' (Mount Joy jail) where she was for two months fo assaulting a policeman. The society, following the conventional moral standards of the time, has labelled her as outcast. Now Nannie, out of jail, wanders here and there for want of a home. When advised by Mrs. Pender to go home to take rest she bitterly remarks:

---

8. Ibid., p. 506.
Nannie's no home.... Wan place is as good as another to Nannie. When Nannie was a chiseler any oul' hall she could find was Nannie's home- after gettin', maybe, a morguein' from her oul' wan. Sleep? What does Irish Nannie want with sleep?  

She beats her only crippled child, commits thefts, smashes windows and drinks cheap alcoholic drinks which has damaged her health. Inspite of all these habits of Nannie, we have our sympathy and pity for her because we do not hold her responsible for her bad habits but the society which has done nothing for her. O'Casey here shows that Nannie is a victim of the circumstances into which she has been living. The society has made her what she is at present. She is not independent to shape her way of life but she is controlled by the society. Her present predicament owes to social factors. The reference to the rather scanty details of her early life gives us ample glimpse of how she has lived in poverty and starvation without having any home to live in. Her life has been full of struggle against the circumstances of her existence. Her husband, who was a docker, met with an accident while working in the dock, in which his spine was broken and consequently he died after two years. Nannie looked after her crippled husband for two years and tried to keep her family going on:

9. Ibid., p.509.
...kept her crippled oul' fella for two years... a jib of crane fell on his back workin' on th' docks, an' smashed his spine; two weeks' half pay he got from th' stevedore, an' then th' bastard went bankrupt... an' Nannie kep' him for two years an' he lyin' on his back....

Later on she had to take care of her crippled father for years and so she was forced to earn money by any means:

...Nannie kep' her oul' father for years, an' he lyin' stretched out not able to stir a hand or foot... good money she earned for him, when it was to be got; an' bad money when there was nothin' else knockin' about....

The unfavourable circumstances of Nannie's life made her an addict to alcoholic drinks and have almost deranged her mentally. Instead of helping her the society draws amusement from her condition. When Nannie started drinking alcoholic drinks she was encouraged by the people who used her as a source of amusement. The Ballad Singer comments upon it towards the end of the play. His comment directed towards the society serves as a social criticism:

Yous gang o' hypocrites! What was it made Nannie what she was? Was it havin' too much money? Who gave a damn about her? It was only when she was drunk an' mad that any wan took any notice of her! What can th' like o' them do, only live any way they can? Th' Poorhouse, th' Poorhouse.

10. Ibid., p. 514.
11. Ibid., p. 522.
Prison an' th' morgue- them is our palaces! I suppose yous want us to sing "Home Sweet Home," about our tenements? D'ye think th' blasted kips o' tenement houses we live in 'll breed Saints an' Scholars?... It's a long time, but th' day's comin'... th' day's is comin'... Oh, it's cruel, it's cruel! 12

Finally, when her wildness increased, the society defended itself against her by sending her to prison. Nannie is illiterate but she has a feeling that there is someone in the society who is responsible for her present condition. She finds him in the manifestation of power and so she attacks the police whenever she sees them. She has not left the society herself but the society has rejected her. Thus we see that through Nannie's condition the dramatist accuses the society which has made her what she is in the present state of degradation. But Nannie has shown her courage to live. Inspite of her bitter circumstances she has lived life joyously. She has accepted life's battle but never yielded to it. She is always dancing and singing which shows her style of care-free life and courage to face difficulties boldly:

It's merriment Nannie wants... singin' an' dancin' an' enjoyin' life.... What's the use o' bein' alive if you're not merry? (Screaming.) Merriment, merriment, merriment! 13

12. Ibid., p. 532.
13. Ibid., p. 509.
This and her repeated words "a short life an' merry wan," show that Nannie is symbolic of life in the midst of chill, poverty and beggary. She knows that she may die any time because the alcoholic drinks have damaged her health. But even after that she does not have any fear for death and enjoys the life which is the main characteristic of the Dublin slum-dwellers:

I'm dyin' on me feet... th' spunk has me nearly done for.... Th' prison docthor told me th' oul' heart was crocked, an' that I'd dhroo any minute... I'm afire inside... no-one cares a curse about Irish Nannie....

The above lines indicate her optimistic view of life which is heightened by her occasional burst, "I'll die game, I'll die game," which is her only defence against death. Her courage is evident in the scene in which she grips the robber and forces him to dance with her. The robber has a revolver and he could have shot her. But she is not afraid of death, represented by the robber. Instead, she dances with him which is symbolical of dancing with death. Here her courage is contrasted with the cowardice of the three men who are trembling due to the fear of the robber. Although she is a drunkard, addicted to alcohol and has bad habits, we have our sympathy for her due to the quality of her courage. The two lines of her songs may be appropriately adopted for her:

Tho' she wears no fine clothes, nor no rich silken hose,
Still there's something that makes her divine,...

Like Kathleen in *Kathleen Listens In*, Nannie is the personification of Ireland. But unlike Kathleen she is a character of flesh and blood and does not operate in abstraction. She represents the reality of Ireland—dirt, chill, poverty and beggary as opposed to the idealized vision of Ireland by the sham nationalists. Her repeated song, "oul' fashioned mother o' nine," refers to Ireland.

This play demonstrates O'Casey's experiment both in theme and structure which he follows in some of his later plays. Nannie's character is projected in *The Plough and the Stars* in the image of Bessie Burgess who is also vulgar and quarrelsome, and given to drinks. Like Nannie she, too, is thoroughly humanised. Further both the characters die in the same circumstances. In *Within the Gates* the fate of Nannie is repeated in the fate of Jannice, the young prostitute in the play. Like Nannie, Jannice has also grown up in a bitter and economically reduced situation without parents and home. The bitter circumstances of her surroundings are also responsible for making Jannice what she is. It is the society which has forced her to become a prostitute. Like Nannie, Jannice also dies a young death and that too by heart attack. Like Nannie, Jannice is also not

responsible for her fate. Dance and songs have also been used as symbols of optimistic view and affirmation of life in some of O'Casey's later plays, especially in *Red Roses for Me* and *Cock-a-doodle-Dandy*. But we see in the technique of drawing the predicaments of Nannie that her predicament is not systematically developed. The details of her previous life is not adequate and is not given in a systematic order.

The Ballad Singer plays a very important role in the play. Through him O'Casey has dual dramaturgic function in the play. His dual dramatic function is evident in his double role as a character in the play and as Ballad Singer in his own right commenting on the story. From the comical and pitiable character in the beginning, he rises to the status of the mouthpiece of the dramatist in criticising the society towards the end of the play. He acts as a chorus or commentator commenting on the society in the play. In drawing the character of the Ballad Singer O'Casey has used the most important technique of modern drama. He has made the Ballad Singer a chorus as well as the stage manager, a technique which we find most appropriately used in Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*. Like the Stage Manager in Thornton's play, the Ballad Singer in this play acts as a bridge between the characters of the play and the audience.
As the Stage Manager, after the conclusion of a scene, comes on the stage and comments on the characters and their roles in the play, the Ballad Singer in *Nannie's Night Out* comments on the roles of the characters in order to criticise the society. But O'Casey did not use this technique of the Stage Manager deliberately and he never used this technique again in his future plays. As a mouthpiece of the dramatist the Ballad Singer appears in many of O'Casey's later plays in the image of the Dreamer in *Within the Gates*, the Messenger in *Cock-a-doodle-Dandy* and Father Boheroe in *The Bishop's Bonfire*. The prayer which he says at the death of Nannie reminds us of the moving prayer of Juno in *Juno and the Paycock*:

May God look down on th' spirit of our poor sister, that, feelin' th' wind, may be got no message from it; that, lookin' up at th' sky, may be seen no stars; that, lookin' down at th' earth, may be, seen no flowers. Rememberin' th' bitterness of th' shocks her poor body got, may God give th' soul of our sister th' sweetness of eternal rest!  

His words after the death of Nannie, which we have quoted earlier in this chapter, is a bitter criticism of the present situation of the society. He criticises the upper middle class of the society which are responsible for the fate of Nannie. But he does not direct his criticism to any

character of the play but addresses it to the audiences. The same social criticism we find in O'Casey's later plays in *The Star Turns Red* and *Hall of Healing*. The vague reference of the Ballad Singer, "It's a long time but th' day's comin'... th' day's comin'..." is a hint, as we have seen in *The Harvest Festival*, of a radical change in the society which is achieved in *The Star Turns Red* and *Purple Dust*. Besides the social criticism, we also find some hint of political criticism in this play. Referring to the crippled condition of the Robert, Nannie's son, Mrs. Pender directs her criticism to the Government and the Gaelic League:

He couldn't be anything else; he lives on th' streets. When he was three or four he fell down a stairs an' hurted his back.... It's a wondher they wouldn't do something for poor little kiddies like him, instead o' thryin' to teach them Irish.17

Joe 's reply to this is comical, but it exposes the hypocrisy and hollowness of the nationalists:

Oh, we've bigger things than that to settle first, we have to put th' Army on a solid basis, an' then th' Boundary Question has to be settled too- in comparisemnt with things like them, a few cripples o' chiselurs is neither here nor there.18

17. Ibid., p. 522.
18. Ibid.
Instead of solving the internal problems of the nation and improving the condition of the poor, the nationalists are busy in settling the external affairs. In the beginning of the play we find that there is a quarrel in the 'Doyle' among its members on petty issues. This shows that still there is disunity among them which we found in the preceding play, Kathleen Listens In. All these situations give an impression that the period of the play is the same as that of Kathleen Listens In. The chaos and disorder after the war have just been normalised but still there are differences among the political factions. Republicans and the Free Staters are still quarreling over petty issues. This is made clear by Nannie's hatred for them, "Republicans an' Free Staters- a lot of rubbidge, th' whole o' yous! The poor Tommies was men!" 19 But the political criticism has not been taken at large in this play as it was done in Kathleen Listens In.

In Nannie's Night Out we also find O'Casey's use of the technique of absurd drama. The characteristic of this technique is evident in the conversation between the Ballad Singer and Mrs. Pender. There is lack of communication in their conversation which reminds us of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. While the Ballad Singer continues to beg,

19. Ibid., p.515.
he narrates his pitiable condition. Mrs. Pender does not response to him and starts telling Nannie about her quarrel with Doran over the rotten egg while she continues her drunken talks. Thus we see that their conversation is vague and there is complete lack of communication in it. This technique is also evident in the description of the habit of Johnny who pulls his coat and says 'ayee'. This technique of absurd drama is also scatteredly found in O'Casey's other plays of the Irish phase. But unlike an absurd dramatist, O'Casey has not developed this technique in his plays. Thus, Nannie's Night Out is full of comic situations. O'Casey himself has given the sub-title of the play 'A Comedy in one Act'. The comic situations in the play, sometimes become farcical. But unlike in other plays the technique of farce in this play, as mentioned earlier, has been reversed.