Recently, I watched the Guthrie’s performance of Sean O’Casey’s play *Juno and the Paycock.* Set in the Dublin tenements during the 1922 Irish Civil War, it tells the story of the Boyle family, impoverished and struggling to stay afloat. The women in the family, Juno the mother and Mary the daughter, are the breadwinners. The father, Jack, is a buffoonish drunk who shuns work and only dimly grasps his family’s and his nation’s predicament. The son, Johnny, one-armed and with a lame leg from wounds incurred during Republican battles, poisons the family atmosphere with his anger and bitterness. An apparent windfall inheritance brings temporary light into this bleak household only to evaporate as tragedy upon tragedy befall the Boyles as the play closes.

In the eyes of some, the play is a family tragedy born of the fatal flaws of its members. Others see it as a social commentary on the pitiful state of the Irish working class in the 1920s. Still others view it as a political diatribe against the bloodshed of the civil war, voiced by Juno when she beseeches “Sacred Heart O’ Jesus, take away our hearts o’ stone, an’ give us flesh! Take away this murderin’ hate, an’ give us thine own eternal love!” But what do the eyes of a physician see?

I saw a chemically dependent father preferring the bottle to his family and spending money they didn’t have for his pub outings. I saw the erosive effects of poverty on the health of a struggling family. And I saw a disabled son beset by the hallucinations and flashbacks of PTSD. I didn’t intend to muster a clinical critique of the play but it’s hard to turn off the doctor brain.

I wasn’t sure I should turn off my doctor brain. After all, anyone who confronts the arts brings their conscious and subconscious to the viewing/listening experience. We bring our personal histories, our education and our biases. We may even react differently to a play or book depending on our mood that day. Part of being the “audience” is to not just passively let the work of art wash over you but to step into it.

And stepping into artistic works is more rewarding if you create as well as observe. A hefty part of my creative writing program at Bennington College was reading. Reading fiction and poetry informed my non-fiction writing and, similarly, my own writing unlocked delightful discoveries in my reading. Playing trumpet in a community band makes concert-going a deeper experience. After practicing 20th century music with the band, I’m alert to rhythms and harmonies when I go to Orchestra Hall. Participation feeds observation.

Obviously, the contributors to our annual writing and photo contests have discovered this. Their doctoring stokes their creativity, and their creativity pricks their senses when they close the exam room door. The doctoring life is so much fuller with an artistic life alongside it.

*Juno and the Paycock* was tough to watch as the dysfunctional Boyles spiraled out of control—a lot like some folks I see each week in the office. To paraphrase the Bard, all of medicine’s a stage.

Charles Meyer can be reached at meyer073@gmail.com.