

The plough and the stars



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Sean O'Casey was born John Casey on the 30th March 1880. A committed nationalist and socialist he was the first major Irish playwright to write about the working class people of Dublin. He was born in Dorset Street, in Dublin's inner city to an impoverished Protestant family. As a young man he was very active in the Church of Ireland but he drifted from the church in the twenties. When he was a child O'Casey contracted trachoma which permanently damaged his eyesight and interrupted his education.

He left school at fourteen and worked in a series of menial jobs such as labouring. He was introduced to the theatre by his older brother who was working as an actor. At fifteen he played Henry VI in an amateur production in what was to become the Abbey Theatre. This was O'Casey's first association with the Abbey which would later play a major role in his life. In his early 20's O'Casey became interested in Ireland and its politics. In 1906 he joined the Gaelic League, learned Irish and changed his name to Sean O'Casey, which he later changed to Sean O'Casey. He learned the uilleann pipes and was a founder and secretary general of the St Laurence Toole Pipe Band. In 1913, while working as a railwayman, he joined Jim Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers Union.

It was at this time that the Union was involved in the strike/lock out with Dublin's employers. In March 1914 he became Secretary General of the Irish Citizen Army but he resigned in July of the same year following a disagreement, with its leaders, over class interaction. O'Casey's relationship with the Abbey began properly in the 1920s with the staging of his play *The Shadow of a Gunman*. Though some of his earlier plays

were rejected by the theatre, Lady Gregory, one of the theatre's directors, encouraged O'Casey to keep submitting his work.

O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, comprising of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, helped rescue the Abbey from financial ruin. O'Casey broke from the Abbey when William Butler Yeats, a director at the Abbey, refused his anti war play *The Silver Tassie*. O'Casey identified with the many of the principles of Communism and was considered by many to be a Communist by definition.

His daughter Siobhan wrote [1] "Sean was a humanitarian, a Communist and a pure spirit, he saw a long way into the future...and he saw that his ideals were being arrived at quicker [among communist nations] than in other countries, particularly the capitalistic ones.

"He had a liberal view of Communism and saw people such as [2]Keats, Shelley, Dickens, Whitman and even Jesus Christ as Communists. "Any man who is honest and gives all he can to the community is a Communist," O'Casey said. After *The Silver Tassie* was rejected by The Abbey O'Casey moved to England where he continued to write plays, short stories and articles for publication and it was here that he wrote his six volume autobiography. He died of a heart attack in Torquay in September 1964 aged eighty four. *The Plough and the Stars* is the second in O'Casey's Dublin trilogy of plays. It was written in the early 1920's and was first performed in the Abbey Theatre in 1926. It is set in Dublin around the time of the 1926 Easter Rising.

The title of the play comes from the flag of the Irish Citizen Army. It is a four act play, with the first two acts taking place in the running up to the Rising, and the second two taking place during it. O'Casey originally wrote the second act as a stand alone play but later incorporated it into the rest of the play. The story follows the residents of a Dublin tenement during this politically and socially difficult time.

The play opens in the home of Jack and Nora Clitheroe. [3] It consists of the front and back drawing-rooms in a fine Georgian house, struggling for its life against the assaults of time, and the more savage assaults of the tenements. The Clitheroes, along with the other central characters in the play, are working class Dubliners, living in tenements. O'Casey was one of the first Irish playwrights to write about Dublin's working class and the impact of revolutionary politics on the tenements and their inhabitants. Act one of the play has a naturalistic quality. It is quite shapeless and lacks an obviously significant incident but it sets up the premise for the play; the effect of the Easter 1916 Rising, on ordinary, working class citizens of Dublin. O'Casey's use of colloquial language, lively scenes and malapropisms add to the authenticity of the scene.

The actions of the characters are everyday actions for example Fluther fixing the lock and Peter airing his shirt at the fire. They do not seem contrived or staged. Act two begins inside a public-house outside of which a meeting is being addressed. This act was originally intended as a single-act play but was later incorporated into the longer four-act structure. It is in this act that the political situation is highlighted. We see Peter and Fluther on one side completely engrossed in nationalism and Pearse's political fervour and

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then we have the Covey on the other side with his anti-nationalist and socialist leanings.

This is just one of the juxtapositions within this act, another one being the juxtaposition of the events inside the pub and Pearse's speech outside. The last two acts take place during the Rising. They are set back in the tenement buildings.

They show a much bleaker picture with death and destruction playing key roles. The language used by O'Casey in the play is a major feature in creating an authentic picture of Dublin at the time of the Rising. The language used foremost in the play is the language of the central characters, that of the working class Dubliners. While O'Casey's use of colloquial language adds significantly to the impact of the play, he was criticised by some at times as being overly vulgar and crude. These criticisms, while not entirely unfounded, must be treated with some objectivity.

While there are, most certainly, passages of verbal abuse in the play, especially involving characters such as, The Covey, [4] 'Isn't that the malignant varmint?', Bessie Burgess, [5] 'You little overdressed throllope, you, for one pin I'd paste the white face of you!' Fluther, and the prostitute Rosie Redmond, they do not count for the majority of the dialogue in the play. These passages, along with the rest of the language use in the play [6] reflect what O'Casey considered to be the authentic speech and idioms of the tenement dwellers. O'Casey has been accused of over using crude and abusive language yet there are also extremely sentimental passages in the play.

This sentimentality is especially evident in the romantic exchanges between Jack and Nora in Act One. The use of poetic language such as '???' little, little red lipped Nora???', contrasts starkly with the coarse language often used by the characters. Peter is another character who usually speaks in quite a coarse manner, in fact he spends most of his time giving out yet when he starts to speak of nationalism and his nationalist feelings, his language becomes increasingly sentimental, '???' I felt a burnin??™ lump in me throat when I heard the band playing the soldier??™s son.???' These stark differences in the tone of the language could be seen to represent O??™ Casey??™s own views on the Easter 1916 Rising. It shows the great disparity between the idealists and realists.

The difference is especially apparent in Brennan??™s speech after Jack??™s death in Act Four. The language used by Brennan is descriptive, flowery even, which makes it seem like Brennan is glorifying Jack??™s death and the deaths of all the people killed in the Rising. In the speech, the huge gulf between the reality of the Rising for the people who took part and the entirely different reality of the ordinary, working class people living in Ireland at the time.

The language used in the play, in O??™ Casey??™s opinion, directly reflected the speech of the tenement dwellers of Dublin at this time, At the same time the way in which he uses language can be quite stylised at time. O??™ Casey uses many poetic techniques such as assonance and alliteration which add to the impact of the dialogue. One character which language plays a big part in constructing is the colourful handyman Fluther Goode. Fluther??™s constant use of malapropisms such as '???' derogatory??™', out of context,

adds to the humour of the play. Fluther also has a tendency to use exaggerated language, another humorous aspect to the play.

Juxtapositions also play a big part in *?? The Plough and the Stars??*. In terms of language, the single, biggest juxtaposition is the pairing of the *?? proper??* language used by the speaker in Act Two and the ordinary people inside the pub at the same time. This difference highlights the huge difference, in both social class and education, between the tenement dwellers and the people who are organizing and recruiting for the rising. Although there has been little critical writing produced by women regarding *O?? Casey*, his representation of women is another interesting aspect of the play. Throughout his life *O?? Casey* was a supporter of autonomy for women saying [7] *?? we are very fine fellows, while still keeping women in their place, leaving windows open for them but keeping women in their place.*

*?? He advocated women in public life and was a great supporter of the National Assembly of Women. The writer Caitlin Mac Aodha wrote an essay *?? Buttermilk and Bullets??* in which she draws parallels between the 1916 rising and the Fenian invasion of Canada. In this essay she discusses *?? The Plough and the Stars??* and *o?? Casey??*'s treatment of women in the play and his views on the part they played in the rising. Mac Aodha wrote, [8] *?? When the bold Fenian men tore a peaceful neighbourhood to pieces, whether it was ... in the Niagara Peninsula or in the city of Dublin, it was the women each time who picked up the pieces and did whatever they could to put them back together again.**

Neither Britannia nor Cathleen n??™ Houlihan is a woman; both are creations of men, intended to assist them in their vainglorious activities. It is the nameless farm women in Niagara and the Noras and Bessies in Dublin who provide buttermilk and dare bullets, who restore and preserve.??? This quote exemplifies the women??™s role in the Rising. While they may not have gone out to fight, they were there to pick up the pieces. Character in the play such as Bessie Burgess may have at first appeared crude and even obnoxious at the end stood up to the plate and took care of everyone. When Nora had all but lost her mind, Jack had died and Fluther, Peter and the Covey were as usual good for nothing except talk, it was Bessie who took control and kept them all together.

In her character we see O??™ Casey??™s feminist leanings. The play ends with the voices of the English soldiers singing outside and Sargeant Tinley and Corporal Stoddart joining in from inside the tenement. Bessie Burgess has been killed and Mrs Gogan is now looking after Nora. The play ends with death and destruction. It does not end on an up beat note. Perhaps this is O Casey??™s way of telling us that in reality, for the ordinary people of Dublin, the rising was not a triumph but a cause of heartache, pain and loss.

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