The Plough and the Stars

Senior Cycle Lesson Activities

*The Plough and the Stars* was first performed in 1926. Sean O’Casey, a former member of the Irish Citizen Army and a socialist, stated that he wrote *The Plough and the Stars* because there was “no play yet around the period of the actual Easter Rising, which was the beginning of all that happened afterward.” The play featured the poor people who lived in Dublin’s tenements, and highlights the tough living conditions as well as showing the disruption to their lives during the Rising. The play highlights the background to as well as the brutal realities of the Easter Rebellion. It concludes after great sadness - Nora Clitheroe has a breakdown after the death of her husband and her newborn child; Mrs. Gogan’s daughter (Mollser) dies of tuberculosis; the play ends with Bessie Burgess killed by a British army sniper after moving Nora away from the window of her tenement flat.

The following activities are intended to indicate how the interpretation of O’Casey’s play that is based around the 1916 Rising, and some of his other works, have changed since the first staging of *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926, when republicans demonstrated during its staging at the Abbey Theatre.

**Activity One: The Plough and The Stars, riots in the Abbey Theatre, 1926.**

A group of republicans who objected to the depiction of the rebels of 1916 demonstrated inside the theatre

In February 1926, during the fourth performance of *The Plough and The Stars*, republican protesters, including some widows of men who died in 1916 rising, caused a major disturbance, interrupting the performance of the play.

One of the protesters got onto the stage and tried to speak, but he was shouted down and shoved off by the actors, with some members of the audience shouting, “Go on with the play”. One of the actors, F. J. McCormick addressed the audience: “Everybody has a right to object. Please, do you think it is fair to come up and mob us. We play in all sorts of plays. Don’t mob us. We have our human rights as human beings and as players.” One of the protesters responded, “Ask O’Casey to remove that scene and we will willingly look at the play. It is a disgrace in a Catholic country.”

When the actors came back on stage, a female protester went on to the stage and interrupted two female actors. Some of the other actors came on to the stage and pushed the intruder off the stage. A male protester who also came on to the stage was attacked by a number of actors, and he received a “hardy punch on the jaw that hurled him bodily into the stalls”. The police were called. W. B. Yeats was shouted down when he tried to speak. He praised O’Casey’s work, and addressed the audience, “You have disgraced yourselves again. Is this to be an ever recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius?”

About a dozen of the women interrupters started to sing the national anthem. When Mrs Sheehy Skeffington was leaving, she said that all the players should be singing “God Save the King”.

Activity Two: Lady Gregory describes O’Casey’s reactions to the riot in 1926.

Lady Augusta Gregory met O’Casey soon after the disturbance. On 15 February 1926, she wrote,

“Casey in good spirits after his reception last night. One of the objections made was the rebel flag having been carried into a public-house, but two old I.R.A. men have since told him that themselves had brought the flag into pubs.

One of the accusations of the interrupters had been that he did not make the Tommies offensive enough. But he says they were usually quite civil until they were frightened and turned cruel. They could come into the house and say “Mother, give us some tea,” or whatever they wanted.”

(310)


[Glossary – “old I.R.A. refers to those who served in the I.R.A during the Irish war of independence]

1. Lady Gregory listed two objections made against O’Casey by the protesters. How did O’Casey answer them?

Activity Three: O’Casey responds to the demonstrators, including Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington

Sean O’Casey defended his play against the accusations of the protestors, answering some of their accusations.

They objected to the display of the tricolour, saying that that flag was never in a public-house. I myself have seen it there. I have seen the green, white and gold in strange places; I have seen it painted on a lavatory in “The Gloucester Diamond”.

The drama is my place for self-expression … and I am prepared to fight for it.

The heavy-hearted expression by Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington about “the Ireland that remembers with tear-dimmed eyes all that Easter Week stands for,” makes me sick. Some of the men cannot get even a job.

Mrs. Skeffington is certainly not dumb, but she appears to be both blind and deaf to all the things that are happening around her.

Is the Ireland that is pouring to the picture-houses, to the dance halls, to the football matches, remembering with tear-dimmed eyes all that Easter Week stand for?

Tears may be in the eyes of the navvies working on the Shannon scheme, but they are not for Ireland.
1. How did O’Casey address the complaint that the flag was never seen in a public-house?
2. Why was O’Casey determined to defend his play?
3. How did he respond to Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington’s contention that Ireland “remembers with tear-dimmed eyes all that Easter Week stands for”?
4. In O’Casey’s view, how has Ireland changed since 1916?

Activity Four: Remembering O’Casey in 1964.

When O’Casey died in 1964, having spent over forty years in England, the Abbey theatre closed as a mark of respect on the night of 19 September.

Watch this 1964 news report (http://www.rte.ie/archives/2014/0918/644434-tributes-on-death-of-sean-o-1964/) by Kevin O’Kelly from RTÉ to get a flavour of the life of O’Casey and his impact on Irish life. Actor Gabriel Fallon pays tribute to O’Casey outside the house at 422 North Circular Road, Dublin, where the playwright lived for a while. Fallon was director of the Abbey Theatre in 1964. He had been friendly with O’Casey and appeared in some of his plays. Ernest Blythe, managing director of the theatre, and actress May Craig also give their reaction to the death. Craig quotes the famous lines from Juno and the Paycock – “Take away these hearts of stone”

1. According to Gabriel Fallon, what difficulties did O’Casey have when he tried to write his plays?
2. What sort of a person was Sean O’Casey, according to Ernest Blythe?
3. Which speech did May Craig most admire in the works of O’Casey?

Activity Five: Remembering O’Casey in 2014

In 2014, the National Theatre (London) made a brief promotional programme (http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/an-introduction-to-sean-o-casey) on Sean O’Casey and his work, including interviews with Professor Roy Forster (historian) and Shivaun O’Casey (Sean O’Casey’s daughter)

1. What events, according to Forster, did O’Casey write about?
2. According to Howard Davis, who did O’Casey write about?
3. According to Forster, what was the appeal of O’Casey to Lady Gregory and Yeats?
4. What was the difference between men and women in O’Casey’s plays, according to Aidan McArdle?
5. Shivaun O’Casey, his daughter, gives some insights into her father’s life. Examine her comments. What do you consider to be the most important point that she makes about her father that helps us to understand his work or his life?

Activity Six: The Plough and the Stars, views on O’Casey in 2014
In 2014, three actors spoke about some of the challenges of performing in a production of *The Plough and the Stars*, showing how O’Casey reputation continued to appeal to Irish and international audiences.

**Ciarán Hinds on O’Casey’s universal appeal**
A couple of years ago, I was in Bucharest, where I saw this poster in Romanian: Something Something Something by Seán O'Casey. His place in the Irish canon is a given, but he's a completely European writer. O'Casey spoke about people in everyday situations but with that epic quality of some deeper truth. [His plays] have messages about socialism, about people and the future, who we are and what we should do, all mixed with the tragedy of real life.

1. What special appeal does Hinds suggest that O’Casey’s plays have for modern Europeans?

**Sinead Cusack on the realistic depiction of Dublin’s poorest**
The play is about Dublin people living through the Easter Rising, in 1916, and you get this real sense of people living cheek by jowl in those tenement blocks – the irritation, the camaraderie, the gossip, the petty resentments – all set against this huge, emotional moment in Irish history. Basically, the play reaches this extraordinary, awful climax – one tragedy after another – and it can do that because he's set up the ordinary lives and the political background of the play with such a lightness of touch that, when the two come together, it doesn't jar at all. In fact, like the very best tragedy, it seems inevitable.

2. How effective was O’Casey’s portrait of the people who lived in the tenements of Dublin, according to Cusack?

**Aidan McArdle on the historical realism of O’Casey’s characters.**
When you're playing O'Casey, the social history can be a bit of a blind alley. Yes, Dublin was one of the poorest cities in Europe at the time. Life in the tenements was awful and people were very hard up. But he just takes it for granted that we know that; his characters don't bitch about it. They barely talk about poverty at all. They just accept that life and get on with living it. There's no self-pity. People are just trying to survive and, to do so, they only see things from their own perspective.

3. Why does McArdle suggest that the audience of *The Plough and the Stars* do not need to know about the historical background of the play?


Written by Pat Callan
(for PDST Technology in Education – February 2016)