

Cultural Context



Poverty in 'Home Before Night', 'The Plough and the Stars' and 'The King's Speech'

Home Before Night

- ❖ Jack's family are poor but they are reasonably content
- ❖ There is enough money to keep the family comfortably fed and clothed and allow outings to the cinema on Sundays
- ❖ The poverty of the family is never overtly stated but is obvious in the descriptions

HUGH
LEONARD



HOME BEFORE NIGHT

- ❖ Jack's early childhood spent in a two-room cottage
- ❖ Father works long hours as a gardener
- ❖ On one occasion, Jack is taken begging by a neighbour, Johnny Quinn and Jack is embarrassed and ashamed to be seen as no better than the Quinns
- ❖ Family uses coats as extra blankets in the winter months

Rising above poverty

- ❖ Jack's mother boasts that they 'paid their way, were under a compliment to no-one and never wanted for anything, least of all nourishment'.
- ❖ She is 'the devil for style' and does her best to add an air of gentility to the house by doing things like putting new wallpaper in the kitchen

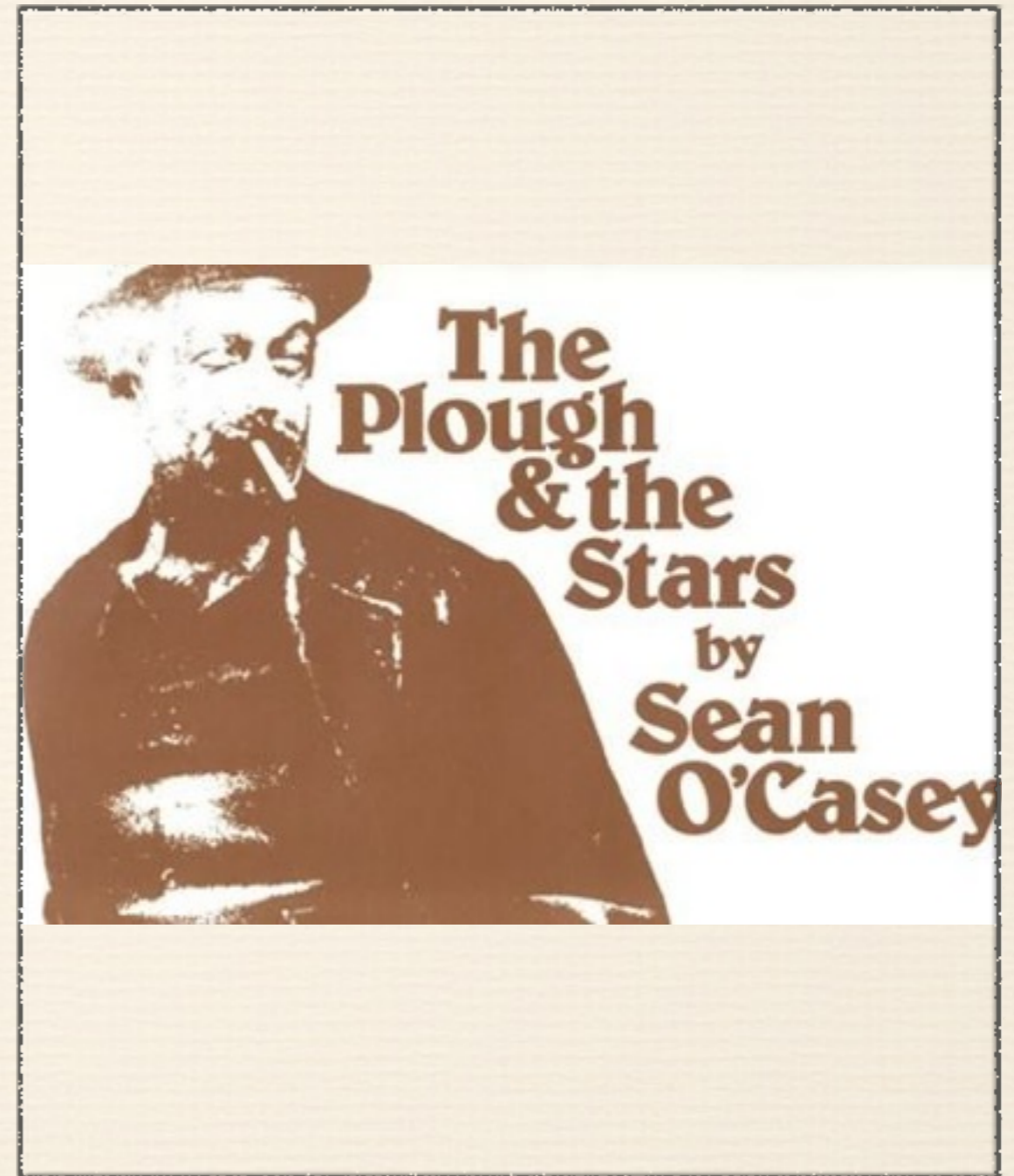
- ❖ Yesterday's newspaper doubles as the day's tablecloth
- ❖ Better to have any tablecloth than none
- ❖ Family does manage to better their situation, eventually moving from Kalafat Lane to St. Begnet's Villas. This is a huge step up from their previous home in that it has 'an upstairs, an indoor lav and a garden with an iron gate'

Effect of Poverty

- ❖ Hard life for Jack's father who has to continue with his back-breaking labour for many years
- ❖ However, he is proud of his job and content with his lot
- ❖ Jack's mother is less content
- ❖ Jack is educated, gets a good job in the civil service and eventually becomes a successful author and playwright

The Plough and the Stars

- ❖ Unlike HBN, appalling poverty is evident from the outset and is clearly stated.
- ❖ The tenement dwellings are far, far worse places to live than the small but respectable two-room cottage on Kalafat Lane
- ❖ Like Jack's mother, Nora does her best to impose 'a little bit of respectability' on her surroundings but is much less successful



- ❖ In both texts there are those who do not have enough to eat but the difference is that those characters - like Johnny Quinn - are peripheral in HBN while they are central in TPATS.
- ❖ Key moment, Mollser sitting outside, being slipped a cup of milk by Bessie Burgess. Like staple of bread in HBN, milk is seen as treat for which Mollser is most grateful.

Effect on characters

- ❖ Unlike HBN, in which there is a steady rise in the Keyes' family fortunes - albeit a small one in the case of Jack's parents, there appears to be no escape from poverty in TPATS
- ❖ Looting is seen as valid response to poverty and is only concern of characters, uniting those such as Bessie and Mrs Gogan. Stark contrast between this and Jack's family's pride in owing nothing
- ❖ Characters are seen as being so concerned with poverty that they cannot concern themselves with the wider world.
- ❖ Mollser dies as a result of poverty. Nothing so dire happens in HBN.

The King's Speech

- ❖ Unlike other two texts, poverty is not shown overtly
- ❖ Lionel Logue is seen to work in a shabby set of rooms and live in a slightly cramped flat, but relative to TPATS and even HBN, his life is one of luxury

- ❖ Unlike O'Casey, who chose to focus on the poverty in the world of his text, Hooper opts to ignore the poverty which most certainly existed in Britain between the wars.
- ❖ The focus is different in all three texts. Because Leonard's memoir is an affectionate portrayal of his upbringing, he plays down the poverty of his upbringing and chooses instead to dwell on the more positive aspects of the poor area in which he lived. O'Casey, on the other hand, is making a strong case against those who have little or no interest in the day-to-day suffering of the ordinary people of Dublin. In TKS, any focus on the ordinary poor people of Britain would cast the incredibly wealthy royal family in a bad light, and so we see no evidence of any financial hardship or suffering.

Change

- ❖ Only in HBN do we see any signs of people being able to free themselves from the chains of poverty. Jack's parents move to a larger, more comfortable house, and Jack himself does very well financially, moving to London and pursuing a successful career.



❖ In TPATS, there is no hope of anyone breaking free of the crushing poverty in which they live, while in TKS, there is no need for anyone to do so because we are not shown a single person in dire financial straits. The poorest character is the middle-class Lionel whose motto is the cheerful, 'Poor and content is rich and rich enough'.