

The Plough and the Stars –Summary of Act 1

CHARACTERS

Jack Clitheroe: (a bricklayer), Commandant in the Irish Citizen Army

Nora Clitheroe: his wife

Peter Flynn: (a labourer), Nora's uncle

The Young Covey: (a fitter or person who assembles machinery), Clitheroe's cousin and a socialist

Bessie Burgess: (a Protestant and a street fruit-vendor)

Mrs. Gogan: (a charwoman or cleaning lady)

Mollser: Mrs. Gogan's child who suffers from pulmonary tuberculosis or, as it was known then, consumption. She struggles to breathe and is dying of her illness.

Fluther Good: (a carpenter)

Lieut. Langon: (a Civil Servant), of the Irish Volunteers

Corporal Stoddart: (a corporal in the British army – in the Wiltshire regiment)

Sergeant Tinley: (a sergeant of the British army – in the Wiltshire regiment)

Rosie Redmond: (a prostitute)

A Bartender

A Woman: (upper class)

The Figure in the Window: (generally believed to be Padraig Pearse)

Act I: The living-room of the Clitheroe flat in a Dublin tenement (see my notes on Dublin tenements in the cultural and political background to the play)

Act II: A public-house (pub), outside of which a meeting is being held

Act III: The street outside the Clitheroe tenement

Act IV: The room of Bessie Burgess

Time: Acts I and 2, November 1915; Acts III and IV, Easter week 1916. A few days elapse between Acts III and IV

Setting:

The home of Jack and Nora Clitheroe. It consists of two rooms of what was once a fine old Georgian house and is now a tenement building. It is obvious that someone has taken some trouble to try to make this humble home look a little elegant and refined. There are pictures on the wall and a bowl of flowers on the chest of drawers.

The Gleaners by Jean Francois Millet (1814 – 1875)



The room serves as a kitchen, a sitting room and the Clitheroe's bedroom. The settee near the fire becomes Jack and Nora's bed at night.

From the street outside comes the clattering and banging of workmen repairing the road.

Fluther Good is repairing the door to the Clitheroe's home. He is a man of forty, fond of the drink.

Peter Flynn is sitting by the fire, airing a white shirt. He is a small, thin man with a straggling, wiry beard. He appears to resent Fluther's presence in the room but says nothing. He is wearing a vest and breeches.

The Angelus by Millet.



A voice is heard outside. It is the Clitheroe's neighbour, Mrs. Gogan. She is a fidgety, talkative little woman of about forty.

Mrs. Gogan is outside the door, talking to an unseen deliveryman who has a package for Nora Clitheroe. As Nora is out, Mrs. Gogan signs for the parcel and brings it into the Clitheroes' home. Her curiosity leads her to open the box and take out the fancy hat it contains. Mrs. Gogan remarks that Nora Clitheroe has pretensions of grandeur and believes herself better than the other tenement dwellers.

Fluther speaks up, saying that Nora is a pretty girl but Mrs. Gogan is scornful of this, saying that Nora dresses in too revealing a manner for a married woman. She goes on to say that Nora's efforts at politeness grate on her – Mrs. Gogan's – nerves.

Fluther says that Nora and her husband Jack seem happily married. Mrs. Gogan contradicts him, saying that the relationship between the young couple has been deteriorating of late. She claims that Nora is dressing as attractively as she can to keep her husband's interest but that it is no use and that, like all men, he has found the novelty of having a woman has waned after a few months of marriage.

Fluther observes that when a man is no longer interested in one woman it is usually because he has found another.

Mrs. Gogan continues criticising Nora, saying that she is always complaining about having to live in a tenement house and is determined not to end her days in one. She claims that Nora takes as much rent as she can squeeze out of Peter and The Covey and at the same time forces them to be unnaturally clean and

tidy so that the home can be as perfect as a doll's house. Fluther is disgusted to hear this, saying that Nora's behaviour is taking things too far for a tenement house.

Peter enters the room. He is wearing his trousers and vest and carrying a white shirt which he hangs over a chair near the fire. He rummages around in the chest of drawers, clearly looking for something but becoming agitated when he cannot find it.

Mrs. Gogan wonders why Peter is so impatient and fussy and Fluther says it is because he is getting ready for a political demonstration in honour of Irish patriots that evening. Fluther mentions that he has given up drink and hasn't had a drop for three days. Mrs. Gogan ignores this comment and says that Peter is a funny-looking little man who looks positively ridiculous when he is dressed up for his political meetings and marches. She says that Peter and the Covey cannot stand one another and argue so fiercely that they will come to blows one of these days.

Fluther asks Mrs. Gogan why Jack Clitheroe has nothing to do with the Citizen Army any more and Mrs. Gogan says it is because he, Jack, was not promoted although he was sure he would be. She says that Jack is not the sort to be interested in any cause which doesn't give him the chance to show off. Mrs. Gogan claims that Nora was delighted Jack wasn't promoted as she worries when he leaves her to go to meetings.

Mrs. Gogan has been picking up books and peering at them, but now she picks up Peter's sword and remarks that it is very fancy and must have been a general's sword at one time. Fluther is scornful, saying that Peter should have a baby's rattle as he is like a child playing at being a soldier.

Peter re-enters the room and snatches the sword from Mrs. Gogan before leaving again to go into the back room. Mrs. Gogan is a little taken aback by his rudeness but Fluther tells her to ignore him and that Peter is often surly but can be very talkative when angry or when he's had a few drinks.

Fluther coughs, and Mrs. Gogan tells him that he has a cold and that he'd want to be careful as she knew a big, strong woman once who got a little tickle in her throat one day and was dead the next. Fluther nervously says the he is fine, that he only has a small cold but Mrs. Gogan continues to insist that death might only be around the corner! Fluther is horrified and fears that his cold may be getting worse and that he may, in fact, be seriously ill.

Mrs. Gogan loses interest in the topic of illness and begins examining Peter's shirt drying on the chair, saying it is like Lord Mayor's nightdress. Fluther reacts angrily to her comment, saying that she should not be so tactless as to show a seriously ill man like himself a piece of clothing that looks like a burial shroud.

Peter comes into the room again, snatches the shirt away from Mrs. Gogan and replaces it on the chair.

Cheers are heard outside from the men repairing the street and Mrs. Gogan moves to the window to see what is happening. Fluther thinks Mrs. Gogan is a nosey busybody and he sits down on a chair, claiming to feel dizzy. He wonders aloud if he gave up the drink too suddenly.

The Covey enters and throws his cap on the table in disgust, before taking off his work overalls. Mrs. Gogan asks him what is going on outside and he says the work has stopped because the men are mobilising to join the

demonstration that night. He is deeply scornful of their cause and compares the vows they take to baptismal vows. Fluther resents this comparison with religion and tells The Covey that religion has no place in such a discussion. The Covey says Fluther is one of those people who becomes deeply religious once a week only, when he goes to Mass. He supposes Fluther will be joining the demonstration. Fluther's response that they are all Irishmen leads The Covey to expound his socialist views as he says that there is no such thing as nationality and we are all just human beings and a collection of molecules and atoms. Fluther says he has no intention of allowing The Covey to confuse him with puzzles and riddles about molecules and atoms but The Covey refuses to give up, continuing to claim that the Church tries to hide the scientific truths about life on earth. Fluther resents The Covey's tone, especially as The Covey has said that Fluther has a small brain. He points out that having a loud voice, like The Covey, does not mean you have a large brain.

Peter suddenly speaks up, complaining that Nora has starched the collar of his shirt so stiffly that he cannot put it on.

The Covey and Fluther continue arguing, The Covey maintaining that people like Fluther are so ignorant that they almost disprove the theory of evolution.

From the room at the back, Mrs. Gogan calls that the men in the street below are marching away in formation. Fluther and the Covey ignore this as they keep up their debate about science versus religion. Fluther brings up Adam and Eve but their existence is rejected by The Covey who points out that anthropologists have discovered skeletons such as The Man of Java - believed at the time to be the 'missing link' - which disprove the theory of creation. As they rage at one another, Peter continues to curse his recalcitrant collar.

Fluther dismisses The Covey's views and says he will not allow his mind to be polluted by such ideas. The Covey claims he, Fluther, is afraid of the truth but Fluther rejects this, calling The Covey a worm. The Covey responds by calling Fluther an ignorant savage who refuses to accept scientific proof that God cannot exist and asks if he is happy working as hard as he does in a harsh world supposedly created and ruled by a benevolent God. Fluther maintains that, for all his talk, The Covey will end up praying to God on his deathbed. He says he will listen to no more blasphemy from an ignorant Socialist who happens to be good with words.

Mrs. Gogan returns to the room and tells Fluther to drop it as religion always causes rows. She stands looking up at the picture of 'The Sleeping Venus' by the Renaissance painter Giorgione. Fluther joins her and mispronounces the artist's name as 'Georgina'. He appears



scandalised by the painting, seeming to believe it is a photograph yet at the same time announcing that the woman who allowed it to be taken must have been a fine figure of a woman. Peter comes over to look at the picture as well and is overcome with giggles on seeing it. Fluther is indignant at this reaction and asks Peter if he has any morals.

Mrs. Gogan says that it's not right to look at such a painting and Fluther agrees, saying it's almost sinful to be in the room with it. Mrs. Gogan is overcome with hysterical giggles and says that she cannot remain in the room with three men after seeing such an immoral painting. She leaves.

The Covey, who has taken off his work dungarees, throws them on top of Peter's clean white shirt on the chair. Peter asks him why he is deliberately acting in such a provocative manner, and The Covey pretends not to know what he means. Peter takes the dungarees and throws them violently onto the floor, claiming that The Covey won't succeed in making him lose his temper. The Covey responds by taking Peter's shirt and throwing it on the ground, saying that although Peter might be Nora's pet, he can't have his own way all the time. Peter tries to keep his temper, gazing at the ceiling and saying aloud that God will send The Covey to his proper place in hell in the fullness of time. The Covey curses and calls Peter an evil old bastard with a dirty, yellowish beard. Peter grabs his sword and begins chasing The Covey around the room. Although it is clear that he is only threatening and has no intention of striking The Covey, the younger man nonetheless stays well out of reach. He calls to Fluther to hold Peter and says that it's terrible to have to put up with a sword-wielding lunatic chasing him around. The Covey darts out of the room, slamming the door in Peter's face. Peter batters and pulls at the door, shouting to be let out and bemoaning his fate in having to put up with The Covey's antagonistic ways.

Fluther speaks once more, asking Peter why he allows The Covey to get to him as The Covey would leave him alone if he didn't get a reaction. Peter is still infuriated at having been mocked and taunted and says he'll get his revenge on The Covey yet.

Outside, The Covey sings Thomas Moore's Irish ballad, 'Dear Harp of My Country' through the keyhole in a mocking tone. Peter is driven wild by this provocation and hammers on the door, shouting that he will do time in prison for what he will do to The Covey when he gets his hands on him. The Covey

continues to jeer and taunt him through the keyhole.

At this juncture, Nora Clitheroe enters. She is a young woman of twenty-two, pretty and alert and keen to get on in the world. She can be firm, but when this fails her, she resorts to using her feminine charms to get her way. She is dressed more smartly than one might expect of a tenement dweller, wearing a custom-made suit and a fox fur around her neck. On seeing the situation in her home, she runs to the door and pushes Peter away from it, complaining that the moment she turns her back he and The Covey begin fighting.

Peter, who she has addressed as 'Uncle Peter', is in no mood to listen to her. He asks her in a loud voice if he is expected to put up with The Covey's provocation without responding to it. At this, The Covey rushes back into the room, telling Nora that if she doesn't keep 'Uncle Peter' under control he, The Covey, will end up killing him.

Nora brings the fight between the two men to a close. Her main concern is that their behaviour is not in keeping with the 'respectable home' she is striving to establish. Both men try to air their grievances and tell her what the other has done, but Nora is having none of it. She tells them that if they cannot behave themselves they can find lodgings elsewhere, perhaps in a place where such rough behaviour would be welcomed. Peter tries one last time to plead his case, asking Nora if she could tolerate being called a 'lemon-whiskered oul' swine.' Nora is unmoved, telling him that if he ever threatens anyone with his sword again, she will take it away from him and put it in a safe place, away from babies who don't understand how dangerous swords can be. Peter leaves the room, but not before saying defiantly that he will not let anyone call him a 'lemon-whiskered oul' swine'.

Fluther, who originally came to the Clitheroe home to fix the door, now busies himself with it, pointing out to Nora that it opens and shuts perfectly now. Nora does not respond to this, instead beginning to lay the table for tea and asking The Covey to stop provoking Peter. The Covey says that he will leave Peter alone if Peter leaves him alone and that he caught Peter sniggering at one of his – The Covey's – Socialist books the day before.

Nora repeats that the squabbling must end and says that Jack will be home soon and fighting between Peter and The Covey must not ruin the peace of their evening. She finally turns to Fluther and asks if he has managed to fix the door. Fluther demonstrates the opening and closing action of the door and says it's better than new. Nora pays him and asks him how many pints he will get with the coin she has given him. Fluther tells her that he won't buy any drink with it as he is a reformed character and could not be pressurised into buying any alcohol.

As Nora is trying out the mended door, her neighbour Bessie Burgess appears at the door. She is a tough woman of forty, her face made tougher by hard work and drink. She glares viciously and scornfully at Nora and then verbally attacks her. Bessie claims that Nora has had her door fixed because she is afraid her neighbours will steal from her and that Nora complains when Bessie sings her Protestant hymns at night after having had a few drinks. Nora tries to shut Bessie out but Bessie, screaming that she will sing when she damn well likes, pushes her way into the room and grabs Nora by the shoulders, shaking her. She calls Nora an over-dressed little tart and threatens to punch her. Frightened, Nora calls Fluther to help her.

Fluther runs over and pulls the two women apart, telling Bessie that Nora does nobody any harm and minds her own business. Bessie snaps back that Nora

puts on airs and thinks herself better than her neighbours.

As Nora sinks onto the couch, frightened, her husband enters the room. Jack is a tall, well-made man of twenty-five. His face is not as strong as his wife's and shows that he wants authority but does not have the power to get it.

Jack is angry and asks what is going on. Fluther tries to calm the situation and encourages Bessie to leave with him. Jack asks Nora what happened and Nora tells him that she merely asked Bessie to go back to her own house when the other woman flew at her and attacked her. Jack goes to the door and tells Bessie to go home and leave his wife alone. He shoves her out and Bessie shouts at him that she is a god-fearing woman and that if her son were not off fighting in the war (WWI), he would not allow her to be treated this way. She leaves with Fluther.

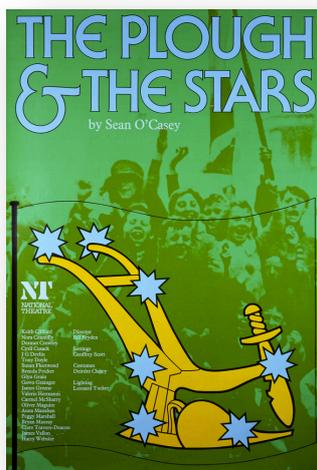
Jack goes over to Nora and comforts her but Nora is afraid that some day when she's on her own, Bessie will attack her and harm her. Jack reassures her, saying he'll talk to Bessie tomorrow when she's sober.

Nora gets up and straightens the table setting. She spots The Covey's dungarees on the floor and stares at them for a moment before asking him if he thinks that is the right place for them. The Covey, who is reading his Socialist book, says the dungarees are not doing any harm where they are but picks them up nonetheless and takes them away into the back room.

Nora calls Peter to say tea is ready and he and The Covey come in from the back room. Peter is dressed in his fancy uniform. They all sit down to eat and there is silence for a few moments before The Covey, pretending to be polite, asks Peter if he'd like more bread. Peter ignores him.

Jack tells Nora that the meeting that night is sure to be a good one and suggests they both go to it. Nora refuses but tells Jack he can go if he wants. The Covey, meanwhile, continues to antagonise Peter, solicitously offering him sugar. Peter loses his cool and asks The Covey if he is going to persist in annoying him. Nora steps in and tells Peter not to be so touchy as The Covey was merely offering him sugar. Peter says that The Covey doesn't give a damn if he wants sugar or not and is only trying to annoy him. Nora turns on The Covey and snaps at him, telling him to leave Peter alone. She says he can help himself to sugar if he needs it. The Covey repeats this to Peter in a mocking tone.

Jack turns the conversation to the night's meeting, saying bitterly that it will be Brennan's first chance to show off since he was made Captain. Jack believes that he should have been made Captain instead and scorns Brennan. He teases Nora, saying that Brennan was sweet on her at one time. Nora says that even if he was, she considered him ignorant.



The Covey says that the Irish Citizen Army are bringing disgrace on the Plough and the Stars flag. Jack Clitheroe challenges him on this and The Covey explains that the flag was originally meant to show that the country would be a socialist state, ruled by the workers from the plough to the stars. Peter scoffs at this notion and The Covey turns on him before leaving to get a look at what he sarcastically calls 'Ireland's warriors' marching past the building. As he passes, Nora tells him to brush his dusty clothes. The Covey resists at first but when Nora insists, he takes a brush and begins to brush his clothes. As he does so, he continues to taunt Peter by singing an Irish ballad.

Peter rises to the bait and leaps to his feet, accusing The Covey of mocking him and his cause. He is about to fling a cup at The Covey when Jack Clitheroe catches his arm and prevents him from doing so. Nora expresses her horror at Peter's actions.

Standing at the door, The Covey again mocks Peter, saying he is an evil old man who, when dressed up in his ridiculous uniform looks like the illegitimate child of a corporal in the Mexican army. Peter says he is so upset by The Covey's behaviour that he will not be able to do himself justice in the march that evening.

Nora has had enough of all of this bickering and helps Peter to buckle on his sword so he can go to his meeting as soon as possible. Jack irritably tells her to get Peter out of the house as quickly as she can. Peter believes everyone is turning on him but is soothed by Nora's motherly manner as she puts his plumed hat on his head and gently pushes him out the door. After a final, vague threat about The Covey, Peter leaves.

Alone at last, Nora clears the table and then sits beside Jack, asking him what he is thinking about. He says he is not thinking of anything but Nora believes he is brooding about the meeting. She reminds him of their courting days during which she had to remind him to go to meetings when he wanted to stay with her instead. She says that it was only a month or so after their wedding that he began to spend all his times at meetings instead of with her.

Jack says defensively that he gave up the Citizen Army and that she should be pleased about that but doesn't seem to be. Nora says that he didn't give it up for her but left in a sulk because he wasn't promoted to Captain.

Jack says that regardless of the reason for his leaving the Citizen army, Nora is benefitting from having him around more. He puts his arm around her and asks her if she likes her new hat. He kisses her repeatedly.

Nora says she thought he had tired of intimacy with her but Jack says he has not. He accuses her of not wanting to be kissed and then kisses her again, calling her 'Little, little red-lipped Nora'.

Nora flirtatiously removes his arm from around her and says that she is his little red-lipped Nora when it suits him but she still has to clean his boots every morning.

Jack is irritated by Nora's response and accuses her of being snotty. Nora snaps back that he is the one being snotty and bitter. Jack says that it is no wonder he is bitter when she turns every compliment into a reason to attack him.

Nora says she cannot please him and that she would be better off sewing or doing something else productive rather than arguing pointlessly. Jack does not respond and she sits down beside him and places her arm around his neck, begging him not to be so cross. Jack is still irritated and says he is not cross at all and accuses her of starting the argument. Nora tries to restore peace by saying that she didn't mean anything by what she said. When Jack says nothing, she pretends all is well and asks him for her evening cigarette allowance. He hands it over silently and they both sit there, smoking.

Nora tries to make conversation but Jack barely responds. Nora asks if he would like to see her new hat and he says he doesn't mind either way. Nora bites back a sharp reply and puts on the hat, asking what he thinks of it. Jack says it suits her and he kisses her once more. They sit down together on the couch and he becomes loving again, calling her his 'little red-lipped Nora'.

Nora reminds him that he has not sung her a song since their honeymoon and he obliges her by singing her choice, Norah:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9QXll1kwxs>
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As Jack finishes the song, Nora kisses him. At that moment, a knock is heard at the door. Nora clings to Jack and begs him not to answer it. The man knocking at the door calls Jack 'Commandant Clitheroe' and says he has a message from James Connolly. Nora again begs Jack to ignore the man at the door and to pretend they are not in. She is desperate to hang onto their happiness. Jack reassures her that he will find out what the man wants and will then send him on his way. Nora seems nervous and continues to ask Jack not to open the door. Jack ignores her, calling her objection 'silly'. He opens the door to a young man bedecked in the full splendour of an Irish Citizen Army uniform. The young man is Captain Brennan. He gives Jack a letter from James Connolly. The letter tells 'Commandant Clitheroe' to take command of the eighth battalion of the Irish Citizen Army. Jack is confused and wonders why General Connolly is calling him 'Commandant'. Captain Brennan replies that Jack was voted into that position a fortnight ago. Jack asks why he was never informed and it comes to light that Nora burned the letter informing Jack of his promotion as she feared his vanity and pride would make him put his new position in the Irish Citizen Army above his wife.

Jack is furious with Nora and grabs her roughly by the arm, warning her never to hide letters again. He goes to the chest of drawers and takes out his military belt, holster and revolver. He tells Nora not to wait up for him as he will be out all night. Nora bitterly says she doesn't care if he never comes home.

Jack leaves with Captain Brennan. Alone, Nora pulls off her new hat and

throws it to the other end of the room.

There is a knock at the door and Mollser enters. She is a young girl of about fifteen but because of her illness (pulmonary tuberculosis – known as ‘consumption’ at the time) she looks even younger. Mollser walks feebly over to Nora and says that as her mother is gone to the meeting she was hoping she could spend the evening with Nora. She says she envies Nora her health and her lovely home.

At that moment, there is the sound of marching men outside, singing ‘It’s a long way to Tipperary’ as they head off to join the British army fighting in WWI.

Bessie Burgess appears in the doorway and predicts death and destruction for those who ignore their duty to fight for Britain in the war. When she has gone, Mollser asks Nora if there is anyone left in the world with even a small amount of sense.