

Gender Roles

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

Home Before Night

- Women do not have a strong position in society
- (K = Key Moment)
- K - Jack's mother is married off to Jack's father at seventeen. Jack's grandfather and father arrange the deal. Mother's opinion was 'neither sought nor offered'. Her parents were delighted to have one less mouth to feed and a man with a steady job who would be able to provide for their daughter.

- Patriarchal society
- Women are elevated or brought low by the men in their lives
- K - Aunt Chris sets her sights on John Bennett and by marrying him, she rises in society. Now she is in the lower middle-class and lives in a house 'with stairs in it and coloured glass around the hall door'. Her role is clear and she is praised as a 'tireless wife' who ensures her husband's life runs smoothly and takes pride in her spotless house.

- Despite being more or less powerless in society, women have power in the home
- Jack's mother is the driving force in the marriage
- K - She adopts Jack without consulting her husband.
- K - The policeman who calls to the house to insist the dog be destroyed for biting a nun appeals to Jack's mother.
- Hugh Leonard says of his parents that Nick 'might strut and bluster, but it was she who ruled the roost'.
- K - It is Jack's mother who arranges it so that Jack will enter the civil service.

- Romantic relationships do not feature
- Jack doubts that his mother ever truly saw her husband in a romantic light, despite the fact that there was clearly love between them.
- The young men are immature and mistakenly believe that boasting of sexual encounters will make them appear like men rather than boys.
- K - The teenage Jack and his friends boast of their sexual exploits with girls, but when Jack admits to his friend Joe that he touched his date's breasts, Joe is shocked and it becomes clear that all of the young men are inexperienced, despite their boasting. Interestingly, the young woman with whom Jack has this encounter is not portrayed in a positive light. It is acceptable for men to be overtly sexual, but women are not meant to be driven by similar urges.

- Women restricted by Church's ban on contraception
- Jack has no siblings so his parents can afford to educate him to a higher level than the Costellos who have nine children
- Women who have children outside of wedlock are stigmatised, as are their children

Conclusion

- Patriarchal society
- Women lack status, financial independence and power
- Women must marry wealth or power
- Women in Catholic Ireland of the 1930s and 1940s burdened with large families but men are also financially responsible for these families so are also restricted
- Realistic view of gender roles at the time
- Women are expected to be good wives and mothers and those who are overtly sexual are portrayed in a negative light
- Neither gender is portrayed in a particularly negative or positive light

The Plough and the Stars

- Like HBN - patriarchal society
- Like HBN, women are confined to a domestic setting
- Women's powerlessness is highlighted far more in TPATS than in HBN as they play no role in the rebellion.

- Unlike Jack's mother in HBN, Nora Clitheroe does not rule the roost. Whereas Mag is the decision-maker in the home, Nora is not. It may appear so at first as she bosses Peter and The Covey around, but that superficial control is all she has. Like Mag, she is a strong-willed woman and does attempt to control her husband but this is where the similarities end. Nick accepts his wife's role, but Jack is not so easily manipulated.

- K- When Jack learns that Nora has burned the letter, he is furious and asserts his dominance over her, to the extent of humiliating her in front of Brennan. Nora's facade crumbles and we see that she is nothing like as strong as Mag in HBN. Without Jack, she is nothing.

“An’ she has th’ life frightened out o’ them;
washin’ their face, combin’ their hair, wipin’
their feet, brushin’ their clothes, thrimmin’ their
nails, cleanin’ their teeth - God Almighty, you’d
think th’ poor men were undhergoin’ penal
servitude.”

-Mrs Gogan, discussing Nora with Fluther Good

- In both HBN and TPATS, women are restricted by the society in which they live. In both texts, it is they who are left minding the children, often with barely enough money to raise them properly. While Jack's family has only one child to feed, large families were the norm, and this is also true in TPATS.
- K- Mrs Gogan is left to raise the consumptive Mollser and a small baby on her own, and everyone suffers as a result. Mrs Gogan has to find what work she can and Mollser is left to mind the baby, despite her youth and her illness.

- It has been argued that the portrayal of women in TPATS is negative and stereotypical; indeed there were many female protestors among those who vociferously objected to O'Casey's portrayal of the Easter Rising.

“The women are backbiting harridans,
neurotics or prostitutes.”

*-Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, widow of Francis Sheehy
Skeffington*

- Although HBN is a memoir and TPATS a fictional story, it is interesting to note that the old 'virgo - virago' portrayal of women is equally true in both. Those who are shown in a positive light are lauded for being good wives and mothers.
- K- In much the same way that the stand-offish Chris Bennett in HBN is praised for being a 'tireless wife', Bessie Burgess is redeemed by her adoption of a motherly role when she takes in the distraught Nora and does her best to nurse her back to health. It is also noted that she showed great kindness to the ailing Mollser, slipping her something to eat or drink or 'liftin' up her heart with a delicate word of kindness'.

- Women who are overtly sexual in both HBN and TPATS are viewed as prostitutes or undesirable, but it is somewhat surprising to see that O'Casey is less judgemental in this regard than is Hugh Leonard, although the latter was writing his story some fifty years after TPATS. In HBN, the young woman who tells Jack that kissing is 'only for childer' is presented as a rather vulgar, unattractive woman and Tish Meredith is a pathetic figure who has 'a queer shyness' about her on Sunday, as if she had 'no right' to be part of such a holy day. Rosie Redmond is described in more positive terms, but she is still a prostitute and the only woman in the play not presented as a wife or mother.

- There is a more negative portrayal of men in TPATS than there is in either of the other two texts. Jack Clitheroe is concerned with self-promotion and the other soldiers are focused on ideals rather than real people.
- K - Brennan is angry that Jack has not fired at the looters but rather over their heads.

- Women in TPATS are seen as more courageous than the men.
- Nora, although pregnant, braves the fighting in the streets in order to search for Jack and she claims that the men are staying at their posts because they are cowards who are 'afraid to say they're afraid'.
- Fluther alone among the men shows courage and compassion, going to find Nora in the streets and later going to arrange Mollser's funeral.
- In general, it is left to the woman to be the protectors
- K- Jack used to sing to Nora but at the end of the play it is Bessie who is left singing hymns to comfort her

Conclusion

- Women are more stereotypical characters than in HBN
- Gender roles are clearly defined, as in HBN, but in reality women take on the male role of protector
- There is a more negative portrayal of men than in HBN
- Women in both HBN and TPATS are limited by the roles society allows them to perform

The King's Speech

- Like the other two texts, women do not play a large role in the wider society but are seen as largely confined to the domestic realm
- Like TPATS, the text is set in a time of political conflict but it is only men who make the decisions
- Women's role, as in the other two texts, is a supportive one
- Patriarchal society

- In all three texts, there are two main models of womanhood: loving, supportive wife and scheming virago
- Elizabeth supports her husband fully but, like Mag in HBN, she is able to take command when he is strutting and blustering
- K - Bertie absolutely refuses to see another therapist, claiming that it is 'out of the question'. He announces that the matter is settled, but the next scene opens with the pair taking the lift down to Logue's room
- Mag and Elizabeth are vastly different in almost every way, yet they both know how to get their husbands to do what they want. Nora Clitheroe, on the other hand, is far less successful in controlling her husband.

- Wallis Simpson is a very different type of woman to Elizabeth and Mag. In many ways, she resembles Nora Clitheroe in trying to use her feminine wiles to win her man around to her way of thinking. However, Wallis is a less sympathetic character than Nora. Although both women are aware of their attractiveness, Wallis is presented as being almost sexually predatory. As a result, like any of the women in the three texts who are overtly sexual, she is viewed as more like a prostitute than potential wife material.

- K - When Churchill and Elizabeth are talking at the party in Balmoral, he asks her what hold Wallis Simpson has over David. Elizabeth claims that Wallis has 'skills which she learned in an establishment in Shanghai'. This view of Wallis is reinforced by her costume: a low-cut dress with a plunging back.

- Men are portrayed in a far more positive light than they are in TPATS. Whereas the men in TPATS want to see themselves as brave, heroic soldiers, in reality they are self-serving (Jack), cowardly (Peter) or more interested in ideals than real people (The Covey). Bertie, on the other hand, is a brave man who has fought in WWI and is ready to take on the challenge of leading his country into the next war.