

Cultural Context - Power in 'The Plough and the Stars'



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The Plough and the Stars

- ❖ Set in a time when there was a rebellion against those in power
- ❖ Deep dissatisfaction in the status quo
- ❖ Rebellion is doomed to failure and power remains in the hands of the British
- ❖ Status quo remains unchanged in terms of power

Key Moment

- ❖ The powerlessness of the rebel Irish compared to the British is made clear in Act 4 when Sergeant Tinley complains that the rebels are 'not playing the game' and says that they should 'come into the owpen and foight fair'. Flutter is stung by this comment and snaps back that fighting fair is not an option when the Irish are 'a few hundhred scrawls o' chaps with a couple o' guns an' Rosary beads, agains' a hundhred thousand trained men with horse, fut an' artillery'.

- ❖ The powerlessness of the lower classes and the poor in general is clear. The shift from Anglo Irish to Irish rule is not portrayed as a positive option as the implication is that the ordinary man and woman will certainly not benefit from any change in the power structure. The lives of those in the tenements will remain unaffected as they are so powerless that no change in the regime will be of any use to them. Indeed, their lives are considerably worsened by the events of the 1916 Rising. By the end of the play, Nora has lost her mind, her baby and her husband and Bessie Burgess has been shot by soldiers from the regime she so vociferously defended throughout the play.

- ❖ Those in power are not seen to have any real interest in those who are powerless. The rhetoric of 'The Voice of the Man' outside the window in Act 2 is focused on willing sacrifice and dying for Ireland. The people are urged to 'rejoice in this terrible war' and 'be ready to pour out the same red wine in the same glorious sacrifice' as previous battles. At the same time the British are sending hundreds of thousands of young men to fight and die on the battlefields of Europe. Bessie Burgess' son is returning home with a shattered arm after fighting in the trenches and there is a terrible irony to the soldiers signing 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' in Act 4 when we know that Bessie's injured son will be returning to a home in which his mother has been shot dead by men from his own side. Those who are powerless suffer greatly as a result of being caught up in the power struggles of those in charge.