

Cultural Context



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

Home Before Night

- ❖ Power rests firmly with the wealthy, educated members of society
- ❖ Jack's family is poor and working class and he has to decide whether to accept this or to try to make his own way in the world

- ❖ Novel set at a time when the balance of power in Ireland shifted from the Anglo-Irish to the Catholic Irish merchant classes
- ❖ Key moment: the passing of Enderley (the Jacobs' home) to a Catholic family who change the name to 'Santa Maria'. Hugh Leonard despises the new ruling class, seeing them as 'gombeen men' with wives whose backsides 'sang of soda bread and spuds'; 'builders and tearers-down, huxters and chancers, the jumped up and the dragged up'.

- ❖ Leonard reflects bitterly that these people are 'in charge now' and that they are nothing like as dignified and fundamentally decent as the 'Quality' that they supplanted.
- ❖ Changes in the power structure have little effect on Jack's family's fortunes except to make Jack's father's working life a little more awkward.
- ❖ There is a sense that those in power in the new Ireland do not care as much for those in their charge as did their predecessors.
- ❖ Jack's father finds them standing over him as he works and checking to see that he does not steal from them.

The Plough and the Stars

- ❖ Set at a time when there was a rebellion against those in power
- ❖ However, rebellion is doomed to failure and power remains in the hands of the British, unlike HBN which is set after Irish independence.
- ❖ The powerlessness of the 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'. Fluther 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'.

- ❖ In both texts, the powerlessness of the lower classes and the poor is clear. The shift from Anglo-Irish to Irish rule is not a positive one, and the implication in TPATS is that the ordinary man will certainly not benefit from any shift in the power structure. We see that the lives of the people in the tenements.
- ❖ Unlike HBN, the Anglo-Irish and the British are not seen as in any way benevolent and care nothing for those in their charge.

- ❖ Those who seek power in TPATS are represented by 'The Voice of the Man' outside the window in Act 2. The rhetoric is focused on willing sacrifice and dying for Ireland. The people are urged to 'rejoice in this terrible war' and to 'be ready to pour out the same red wine in the same glorious sacrifice' as previous battles.
- ❖ The power struggle means at best no change and at worst more suffering and hardship for the tenement dwellers. Nora loses her husband, her baby and her sanity and Mollser dies of consumption.

The King's Speech

- ❖ Like the other two texts, we see that power rests firmly in the hands of the educated and wealthy.
- ❖ However, the fundamental difference between this text and the other two is that we are primed to view those in power in a very positive light.



- ❖ The king is seen as someone who cares for his people and is keen to do his utmost for them, unlike the rulers and those who would be rulers in TPATS, who view the people as necessary sacrifices in the struggle for independence.
- ❖ When King George dies, the Pathe newsreader comments that 'All salute as they pass the Cenotaph. One million died for him... as King George died fro them'. The king is seen as using his power to fight with and for his people in TKS.

- ❖ Bertie's desire to be able to speak publicly is driven by his need to serve his people well and be seen as a good leader. He regrets that he has to send men to war, saying that he would have preferred 'a peaceful way out of the differences'.
- ❖ Unlike Jack Clitheroe and the rebel leaders in TPATS, Bertie does not seek any personal glory and sees himself as serving the people: 'If I am to be King...where is my power? May I form a Government, levy a tax or declare a war? No! Yet I am the seat of all authority. Why? Because the Nation believes when I speak, I speak for them.'

- ❖ While Bertie delivers his final speech, the camera cuts repeatedly from him to a montage of various locations in which we see the king's subjects listening raptly and respectfully to his words. This is in stark contrast to the occupants of the pub in TPATS who either ignore the Voice of the Man and continue with their own conversations and concerns or, like Peter and Fluther, say they are moved by it but do nothing in response except buy a round of drinks!
- ❖ It is clear that the power Bertie wields brings him great respect and is therefore deemed good and worthwhile, unlike those who rule or seek to rule in TPATS and in HBN. In the latter texts, the powerful are more concerned with themselves than with anyone beneath them.

Is there any change in the balance of power?

- ❖ In HBN, power shifts from the British and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy to the Catholic merchant classes but this is not seen as a particularly positive move and makes no positive difference in the lives of the ordinary working men like Jack's da.
- ❖ In TPATS, the power struggle is doomed to failure and the British remain in charge. The lives of the ordinary people are made worse rather than better by the power struggle.
- ❖ In TKS, power remains in the hands of the wealthy and the upper class, but this is seen as a positive thing, unlike the situation in the other two texts.