

# Gender Roles

The Plough and the Stars



# The Plough and the Stars

- Patriarchal society
- Women are confined to a domestic setting
- Women's powerlessness is highlighted in TPATS as they play no role in the rebellion



- Nora Clitheroe does not rule the roost. She is not the decision-maker in the home, although it appear so at first as she bosses Peter and The Covey around. However, that superficial control is all she has. She is a strong-willed woman and does attempt to control her husband but Jack is not easily manipulated.



- Key Moment - 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 TPATS, women are restricted by the society in which they live. It is they who are left minding the children, often with barely enough money to raise them properly.
- Key Moment- 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*



- It is interesting to note that the old 'virgo - virago' portrayal of women is seen in TPATS. Those who are shown in a positive light are lauded for being good wives and mothers.
- Key Moment- 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 TPATS are viewed as prostitutes or undesirable, but it is somewhat surprising to see that O'Casey is not judgemental in this regard, although he was writing in the early 1900s. Rosie Redmond is described in quite positive terms and we feel sympathy with her when the Covey attacks her verbally in the pub. However she is still a prostitute and the only woman in the play not presented as a wife or mother.



- The harshest judges of each gender in the play are those of their own sex.
- The men are egged on to fight by other men and taunted for cowardice. Bessie Burgess and Mrs Gogan disapprove of Nora's low-cut dresses and consider her outfits inappropriate for a married woman.
- Bessie attacks Mrs Gogan for 'dhrinkin' with a bevy of men' in the pub, saying a woman who does this is 'hardly an example to her sex.'



- It is not just women who are shown in a negative light in the play. Jack Clitheroe is concerned with self-promotion and the other soldiers are focused on ideals rather than real people. 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).



- There is a certain pressure on men to behave in a way that is expected of them.
- Those who do not fight for Britain in WWI or for Ireland in the Easter Rising are viewed as less than manly. Fluther, The Covey and Uncle Peter do not fight, despite the latter pair's assertion that they are more than willing to do so.
- Key moments: Bessie Burgess jeers 'Go on an' get your guns if you are men', and Corporal Stoddart says 'a man's a man an' 'e 'as to foight for his country'. Captain Brennan taunts Jack when he is torn between leaving and staying with her. Jack leaves his wife because his manly pride won't allow him to stay and avoid the fighting he has come to loathe.



- 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'. However, this also shows the way in which men are restricted by gender roles as they are - according to Nora - afraid of being seen as unmanly and cowardly by refusing to fight.
- 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 quite stereotypical characters
- Gender roles are clearly defined, but in reality women take on the male role of protector
- Women in TPATS are limited by the roles society allows them to perform