

JUNIOR CYCLE ENGLISH

Lesson activities for *The Plough and the Stars* by Seán O'Casey

Learning outcomes

This lesson plan fulfils many of the learning outcomes for Junior Cycle English but there is a particular focus on the following outcomes:

Strand: Oral language 12. Demonstrate how register, including grammar, text structure and word choice, varies with context and purpose in spoken texts.

Strand: Reading 7. Select key moments from their texts and give thoughtful value judgements on the main character, a key scene, a favourite image from a film, a poem, a drama, a chapter, a media or web based event.

Strand: Writing 5. Engage with and learn from models of oral and written language use to enrich their own writing.

The scene

It is April 1916 and the Easter Rising is taking place in Dublin. Fluther, Covey and Peter are residents of an inner city tenement dwelling. In the midst of the chaos of the rebellion happening on the streets outside, a wealthy woman from the fashionable Rathmines area of the city approaches the three men.

Extract from Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (London, Faber and Faber: 1998), pp 213-4.

A fashionably dressed, middle-aged, stout woman comes hurriedly in, and makes for the group. She is almost fainting with fear.

Woman For Gawd's sake, will one of you kind men show any safe way for me to get to Wrathmines?...I was foolish enough to visit a friend, thinking the howl thing was a joke, and now I cawn't get a car or a tram to take me home - isn't it awful?

Fluther I'm afraid, ma'am, one way is as safe as another.

Woman And what am I gowing to do? Oh, isn't this awful?...I'm so different from others....The mowment I hear a shot, my legs give way under me - I cawn't stir, I'm paralysed - isn't it awful?

Fluther (*moving away*) It's a derogatory way to be, right enough, ma'am.

Woman (*catching Fluther's coat*) Creeping along the street there, with my head down and my eyes half shut, a bullet whizzed past within an inch of my nowse....I had to lean against the wall for a long time, gasping for breath - I nearly passed away - it was awful!...I wonder, would you kind men come some of the way and see me safe?

Fluther I have to go away, ma'am, to thry an' save a few things from th' burnin' buildin's.

The Covey Come on, then, or there won't be anything left to save.

The Covey and Fluther hurry away.

Woman (to Peter) Wasn't it an awful thing for me to leave my friend's house? Wasn't it an idiotic thing to do?...I haven't the slightest idea where I am...You have a kind face, sir. Could you possibly come and pilot me in the direction of Wrathmines?

Peter (indignantly) D'ye think I'm goin' to risk me life throttin' in front of you? An' maybe get a bullet that would gimme a game leg or something that would leave me a jibe an' a jeer to Fluther an' th' young Covey for th' rest o' me days! (*With an indignant toss of the head he walks into the house.*)

Woman (going out) I know I'll fall down in a dead faint if I hear a shot go off anyway near me - isn't it awful!

ACTIVITY ONE: oral language - dialect

- Pre-reading: discuss with students key words such as **accent** and **dialect**.
- In groups of four, students read the extract aloud. More confident students could take the roles of the woman from Rathmines and Fluther.
- In their groups, students discuss how O'Casey's choice of language in this extract help us to understand the backgrounds and personalities of the characters. How does O'Casey use language to indicate that this woman is from a middle class background? Identify examples. How does O'Casey's choice of language indicate that the men in this extract are ordinary working class Dubliners? Do you think that O'Casey could be accused of exaggerating the accents of the characters?

ACTIVITY TWO: reading - character analysis and stagecraft

The following questions could form the basis of a group discussion or students could work independently to produce written answers in their copybooks:

- Describe the difficult situation the woman finds herself in. Why is she in this difficult situation?
- How do Covey, Fluther and Peter react to the woman's plea for help?
- Can you identify how O'Casey created humour in this scene? [Students might refer to: the melodramatic entrance of the woman, the exaggerated accents of the characters, the pitiful excuses of Covey, Fluther and Peter to avoid helping her, the woman's inflated sense of self-pity etc.]
- Imagine you have been asked to stage a performance of this scene. How would you use the techniques of stagecraft (costume, lighting, props, body language etc.) to add to the humour of this scene?

ACTIVITY THREE: writing - extension activity

- Imagine that the woman manages to make her way home to arrive. Write the text of the conversation she has with her husband, describing her experience in Dublin city centre that day.

The following **success criteria** could be provided to students for completing this writing task:

- write the conversation in the style of a script
- describe the woman's experience, referring to some of the events from the scene you have read
- use language appropriate for the character of the woman
- include character and state directions
- check your work for capital letters, understanding, spelling and punctuation.

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