

Theme of Escape in *The
Plough and the Stars*



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How is the theme introduced?

- ❖ Point:
- ❖ From the start of the play, it is clear that Nora is trying to **escape the poverty and deprivation of life in the tenements**. She dreams of a better life and makes every effort to create the idyllic family life she desires.

- ❖ Key moment 1:
- ❖ The stage directions tell us that the Clitheroe home with its prints of important artworks and the wooden fireplace “painted to look like marble” shows “an attempt towards a finer expression of domestic life”. We learn from Mrs Gogan that Nora says she wouldn’t like to live forever in a tenement house and calls them “vaults [...] that are hidin’ th’ dead instead of homes that are sheltherin’ th’ livin’.” It is clear that Nora wants **escape the reality of her life in the tenement** and makes every effort to create a pleasant home in the two rooms she and her husband share.

- ❖ Key moment 2:
- ❖ Nora asks Fluther Good to put a **lock** on her door. Nora attempts to **escape** the communal life of the tenements and the unwelcome intrusion of her neighbours by **controlling who enters her home**. If she can place a physical barrier between herself and the other tenement dwellers, Nora may be able to convince herself that she is not one of them.

What **obstacles** stand in the way of Nora achieving her **escape**?

- ❖ Nora's neighbours disapprove of her attempts to escape the reality of life in the tenement.
- ❖ Key moment:
- ❖ Mrs Gogan is relatively mild in her criticism, claiming that Nora has "notions of upperosity" but Bessie Burgess is scornful and vicious, accusing Nora of putting a lock on her door because she thinks she is better than the other tenement dwellers and fears they might steal from her.

- ❖ Jack is more concerned with his quest for glory than his role as a husband and father. He does not share Nora's vision of escaping the misery of their current situation by making a cosy, family home and saving for the day they can move out of the tenement.

- ❖ Key moment:
- ❖ Nora tries to cajole Jack into being satisfied with family life. When Brennan calls to the house with a message from General Connolly, Nora fears that her efforts to make a secure, loving family home will be in vain. She urges Jack not to answer the door, saying ‘Don’t break our happiness... Pretend we’re not in’, but he abandons her as soon as he learns that she burned the letter informing him that he had been promoted to Commandant of the ICA. **Jack has his own dreams of escape but they are incompatible with Nora’s. As a result, her efforts to escape are thwarted by his.** Jack imagines himself escaping his ordinary, undistinguished life by becoming a hero fighting for Irish independence, and he bitterly resents Nora’s manipulative attempts to make him stay at home with her in order to create what Mrs Gogan calls “a babby house”.

Nora's failure to escape

- ❖ Nora dreamed of escaping the deprivation of life in the tenements. She wanted to escape the fate of those around her, like Mrs Gogan, and create a better future for herself, Jack and any children they might have.
- ❖ Despite her strength and determination, Nora is defeated in her attempt to create what Mrs Gogan calls 'a babby house'.

- ❖ In the final act, Nora has been taken to Bessie Burgess' home. Far from escaping the deprivation and squalor of tenement life, Nora has been reduced to taking refuge in Bessie's tiny, cramped attic rooms.

Escapes in the only way she can

- ❖ Unable to cope with the horror of all she has lost, Nora loses her mind. In a tragic reflection of her earlier preparations for Jack's return home for tea, the distraught, dishevelled Nora makes a pathetic attempt to lay Bessie's table for Jack's tea. The woman who seemed so in control in Act 1 and whose determination to escape the limitations of her lower-class life can now only escape into the realms of insanity.

Insights

- Characters wish to escape a world in which they do not feel they belong
- Characters need the support of those around them if they are to escape
- Accepting reality, however unpleasant, can help a character's chance of escape
- The author's treatment of the theme influences our view of that theme