The Plough and the Stars

Act 1

The opening scene or episode seems shapeless - a cameo of normal life:

* We see Mrs. Gogan's snooping, comments on Nora.
* The teasing of Peter.
* Both Fluther and Mrs. Gogan refer to the Nationalist rising.
* The Covey's arrival brings hot news of the evening's demo.
* We see first of Peter's quarrels with the Covey - both characters are comic,
* But Peter more obviously so
* While the Covey is a political bore,
* Peter is a posturing coward.
* The next entrance is Nora's - she appears to have influence over these four, but is intimidated by Bessie.
* Fluther's exit leads to tea-scene - Nora presiding, Peter and Covey sparring.
* These leave - and we see an apparently intimate scene.
* But this is shattered by Brennan's revelation and Nora's confession.
* Captain Brennan came by two days before to tell Jack that he had been promoted to Commandant.
* He told Nora.
* Nora never told Jack because she didn’t want him to spend all his time on army duty and neglect her.
* Jack feels very let down by her and he leaves after fighting with her.
* The very sick Mollser comes in and sits with Nora. They are both very upset but for different reasons.

Act two.

* The prostitute and the barman listen to the rabble-rouser (Pearse) outside. While Rosie bemoans the lack of custom, she endorses the “sacred truth” of the patriot's speech.
* Peter and Fluther enter roused to a high pitch of excitement by what they have heard. Yet Peter is a coward and Fluther will later criticise patriotic fervour.
* As these leave the Covey enters, disgusted by Pearse's speech (but no more understanding it than Peter and Fluther). Rosie attempts to interest him but he backs off in fear. We see that he is fearful of the physical reality of sex.
* Peter and Fluther return, joined by Mrs. Gogan, with her baby. Mrs. Gogan's comments on sacrifice for Ireland lead to Fluther's twitting of Peter.
* The entry of Bessie and the Covey allows Peter to recognise his real enemy, but the two women intervene with their own quarrel - Mrs. Gogan, thinking of Ireland and Bessie of the loyalists who have gone to fight in France and Belgium.
* This breaks down into personal abuse (despite Fluther's and Peter's intervention) with the result that Mrs. Gogan hands her child to Peter, in order to fight her tormentor. The barman throws out both women, and Peter pursues Mrs. Gogan with the baby.

Act Three

This act is set in the Clitheroes' home - inside and out. The time is dusk in Easter week, months after Act Two. Mollser is comforted by Jenny Gogan - she is dead within days (before Act Four). The main episodes are as follows:

* Peter and the Covey (together) bring news of the rising - Bessie foresees defeat of the rebels and gloats.
* Fluther brings back Nora - she has not found Jack. She rails against the rebellion. The men play dice until interrupted by Bessie (who has returned impossibly quickly).
* Bessie tells the others of the looting (she has done some)and Fluther and the Covey go to do likewise.
* Mrs. Gogan and Bessie argue over the pram. They agree to go looting together. Peter follows but runs home at the sound of heavy artillery.
* The Young Covey returns with a sack of flour and a ham. Peter shuts him out but someone else lets him in. Mrs. Gogan and Bessie come back, friendly, with their loot.
* Brennan and Clitheroe appear with the wounded Langon. Bessie taunts them (especially the chicken-butcher, Brennan) from an upstairs window (we see into this room in Act Four). Nora tries to detain Jack, but the men leave. Clitheroe will not be seen again in the play.
* Fluther returns, drunk and singing and is hauled inside by Bessie. Nora goes into labour (this throws more light on Jack's departure) and Bessie goes to bring the doctor - Fluther is incapable and Mrs. Gogan fearful and needing to attend to the dying Mollser.

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Act Four

This act is set inside Bessie's living room. The time is dusk again, a few days later. Mollser has died, Nora has had a stillbirth and Clitheroe is also dead, unbeknown to her.

* The three men play cards while Bessie tends Nora. Mollser's coffin stands in the room (why not in her mother's? because of the baby?). We learn of Jenny's background - her consumptive husband died leaving her a baby. Presumably “before he died” refers to “leaving baby...” rather than its birth - that is, he made her pregnant, and then died.
* Brennan arrives without uniform - he has given up the fight. His account of Clitheroe's heroic death is thus rather hollow, as Bessie shrewdly notes.
* Nora appears and speaks insanely. Bessie tries to calm her. The Covey reproaches Peter who has spoken of Jack's death. Brennan is fearful of arrest but Fluther tells him to pose as “one of the household”.
* We have seen the self-appointed citizen soldiers; now we see a real (professional, trained) soldier, Corporal Stoddart. He has come to oversee Mollser's funeral arrangements - a routine duty, but she has died of natural causes. He asks Bessie who is in the house, as he has to round up all of the men. (While the four men carry out the coffin).
* Sergeant Tinley brings more news of the fighting. He is more brusque than Stoddart and provokes more reaction from Fluther. He threatens to shoot the four men whom he leads out.
* Nora goes to the window, calling for Jack. Bessie pulls her away, but is shot. (The soldiers assume any figure at a window may be a sniper). Bessie curses Nora but her last words are a hymn of faith in Jesus.

Mrs. Gogan takes over the care of Nora whom she leads out. Tinley and Stoddart drink the tea (which Nora has made?). As the soldiers outside sing, they join in the chorus, “Keep the home fires burning”.