

PLAY SYNOPSIS

Prison Notebooks

DMAPP

PROLOGUE: ‘Memory’

Prison. A vacant cell, sparsely furnished. There is a faint, haunting soundscape of banging doors, women’s distant voices, indiscriminate gunfire, and newsboys calling out. A jail door bangs shut. Blackout. Gaslight gradually begins to fill the room. A woman has appeared, spectral and striking. She stands, gazing at the barred window. She speaks as if from a faraway dream. This ghostly figure is Dorothy in later life, or perhaps after death, reflecting on a kaleidoscope of memories – acknowledging that only in hindsight can she see order in the “altered allegiances” and “discarded hopes” that were her life.

ACT 1: Early Days at Mountjoy Gaol, November 1922

Scene 1: A parcel arrives

The lights brighten suddenly. There is the sound of happy laughter and chatter as we are in the hustle and bustle of the female prison in 1922. The actor now assumes the persona of a young ‘ordinary criminal’ prisoner who delivers a parcel to Dorothy. It contains food, which she generously shares with her fellow prisoners. We understand that a vigil is happening upstairs for Miss MacSwiney, who is on hunger strike. Dorothy has also received her much-wanted writing materials. Now she can formally commence a journal she has been keeping on scraps of paper hidden in holes in the cell wall over the previous fortnight. She lays the scraps out on the table, trying to order them according to headings Vigil, Prison Moods, Prison Dreams, Prison Letters, Victory... When satisfied, she begins to transcribe her gaol diary – commencing with the day of her arrest.

Scene 2: A Stand-off with Paudeen

Dorothy begins to write about her arrest, but she is distracted by an argument on the landing. Paudeen, the Deputy Governor, is announcing that the female political prisoners must retire to their cells at five o’clock. The women are divided with the militants, under Brigid O’Mullane, determined to protest, while the “political women” (spokesperson Lili O’Brennan) prefer to negotiate. Dorothy steps in with a time-buying compromise suggestion. Her moderate view wins the day but sets a tension that will continue between the militarist women and the more politically focused ‘Suffolk street’ propaganda team.

Scene 3: Early Days

Back at her diary, Dorothy recalls her arrival in prison a fortnight earlier. She and her fellow new detainees face an immediate challenge: to join Mary MacSwiney and her supporters on hunger strike or not. Appalled by the notion of this “ultimate sacrifice”, Dorothy nonetheless volunteers to do so, but a group decision is deferred until morning. At dawn, Sighle Humphreys, who has been on hunger strike for a week, comes to tell the new arrivals the solidarity strike is over. MacSwiney will continue her protest, but alone. The women visit Miss MacSwiney, already weak in her cell, and pray. Dorothy faints during this unfamiliar (to her) rosary ritual and has the first of several “out of body” experiences. A loveable little kitten visited her.

Scene 4: Vigil

This Scene refers to a 24-hour vigil kept by the women prisoners just outside the door of the infirmary cell where Mary MacSwiney is conducting her hunger strike. This unfolding drama is attracting international media attention and preoccupying the women in the prison. The Scene explores Macardle’s reflections on religion and her spirituality. It explores ritual and magic as portals into the otherworld, the practice of incantations and purification as primal practice of Catholics. The Scene features Lily O’Brennan, former personal secretary to Erskine Childers. The Scene opens in darkness. A match is struck. A small, squat candle flares and settles. The character holds it a little from her chin, uplifting her face. She appears to be in a trance. It is fellow prisoner Lily O’ Brennan in conversation with Our Lady. Later, Dorothy, on her way to keep vigil for Miss MacSwiney meets Lili, who recounts her vision of the Blessed Virgin in a melting candle. This prompts Dorothy to question her own beliefs. She remarks that she cannot pray but then attempts fiercely to “image” or will things to happen. The sound of the rosary is heard. She goes hence to sit in vigil with Miss MacSwiney. While she and a young girl called Tess are kneeling in vigil outside the cell of the great hunger-striking prison matriarch, a benign patriot ghost seems to pass by whom they believe to be Terence, the famous martyred brother of Miss MacSwiney.

Scene 5: Burnt Offerings

The crackling sound of fire is faintly heard. Immediately after this ghost incident, we see Dorothy looking anxiously out her window as she senses a fire. This Scene has a nightmarish, traumatic aspect. Dorothy receives an ‘underground’ letter from Maud Gonne, with whom

she has been lodging before her arrest, detailing the raid at her home. A voiceover of Gonne tells her that all her personal papers and literary manuscripts have been destroyed in a malicious street fire by Free State soldiers. Dorothy has a traumatic reaction, falling to her knees and grieving among the imagined ashes of her dramatic heroines and her pages of poetry. She mourns the lost heroines of her unpublished plays, namely Cassandra, Asthara but especially, Dervorgilla, for whom she wrote innocent and in particular, for a poetry book which has been her labour of love for many years. She remembers that allegiance to the Republic had cost her nothing; perhaps this was her baptism. She tries to shield Miss MacSwiney from this news but the older woman senses and understands her distress and confirms the act as an outrage. Dorothy begins afresh on a collection of short fiction and pens some lines from a short story, “The Prisoner”, which explores concepts of time.

Scene 6: Execution of Childers

On the soundtrack, we hear fellow inmate Nóinín Cogley singing a haunting Irish song at night for Miss MacSwiney. We hear the gentle and soothing sounds of water splashing. The monotony and discomfort of prison are broken for Dorothy by the rare luxury of a hot bath and a moment of reverie at a window overlooking the canal. But this is broken by her sudden expression of repressed grief at the acknowledgement that a great friend, Erskine Childers, has been captured and will undoubtedly be executed. From her cell, Dorothy can hear Nóinín Cogley, a prisoner, singing a Spanish song that captures the woe of the situation. Nóinín’s singing permeates the prison walls. The women occupy themselves with sewing, walking in the yard and playing games. Lili O’Brennan’s stoicism helps keep Dorothy’s spirit up. Still, the uneasy calm is disturbed by reports of multiple executions outside the prison, culminating in the shocking news of Childers’ execution by Free State forces. Dorothy lies down and tries to sleep, but her sleep is disturbed by the noise of riotous behaviour outside the jail, which she describes as being like a “grand Guignol play.”

Scene 7: A Victory

The Next morning Dorothy is sitting in vigil with Miss MacSwiney. Dorothy is troubled by the effect the news of Childers’ execution will have on Mary MacSwiney, now gravely ill. As she sits in vigil with her, an incident brings to the fore a growing tension between the militant and the political wings in the jail: Brigid barges in seeking advice from the hunger-striking matriarch on a minor matter of prison discipline. Dorothy is outraged and explodes at Brigid. A meeting is called to create a better relationship between the militarists and the

politics, and the row is resolved. Brigid acknowledges that they are both now caring for a dying woman. However, events take an unexpected turn. A strange doctor and some officials arrive. MacSwiney is suddenly released. She is stretcher borne down in an emotional procession, and wild celebrations follow her departure among the women left behind. Dorothy takes a moment alone to kneel by MacSwiney's empty bed and be at peace as Nóinín's singing fills the air. Lights fade to black out.

ACT 2: Mountjoy: December 1922 to February 1923

Scene 1: Dissent, Protest and In-fighting

As the civil war outside descends into anarchy and reprisals, the women within the prison, without the unifying fulcrum of Miss MacSwiney, fall to bickering and form camps. This period is one of division, and tension and stand-offs ensue between prisoners and jail authorities. The Free State authorities seek to degrade the prisoners by removing concessions. The convict women are not bringing up food, and the prisoners decide to protest by going without food. There is more anarchy as some of the militant women, led by Sighle Humphreys, go on a wildcat protest beyond the bounds of what the prison council has agreed, exacerbating the tensions. A scummage occurs between the prison guards and the women prisoners, and Dorothy, appalled at the manhandling of the women, blazes at Paudeen. After the fight, Dorothy sits at her desk and journals. Her political writings are angry and polemic. We see Dorothy in conflict with herself. She admits privately that she has more in common with her English friends than the Irish Republicans with whom she is incarcerated. Dorothy can't help but contrast her somewhat unthinking prisoner comrades with her intellectual British friends.

Scene 2: Dreams

Music plays softly. The lighting turns a vivid blue. Dorothy rises from her knees and begins a mesmeric, gentle dance as she enters an other-worldly reverie – a benign dreaming of past delights, windows and memories. She describes and enacts a sequence of dreams and illusions she has begun to experience, suggesting a deepening of her trauma but an equal heightening of the psychic sensibilities and self-awareness that mark her out as an emerging visionary artist. There are elements of dance, voiceover, half-waking narration, and calm and sudden fear. Midway through, the dreams are no longer from the world of sleep but from a semi-awake state of rarefied consciousness where three times in succession, she sees “a

window appear in a wall”. She visions peaceful and serene scenes through these uncanny windows – a university garden, a city street by night, and the blue Mediterranean sea. She dreams of being back at Alexandra college, teaching a poetry class to her students. Upon waking, she remembers Nóinín told her fortune the day before, prefiguring the news of her dismissal from her beloved teaching post at “Alex”. She reflects on a world now lost to her as a respectable teacher from a good family who has distanced themselves from her. She determines her future will be as a writer. Her moment of reflection is broken by the sound of Paudeen calling the women to the landing. The women gather on the landing, some raucously ridiculing Paudeen as he announces they – although not all of them – will be transferred to Kilmainham Prison at midnight. The women step forward as their names are called. Lights fade to black as Dorothy packs to leave for the new surrounds of Kilmainham gaol.

INTERVAL

ACT 3: Transfer to Kilmainham Gaol: February 1923

Dorothy was moved twice during her six-month incarceration, first from Mountjoy to Kilmainham and later from Kilmainham to the North Dublin Union. This Scene takes place after Christmas, in early January 1923. Paudeen O’Keeffe, the infamous deputy governor of Mountjoy Prison, arranges the transfer. Excitement fills the air as the women pack hastily and assemble outside. She meets with Betty, a new girl. Before loading the trucks, they wait at the grave of Kevin Barry. In the yard, a young Free State soldier, her guard, makes the unexpected and moving gesture of giving Dorothy a gift of ‘sacred’ clay from the grave of their shared War of Independence hero-martyr Kevin Barry. She senses the young man’s horror at the Civil War and his ignoble duty to incarcerate these idealistic women in his charge and entrusts to him a secret letter to her mother. She reassures the soldier that although he is on the wrong side, there will ultimately be peace and forgiveness. Dorothy recounts her journey by military truck from Mountjoy prison yard to the notorious ‘Kill and Maim Them’ gaol. On the truck journey through the dark city streets, the air filled with the sound of a prisoner’s melodeon. There is great immensity in arriving where the men of 1916 were executed and to meet the daughter of James Connolly.

ACT 4: Kilmainham: February – March 1923

Scene 1: A Great Cage

For the most part, Kilmainham lives up to Dorothy's worst expectations. It is dank and cold and full of reminders of atrocities committed within its confines, most notably the execution of the 1916 leaders. She shares a dark cell with her new friend, her 'wife' Betty. Nonetheless, she finds some solace. A large landing window upstairs affords a view of the bright outside world. She and Betty take a tour of the gaol. They walk around the gallery examining the doors of the cells, only to discover the name of Betty's brother, Shawn, carved on one of them. Shawn was injured during the four courts fight and imprisoned at Kilmainham, where he died six weeks later. They meet Nora Connolly and Grace Plunkett. Grace was brought to Kilmainham during the night by men wearing the same uniform that Joseph Plunkett wore. Dorothy reflects on England's 'monstrous' and 'abnormal' treatment of Ireland.

Scene 2: A visit from Nora Connolly

Dorothy befriends and develops great admiration for Nora Connolly, daughter of the great executed hero James Connolly. Although delicate and recovering from a breakdown, Nora is an inspiring figure and Dorothy is drawn to her wisdom and also her apparent psychic sensibilities. She tells Nora that she is teaching other prisoners about Diarmuid Mc Morrogh, 'the first cause of all our troubles'. Dorothy is reminded of her lost play heroine Dervorgilla. Nora tells Dorothy how she helped her father prepare for the 1916 rebellion. She believed Ireland would never have been a Republic if her father had not died. She tells Dorothy how her father's spirit appeared to her one night as a source of consolation and helped her keep going. She claimed that after her father died, the sun left her world.

Scene 3: The Whirligig Dream

In a dream, she sees a symbolist vision of her political leader de Valera, "The Chief", having a problematic encounter with Miss MacSwiney. She sees de Valera reunited with Miss MacSwiney, only for them to be separated and for the dream to turn into a bloody nightmare of a whirligig accident. The dream seems to foreshadow a significant political split that has not yet occurred but will occur soon in the Republican movement when a letter detailing the beginnings of a MacSwiney/Dev split is revealed. Dorothy awakens in despair from this nightmare and declares prison will not break her spirit: nonetheless, she has moments of sadness and belief that the war and her imprisonment will never end.

She senses the presence of a consoling voice beside her saying, ‘The life of iron! You must manage to endure this little thing! And as for God, God made this gaol’. This brings her comfort and the strength she needs to finish her final ‘Earthbound’ Story, *De Profundis*. News filters in of setbacks in the war effort, and the whisper of possible surrender fills the prison. Liam Deasy has called for surrender, but from his execution cell and, therefore, subject to dismay and suspicion among the women. The external division between Liam Deasy, who seeks accord and Liam Lynch, who rejects it, is again mirrored within the women’s prison. It is hinted that Dorothy and Nora lean more towards noble surrender, whereas former ally Lili disagrees with any such strategy. This event, however, sees a deepening of Dorothy’s pacifist and pro-Dev leanings - towards surrender and politicisation as against useless war. Her political reflections become increasingly sophisticated and prescient – indicative, perhaps, of the political historian she would later become. Any sense of temporary comfort is disturbed when Mary MacSwiney is re-arrested. Unlike before, when she was afraid to - Dorothy is now ready to join her on a moral hunger strike – but is spared again by the unexpected sudden release of MacSwiney 12 hours after her arrest.

Scene 4: Homemaking

This upturn in fortunes is followed by another minor improvement, as Dorothy and Betty are transferred from the “white sepulchre” of the lower floor to a top-floor cell with more sunlight and a view. She takes us on a tour of her “Chambre” and enjoys days of hope as Spring peeps through the window. A time of brief hope as Dorothy and the women attempt to make a home in the hellhole of the new gaol. Dorothy describes her cell revelling in the simple joys of a sooty jerry can where she can make a cup of tea and fry rashers and eggs. Her prized possession is a photo of Childers; looking at it, she notes she is coming more to terms with his heroic death.

Scene 5: Betty’s Dreams

Betty confides to Dorothy about a broken love for an enemy soldier, Tom. This man, it transpires, had been a spy for the IRA but has now been outed and captured. Dorothy sympathises with Betty in her distress. Meanwhile, Dorothy’s mixed emotions about her family continue to preoccupy her. She reflects upon her differences with her family, who despise her politics and despair of her behaviour, particularly Donald, who she sees as immersed in British upper-class life, concluding “Mother and Mona and Donald are among the enemy”. A darkening begins again as Dorothy’s delicate cellmate Betty reveals that she is

having constant dreams about Tom, who has been arrested and may face execution. Dorothy takes an avid and deeply compassionate interest in Betty's dreams, particularly about her soldier boy – seeing in her images of a cart, a sheet and a tangled green field, portents of hangings, premature death and a lost Republic. As Betty seems to teeter towards a breakdown, Dorothy also relives her recent past's suppressed traumas – particularly the burning of all her literary manuscripts some months earlier. Betty finally does suffer a breakdown. Dorothy looks up from a troubled reverie to see Betty weeping at the half moon. She comforts her friend to sleep, but the sound of the young woman sobbing triggers a psychic convulsion in Dorothy.

INTERLUDE: 'Trauma'

Here we depart dramatically into an expressionist finale. It coincides with the sudden “end” of Dorothy's surviving diaries – (the missing volumes were burned by her brother many years later, after her death). It takes us into a convulsive, psychic dramatisation of imagined trauma, foresight, and world events. Drawing on Macardle's later Gothic Horror aesthetic where the final month of her incarceration is presented as a heightened, nightmarish phantasmagoria.

We represent this elongated psychic episode, part dream, part traumatic reality as a “future vision” where Dorothy foresees moments from her future through a veil of fire.

Her body begins to heave, and the symptoms of a panic attack beset her. She hears the crackle of fire. She finds herself pinioned to the wall by some terrible psychic force. She issues a scream of horror and shouts out, “Donald. Burning my manuscripts...Stop it, Donald... Stop it!” Loud psychedelic music from the years after Dorothy's death in 1958 plays incongruously. She is flung from the wall and begins what seems like a manic or possessed “St Vitus” dance. On the music track, we hear snippets of radio news: Obituary of broadcaster, historian, novelist, Hollywood writer and humanitarian Dorothy Macardle as spoken by Eamon de Valera; Winston Churchill declaring war on Germany; Dorothy announcing that German bombers have destroyed her London apartment and left her typewriter a smoking mangled wreck; Lines from *The Children of Europe*, written by Miss Macardle in 1948; Lennox Robinson declaring that in the great Abbey Theatre fire of 1951, several original play scripts have been fire damaged including work by Miss Dorothy Macardle and so forth. The music fades, the dance ends, and Dorothy picks up a hand full of

her charred papers and throws them in the air wailing for her lost poetry. She collapses, spent from her seizure, into a deep sleep.

ACT 5: The Kilmainham Tortures: Removal to North Dublin Union May 1923

Scene 1: Spectral Woman & The Kilmainham Tortures

When she wakes, a mystic woman is at the end of her bed, a vision of her post-mortem self who calms her but then fills her in on some missing details. Her memory is hazy – due, the woman suggests, to the fact that some of her diaries have been burned after her death by Donald in his late-life mental distress. Specifically, she tells Dorothy that Mary MacSwiney returned yet again and that she, Dorothy, took part in a week-long hunger strike. She also directs Dorothy to one final piece of prison writing, not a diary entry, but a propagandist news article she managed to smuggle out concerning her last day in Kilmainham before her violent transfer to another prison, the North Dublin Union.

The article, entitled ‘The Kilmainham Tortures’ is a vivid account of the forced removal of 81 women prisoners against their will to the North Dublin Union. It describes the brutal treatment of the women as they tried to resist the transfer. It is a moment of shocking testimony – reminiscent of the tribunals which have followed wars, where people give witness to torture and atrocities. We hear how the women resist with great bravery as CID men use brutal violence to prise them from the barricades and force them out of Kilmainham until, one by one, they are forced into trucks and driven away. At the end of the testimony, Dorothy signs and dates the document and declares it to be a true account.

EPILOGUE: ‘Release’

Ten days later, Dorothy is lying in bed reading. Her release papers are delivered to her in her NDU cell. She appears broken and neither hears nor reacts to this. She packs her pages, pens and trinkets into her ornate box and prepares to leave the NDU. A haunting lament on the melodeon is played. As Dorothy steps out of prison, her spirit warms in the sunlight. She sees her friend waiting for her. Dorothy Smiles and waves while holding back her tears.

