Novel Notes

Under the Hawthorn Tree
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Under the Hawthorn Tree

Under the Hawthorn Tree tells the story of the O’Driscoll children during the Great Irish Famine. Toward the beginning of the novel, Eily, Peggy and Michael are at home in their cottage with Mother. It’s been a year since the Famine began and the family are cold and hungry. Their baby sister Bridget is ill and Father is away working on the roads. The children help their mother and she tells them stories from her childhood.

One night, the children wake to find their mother sobbing. Bridget has died from fever. The next day, their neighbour Dan Collins and his wife arrive with the news that the priest is ill and the coffin maker has died so there are no proper funerals. The family bury Bridget under the hawthorn tree in their own field.

When Mother decides to go to the village for food, the children are left alone. Two strangers come along. Mother has warned the children about the sickness so they do not let them inside. Mother returns later with food and stories of the sick and starving in the village.

A short time later Mother tells the children that she is going to find their father. While she is gone, some men come to the cottage. They say that if Mother is not back by the next day, the children will have to go to a workhouse. Michael has heard terrible stories about the workhouse. The children decide to leave and look for their great aunts in Castletaggart. They leave a message for their mother with the Collins family.

When the men arrive the next day to take them to the workhouse, the children begin walking without complaint. The first chance they get, they make their escape up through a field. A kindly woman from their village finds them and takes them to her house for the night. She gives them medicine, lotions and advice to help them on their way.

The children follow the river. They hunt for food as best they can, being careful not to use up their supplies. They find a soup kitchen where they meet a new friend and have some nourishing food. They move on when they notice adults taking children from the crowd.

As they continue, the children meet people who frighten them with descriptions of the sick and dying. At one point, they are attacked by a pack of starving dogs that bite Peggy. Michael and Eily save their sister and they continue on to Ballycarbery. When the heat becomes too much, the children decide to travel by night. One night, they witness a raging thunderstorm.

Peggy gets a terrible fever and Michael walks for hours to get to a workhouse and seek help for her. He discovers that the place is full of sick people and leaves without help. On his way back to his sisters, he finds a trapped cow. He and Eily bleed the cow before letting it go. Eily cooks the cow’s blood for food and Peggy recovers.

Finally the children reach Castletaggart. They meet their great aunt Lena. She is amazed to learn that these poor children are her relatives and gives them food. The children tell her the whole story and the aunts promise to look after them. Eily knows they are safe now, but their hearts will always belong to home.

Themes and issues addressed in this novel include poverty, famine, 19th Century Ireland, hunger, death, disease, family, friendship, struggle for survival and travel.
Marita Conlon-McKenna is an award-winning Irish author who was born in Dublin in 1956. Conlon-McKenna has always been very interested in the history of the Irish Famine and drew inspiration from it for her first book, Under the Hawthorn Tree. The book was published in 1990 and became a bestseller. It has been reprinted several times and translated into many languages. It is the first book in her ‘Children of the Famine’ trilogy. She went on to write Wildflower Girl, which follows Peggy’s adventures in America and Fields of Home. Conlon-McKenna has written several other children’s books including No Goodbye, Safe Harbour and The Blue Horse, which won the Bisto Book of the Year Award in 1993.

Curriculum Objectives

The child should be enabled to use more than one strategy when reading unfamiliar text, experience different types of text, continue to develop a range of comprehension strategies to deal with narrative, expository and representational reading material, extend and develop his/her response to increasingly challenging reading material, and experience a shared response to fiction through use of a class novel.

Learning Outcomes

- Write a reading log.
- Produce a script based on the book.
- Create a collage of key words from the text.
- Participate in a class discussion on the text.
- Write a poem on the book’s theme.
- Conduct an oral or written interview with a character from the book.
- Write an alternative ending for the book.
Cross-curricular Links

**Visual Arts**
The children could draw, paint or colour pictures of the famine in Ireland, e.g. a coffin ship. Children could also make a hawthorn tree from clay. See ‘Children of the Irish Famine’ PDF for illustration ideas (link available in Web Links section).

**Geography**
Children can investigate their local environment for features dating back to famine times.

**History**
Children can learn about life, society, work and culture in 19th Century Ireland.

**Science**
Children can investigate causes of the Irish Famine – what led to the potato blight?

**Gaeilge**
Children can revise the Irish words for relatives, e.g. deirfiúr, deartháir, athair, máthair, tuismitheoirí.

**Drama**
Children could re-enact a scene from the story as a class.

**SPHE**
Children could investigate media coverage of a famine in another part of the world. Children could also discuss the importance of food and nutrition.

Suggestions for Classroom Work

- Keep a reading log.

- Rewrite a section of the book in the form of a script.

- Make a ‘favourite word’ collage from the story featuring lots of the old Irish words in the book.

- Have a class discussion around who is the hero in the book.

- Write a poem on the theme of famine.

- Interview a character from the book. Pose questions and answers in written form or conduct an oral interview with a classmate.

- Write an alternate ending for the book.
Web Links


Illustrations relating to The Famine: http://iisresource.org/Documents/0A5_Children_in_Irish_Famine.pdf

BBC Interactive site about The Famine: http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/schools/4_11/tandy/projects/famine/


Quiz on Under the Hawthorn Tree: http://www.scoilnet.ie/Quiz.aspx?id=1021


Pre-reading Activities

Oral Pre-reading Questions

Chapter 1
The title of this chapter is ‘Hunger’. What do you think it is about?

Chapter 2
What do you think will happen under the hawthorn tree?

Chapter 3
How long do you think Father will be away?

Chapter 4
Do you think Mother and Father will return?

Chapter 5
What do you think the children are going to do next?

Chapter 6
Do you think the children would have been better off staying with Mary Kate?

Chapter 7
This chapter is called ‘The Soup Kitchen’. What do you think is going to happen?

Chapter 8
Do you think the children are going to see their friend again? Why?

Chapter 9
Do you think the children should stay put for another few days?
Chapter 10
What do you think the children will see at the harbour?

Chapter 11
This chapter is called ‘Travelling by Night’. Who do you think is going to travel at night? Why do you think this will happen?

Chapter 12
What do you think the children can hear in the distance?

Chapter 13
Look at the illustration. What do you think will happen in this chapter?

Chapter 14
Do you think Michael will find help in the workhouse? Why?

Chapter 15
What do you think Michael and Eily plan to do with the cow?

Chapter 16
Look at the illustration in this chapter. What do you think is happening in the picture?

Chapter 17
Where do you think the aunts are?

Vocabulary
There are many old Irish words and expressions in this book. Make a word wall of these traditional words and phrases and their modern-day equivalents. Encourage the children to figure out the meanings of words by reading them in context. Have a discussion about the language in the book - find out if children are comfortable reading this style of writing. How does it compare with books they read in their spare time?

Comprehension Activity Sheets

Presented over the following pages are a selection of both lower and higher order questions for each section of this novel, which the teacher may choose from.
Chapter 1

‘Hunger’

1. What do you think ‘crooning’ means?

2. Where are Mother and Father when the children run home?

3. How long has it been since Eily washed her hair?

4. What does Mary Kate Conway give to the girls for Bridget?

5. Why does Mary Kate Conway not eat her apple?

6. Why is Mother worried?

7. What choice would you make if you were in Michael’s situation at dinner? Would you ask for more food? Why?
1. What is the name of the town where the O’Driscolls live?

2. Why do the neighbours visit one another less often than before?

3. What is the name of Dan Collins’ donkey?

4. What do the family use as a coffin?

5. What kind of children do you think Eily and Michael are? Why?

6. Imagine you are one of the children. Write a paragraph describing how you feel in this situation.
1. What does Mother trade for food?

2. What do the people who come to the door want?

3. Name three items Mother brings back from the village.

4. Why does Mother give the sack of yellow meal to Dan Collins?

5. What present did Mother get from her parents for her 8th birthday?

6. Do you think Michael's plan is clever? Why?

7. What would you do if you were in the same situation? Would you let the strangers in? Why?
1. What does Michael bring home from his fishing trip?

2. Who gives Mother a tip about wild mushrooms?

3. Why could the children not go to the Collins house?

4. Where do the Grandaunts Nano and Lena live?

5. Do you think the children make the right decision in not going to the workhouse? Why?

6. Do you think the children care about each other? Why?
1. What does Kitty O’Hara say about the workhouse?

2. How do the children escape from the group?

3. How long do the children stay with Mary Kate?

4. How would you describe Mary Kate, based on her actions in this chapter?

5. How do you think Tom Daly feels about bringing people to the workhouse? Why?

6. How does the children’s escape help them to understand the fears of a cornered rabbit or hare?
1. What injury does Michael get when they cross the river?

2. What is Peggy's proud discovery?

3. What is Mary Kate's warning about food?

4. Why does Peggy have to stay within shouting distance of Michael when she searches for firewood?

5. How do you feel about Michael killing the rabbit?

6. Do you think Eily is being kind or unkind when she puts the hot blade against Michael's knee? Explain your answer.
Chapter 7
‘The Soup Kitchen’

1. What is the name of the boy the children meet on their way to the soup kitchen?

2. What does Eily do when she is asked where her parents are?

3. Where is their new friend hoping to sail to?

4. Which of the characters in the story is your favourite so far? Why?

5. Why do you think children are being taken from the crowd?

6. What thoughts do you think are going through Eily’s head when she is pretending to wave at her parents in the crowd?
1. What do you think ‘the flux’ is?

2. Who does Peggy say she wants to be like when she grows up?

3. What are people doing in the farmer’s field?

4. What does Michael use for fishing?

5. How do the children start a fire?

6. It seemed as though time stopped still in the forest. What do you think the expression ‘time stopped still’ means? Write down another expression about time that you have heard before.
1. What does Eily wrap the leftover fish in?

2. What do you think the word ‘petrified’ means?

3. What does Michael throw at the dogs?

4. Eily says not to make any sudden moves or run away from the dogs. Do you think this is good advice? Why?

5. How would you describe Michael in this chapter?
1. What is being carried in the wooden carts?

2. Where are the goods being shipped to?

3. What does the soldier do to make the crowd gasp?

4. What does the farmer give to the children?

5. Eily feels very homesick in this chapter. Have you ever felt homesick? Write about it.

6. Write a description of Ballycarbery in your own words.
1. What do the children find worse than the hunger?

2. What does Peggy find in the field of overgrown grass?

3. Name two animals the children spot at night.

4. If you were in the children’s situation, would you drink the muddy water? Why?

5. What idea does Michael get in this chapter? Do you think it is a good idea?

6. The children hear a rumble in the distance. What do you think this might be?
1. What colour is the sky?

2. What joke does Michael make about the storm?

3. Why do you think Eily tries to control her fears?

4. A simile is a comparison between two things that uses the words ‘like’ or ‘as’. What simile does the author use to describe the rain?

5. Do you think the rain is a good or bad event? Explain.
1. How do Eily and Michael deal with Peggy when she is being bold?

2. How does Eily feel when she realises Peggy has a fever?

3. What does Michael do to distract himself from worry?

4. Why do you think Eily gets into a temper before lighting the fire?

5. Would you like to have Eily as your older sister? Why?

6. At the end of the chapter, Eily wonders if they should have gone to the workhouse instead. Write your own story about what would have happened if the children went to the workhouse.
1. What is Michael searching for?

2. What does Michael find on his way back to his sisters?

3. What is your impression of Michael in this chapter? Why?

4. One of the lines in this chapter states that Michael ran ‘hell for leather’. Write down some other expressions that describe somebody running.

5. Michael feels that his heart is broken in two and his childhood forever gone. Why do you think Michael feels this way?
1. What does Eily do with the cow’s blood?

2. What does Michael put on the cow’s cut?

3. How many days of walking are needed to reach Castletaggart?

4. What animals does Michael catch during the night?

5. Eily and Michael both get a great surprise when Peggy recovers from her fever. Write about a time when you got a big surprise. What happened?

6. Do you think that you would be a fussy eater if you were in the children’s situation? Explain.
1. Why does Peggy climb through the gap in the wall?

2. Name three items that are in the bag.

3. Why do you think the priest puts his handkerchief to his face when speaking to the children?

4. Why do people avoid looking at the children?

5. Eily and Michael feel as though Peggy is gone for a really long time because they are anxious. Write about a time you felt anxious or excited and time seemed to pass very slowly.

6. How do you think the children feel when they reach Castletaggart? Describe their emotions in this chapter.
1. What does Peggy accidentally walk into?

2. Who do the children meet at the shop with the blue and white shutters?

3. What is the name of the lane where the aunts’ shop used to be?

4. Which of the aunts is your favourite and why?

5. At the end of the book, Eily feels that her heart will always belong to her home. How do you think you would feel in this situation?

6. Do you think the ending is a good one? Give reasons for your answer.
Book Report Sheet

If you don’t have enough space to write your answers, use the notes section on the following pages.

Pupil’s name: ___________________________________ Class: __________________ Date: ______________________

Title of book: ______________________ Author: ______________________ Illustrator: ______________________

Setting (where the story took place): ________________________________________________________________

List the main characters:

1. ____________________________________________ 2. ____________________________________________

3. ____________________________________________ 4. ____________________________________________

Describe your favourite character: ________________________________________________________________

Describe your favourite part of the story: __________________________________________________________

This book was: [ ] Exciting [ ] Boring [ ] Complicated

(✓ tick all that apply) [ ] Interesting [ ] Slow-moving [ ] Imaginative

[ ] Scary [ ] Fast-paced [ ] Amusing

Did you like the book? Why?/Why not?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Grade the book (✓ Tick one)

Easy to read [ ] Just right [ ] A little difficult [ ] Difficult [ ]

Rate the book out of ten: /10