

TOPIC VII: The Amazing Potato and the History of Ireland

INTERDISCIPLINARY MIDDLE GRADES (4-8) PACKAGE

TITLE: Adolescent Literature about the Great Irish Famine

TEACHER BACKGROUND: A number of authors who write adolescent literature have written about the Great Irish Famine. Often the stories focus on the experience of young people and their families. This makes these works especially useful for younger readers. Fiction, even fact-based fiction, is not always historically accurate, so classes need to discuss the difference between fact and fiction. “The Potato Easters” by Karen Branson and The Hauting of Kildorn Abbey by Eve Bunting are both currently out of print. However, “Under the Hawthorn Tree” by Marita Conlon-McKenna is part of a series available in paperback from O'Brien Press.

AIM 7.5: What did people do when there was famine in Ireland?

ASSESSMENT: Students will demonstrate their understanding of the impact of the potato on the history of Ireland through participation in group discussion, completion of activity sheets, presentations in class and completion of individual projects.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Who is your favorite fictional character? Why? How is fiction different from fact? Why is fiction a useful way to learn about the past? How can we help to make sure that the stories we read are based on facts?

ACTIVITY: Students select and read either ACTIVITY SHEET A- BAD NEWS FROM THE VILLAGE, B- NOTHING TO EAT, or 3- VILLAGE OF DEATH. Answer questions and prepare to make an oral report to class about your reading passage.

SUMMARY QUESTION: What did people do when there was famine in Ireland?

HOMEWORK: Select and complete one of the projects.

APPLICATION: Which character do you like the most? Why?

PROJECTS:

- Draw a picture of the O'Connor family and their home.
- Draw a series of pictures to illustrate this chapter from Under the Hawthorn Tree.
- Write a poem that describes what is happening in Ballyvourney or to Eily and the O'Driscoll family.
- Imagine you were a cousin from the United States visiting the O'Connor family. Write a letter home to your parents explaining what is happening in Ireland.
- The O'Driscoll children love stories. Write a letter to either Eily or Michael O'Driscoll. In your letter, tell them a story that will give them hope for the future.
- Write a ballad about Columb, Finn and Witch.
- What do you think will happen next? Write a new chapter that describes what will happen to Columb and Finn when they go to see Sir James.

REFLECTIONS: Children in Cecelia Goodman's 5th grade class read “Under the Hawthorn Tree” by Marita Conlon-McKenna and wrote book reports. Cecelia found the book easily accessible to her students and reports that they were very engaged by the story. Jennifer Debler recommends asking students to anticipate what will happen next in the story. Teachers recommended reviewing questions with students before they began to read the stories.

ACTIVITY SHEET A - BAD NEWS FROM THE VILLAGE

From "The Potato Eaters" by Karen Branson (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979)

Instructions: Examine the questions and word bank before you read the story. After completing the reading, answer the questions and discuss your answers with your teammates. Be prepared to report to the full class.

Questions

- 1- Why does Michael Coyle predict the situation in Ireland will get worse?
- 2- Why are there soldiers in the village of Ballyvourney?
- 3- Who does Sean O'Connor blame for the problems facing Ireland? Explain your answer.
- 4- Why don't Irish tenant farmers improve their farms and grow other crops?
- 5- Why does Sean O'Connor feel the family may have to leave Ireland? How does Mary O'Connor feel about his idea?

Word Bank

Beetle- potato masher
Blight - a fungus that causes potatoes to rot while still in the ground
Champ - mashed potatoes
Da - father
Hearth- fire place
Gombeen - English landlord
Ma, Mammy -mother
Praties - potatoes
Rosary- a string of beads used by Roman Catholics during prayers
Whist - quiet

From the cottage window Maureen could see the afternoon sun sinking low in the wide Irish sky. The lengthening shadows of the Cooley Hills now darkened the land, and a solitary blackbird circled overhead.

"You'll not be finding your supper out there," she told the bird, "for our oats are harvested and on their way to England. Can you fly that far, do you think?"

As if in answer, the blackbird dipped its wings, flew high over the empty fields, and began heading towards the east.

"Aye, then, and safe journey," the girl murmured. "To have wings would be grand indeed."

"Eh, Maureen? Is it your da and the boys? Sure it's time they were rounding the bend."

Her mother bent over the hearth where a black kettle hissed on the fire.

"Oh, Mammy, I'm not certain." Maureen's eyes returned to the rolling green countryside. Squinting into the sun, she could see some movement far down the road.

"Oh, aye, it's the three of them coming now." Maureen looked more closely. "and would that be the Coyles walking along with them?"

"Well, see that you give out a warning word before they come in and wake the little one." Mary O'Connor cast a look at the small child lying on the room's one bed. "She's sleeping at last, thanks be to God."

Maureen nodded. Her sister Rosheen looked like a bird nestled in the corner of the bed. Maureen tiptoed over and tucked a blanket around the feverish body.

"Aye, Ma, she's resting peaceful."

Voices could be heard and Maureen hurried to the cottage door. Their neighbors, old Eamon Coyle and his son Michael, were talking to Da.

She ran outside. Her bare feet followed the road ruts worn smooth by the wheels of hauling-carts. Brian and Padraic saw their sister coming.

"Maureen! There's soldiers in Ballyvourney! Lots of them, come all the way from England!" Padraic shouted. "One had a horse finer even than Lord Burnleigh's."

"Ballyvourney is crowded with people," Brian added, "more than at Fairtime." The boy's face was serious. "And 'twas not for any celebration. Da said there's many from the countryside seeking food."

Maureen looked up as her father and two neighbors approached. Michael Coyle's face was angry as he talked to Da. Old Eamon leaned heavily on his blackthorn cane, slowly moving himself along the road.

"Maureen alanna," Sean O'Connor greeted his daughter.

She took hold of his large, rough hand. "Mammy sent me to meet you. Hello, Eamon. And greetings to you, Michael."

Eamon Coyle stopped walking and reached his hand up to his head, tipping his cap and bowing slightly to Maureen. "My dear lady, 'tis indeed a pleasure," he said, a droll smile coming to the wrinkled face.

Maureen fell into step with her father. "Da, Rosheen just now fell asleep. The whole day she's been tossing with fever. Ma said you're to come in quiet, so's not to waken her."

"Aye, girl." Her father whistled to the boys, who had run on down the road. "Brian! Padraic! No ree-raa games or noisemaking. Let your sister be."

The boys waved and ran on.

"I'm sure of it!" Michael Coyle resumed his conversation. "Things will get much worse! Those people at Donegon's today, selling their tools in order to buy grain. What will they plant with come spring? And did you see the look of Donegon, his greedy eyes on that long line? We'll all be owing him before the winter is out!"

"Aye," Sean said quietly. "Well, I've still the potato beds in the far field to dig, and their vines have been healthy." He gave Maureen's hand a gentle squeeze. "It will be a lean winter again, but we'll get by."

Maureen knew Da was worried. For the second year now, many of their potatoes were soft and within a few days had turned black with mold. Even Donal, their pig, could not eat them.

The same thing had happened to the Coyles, and the Dunnes, and to others across the countryside. Some beds were hit worse than others. It was rumored that further north entire fields had yielded nothing but rotted potatoes.

They were nearly at the cottage. "Now if I might light my pipe from your fire, Sean, I'll arrive home a happy man." Eamon Coyle nodded towards the door.

Maureen smiled at the old man, knowing he wished more than a hot coal for his pipe. He no doubt had a story to tell Ma, something he'd seen in Ballyvourney that Da might not think to mention. The color of a bolt of cloth at the draper's, perhaps, or news from Eileen, Michael's wife.

With his father out of earshot, Michael's voice became more urgent. "The old man won't listen when I say there's no future for us here. Every year we break our backs sending oats and wheat to an English landlord! If we own a cow or a pig, do we get the milk or the bacon? No! It's off to the village to trade them for a plow or pair of boots so we can start all over again! And now the praties are failing us!" He pointed to the fields that lay between the O'Connors' cottage and his own. "There's nothing else to eat out there, Sean!"

Michael suddenly became aware of Maureen standing next to her father.

"Och," he said, shaking his head, "I'd not meant to go on so."

Maureen's mouth felt dry. She had heard Michael Coyle talk of leaving Ireland before, especially since he married Eileen. Two of his brothers had gone to Liverpool and were said to have good jobs. But Eamon was too stubborn to leave, Michael said, and he couldn't leave his father to work the land alone.

Eamon now stood in the doorway, a column of smoke curling from his pipe. Ma was with him, her hand on his arm in a comforting manner.

Michael spoke to Sean in a low voice. "Get those beds dug soon and store the praties well. Even our good ones had dark spots."

"Aye, Michael, tomorrow, Pray God all will be well." Eamon hobbled down the path to the road. He stopped in front of Maureen and regarded her seriously. "Mind now, girl, that you don't be sweeping towards the door when you're cleaning the house!"

Sure then your good luck gets swept out, along with the dirt!" His eyes twinkled as he doffed his hat.

The old man turned towards Sean. "Remember, my friend, Ireland has had bad times before. But see there," he pointed to the far-off hills, "how the heather still grows on Ben Garron, and the grasses are laid low by the wind?" Eamon took a long draw on his pipe. "Life goes on," he said, but his eyes avoided those of his son.

"Aye," Sean replied. "And 'twas fine indeed walking from the village with you, for it's your stories that do shorten the miles."

"God bless you," Mary called softly from the doorway. "My love to Eileen."

"God bless, Mary," Michael called back.

"Maureen," Ma said, "the boys have gone to fetch Donal. Finish with the praties and give him the peelings."

"Aye, Mammy."

Ma would be anxious to hear about Da's trip into Ballyvourney. Maureen hoped they would come inside to talk so she could hear, too.

"The little one?" Da asked. "She's better?"

"Aye, Sean, but her head still aches. And she's eaten almost nothing since yesterday noon."

Ma gave a short cough as if something had caught in her throat. "Come inside, for there's a chill in that wind. And sure you've need of a place to sit after your long walk."

Maureen put the last potato into the kettle. She poked at the fire, in no hurry to gather up the peelings for Donal. Was Da going to tell Mammy about the soldiers in the village and about what Michael had said?

Da always looked so big standing beside Mammy. He had broad shoulders and large, coarse hands; Mammy was small and delicate. Da's eyes were blue, and he had a stock of sandy hair that blew every which way in the wind. Mammy's hair was like Maureen's long and nearly black.

Her skin was smooth and white, not rough and weathered like Da's.

Still, thought Maureen, Da had a gentleness about him. There was a softness in his eyes and in his voice, even though when he sang a "come-all-ye" the crockery on the shelf was set to quivering.

Now he paced up and down the narrow distance between the bed and the door. He rubbed his hand nervously along his chin, looking first at Ma, then Maureen, then at little Rosheen asleep on the bed.

"Ah, woman, he said at last, "times are bad. they're telling now it's a blight for certain and has spread across the whole of Ireland. There's already people wandering the streets in Ballyvourney, desperate for food. They're trading anything they have for a sack of grain."

Sean paused at the window. "If only I had half of what I sent to England this year, we'd have plenty to eat."

"Padraic said there were English soldiers in the village,"Maureen added in a hesitant voice.

Da resumed his pacing. "Aye! Soldiers guarding the granaries, soldiers out at the mill! Armed soldiers riding with the wagons taking our oats into Cork harbor!"

Mary raised her hands to quiet her husband, nodding in Rosheen's direction. "Whist, Sean! Now you've had a long day, and the boys must be near to fainting. We've food enough for now, and the beds in the far field will surely yield good praties. Go on and ready yourself for supper. Maureen, see to those scraps!"

"Aye, Mammy!" Maureen quickly began scooping the mound of potato peelings into her outstretched apron skirt.

She followed her father out the door. The boys were just bringing Donal in from the woods, and the pig grunted noisily when he saw Maureen with his supper. She released the edges of her skirt and the peelings tumbled to the ground.

The four of them stood and watched Donal devour the scraps. Da shook his head. "Alas, Donal, you'll never appear on our own table, for it's yourself that must pay for tools and cloth and all we'll be needing from the village."

The pig looked up at Maureen, waiting for another handful.

"Come along, boys," Da said wearily. "Supper's waiting."

They sat quietly at the long wooden table. Ma took the clay serving bowl down from the hob and set it in the middle of the table. Instead of the usual plain boiled praties, Maureen saw that Ma had mashed them smooth and added nice green bits of wild onion dug from the woods.

"Now if you'll pretend I've added a fine knob of butter and lashings of sweet milk, why we can say we're eating a bowl of champ this night!" Ma said with her modest smile.

"My love forever," Da smiled back, for champ was his favorite dish.

"Mammy, you'll say the beetle rhyme from Granny, the one about the old woman?" Brian pointed to the wooden potato maser, called a beetle by his mother.

Ma held a finger up to her lips, signaling they must keep their voices low. She picked up the beetle and came around close to the boys. She tapped the beetle lightly against her hand.

"There was an old woman who lived in a lamp,
She had no room to beetle her champ,
She's up with the beetle and broke the lamp,
And then she had room to beetle her champ!"

Everyone was smiling and as Ma spooned the champ into their bowls, Maureen could see that she was pleased. The servings were small, and soon the bowls were empty.

Maureen felt her stomach complaining. Suddenly she had a question.

"Da, why is it we grown only praties for ourselves? I know the oats and wheat must go to the landlord, but if we grew apples or cherries, then it wouldn't matter so if the praties failed."

Sean O'Connor looked at the empty bowls and at the faces of his wife and children. Through the window he could see the soft rolling hills of Ireland, now darkly verdant in the twilight.

"If the land was ours again, daughter," he began and then stopped, struggling for the right words.

How many times Maureen had heard that phrase, "If the land was ours again," from Da, from Michael Coyle, from Mr. Dunne, from every man who had ever crossed their threshold.

"Once we did grow other things, Maureen," Ma said. "Cabbages, turnips, marrow, as well as potatoes. We even hoped to own a cow one day. But then the land-rents were raised, not just ours, but everyone's. More land had to be planted in oats, more time spent working towards the rent. Praties don't need much tending; sure you've seen how a small bed will yield a dozen fine pecks with hardly even a nod from your da."

Ma shook her head. "Aye, 'lazy beds' we call them, and for years they've served us well. But now, " she reached out and patted Maureen's arm, "now we must be very careful. We'll use cress and curly dock from the woods, for soups. There's mallow root, too. We'll manage, you'll see."

Ma looked down the table to where Da was sitting. The fire was getting low, and the night air had a dampness in it.

"I've need of more turf soon," she said quietly.

"Aye, Mary."

The boys were tired from the day's journey; there was little objection when time came to make their beds on the smooth earthen floor.

A wind had come up and now rattled against the cottage door. Brian led the saying of the rosary, and then the children, Maureen included, bid their parents good-night.

Their straw mats lay close together on the floor, each one with its own woolen blanket. Maureen lay on the outside, closest to the door, with the boys between her and the bed on which Rosheen, Mammy and Da slept. She watched the flickering lights of the fire, and although her eyes were heavy, she did not fall asleep.

Da moved his stool close to Mammy's chair. "That fire's a comfort and a blessing, isn't it? he said softly. "With an old wind howling at the door?"

Ma was quiet. After a long while, Maureen heard her say: "If it's true, Sean, if it is a blight that's spread throughout Ireland, then the only food will be what the grain merchants sell to us?"

Da did not seem to hear. "It's a peat fire I'm loving," he said, "more even than coal. The hissing of the turf when it's burning, like your wee fairies calling to one another."

Ma's voice sounded strange. "Sean, will Donegon give us credit to buy meal when we've no praties left?"

Maureen knew about Donegon. Da had dealt with him before. One year they'd run out of praties before the new crop could be dug, and Mr. Donegon had sold Da oats on credit. The cost was so high it had taken Da many months to pay off the debt.

Again, Maureen heard Ma's question: "Sean, can we get grain when the praties are gone?"

All at once Ma began coughing. When at last she quieted, Da spoke to her gently.

"Aye, woman dear, we can get grain. Even if it's the pig, the bed, and the kettle we'll be selling to pay Donegon. He's a foul greedy gombeen, he is."

For a long while there was no other sound except the hissing of the fire. Then Da cleared his throat, and Maureen knew what he was going to say.

"It's my thinking, Mary, that the time may soon come when we must leave Ireland."

A glowing piece of turf suddenly crumbled, and a shower of sparks went up the chimney.

Ma leaned over, her hand on Da's arm.

"That day is not yet here!" she said. "You'll not be talking of leaving our home because a field of potatoes went bad."

Maureen could not hear if Da replied.

The wind was down, and a stillness settled over the tiny cottage. Rosheen's breathing seemed easier now. Maureen quickly closed her eyes as Mammy bent over her and the boys to tuck in their blankets.

Da banked the fire. In the pale moonlight Maureen saw him looking at his children and then heard him murmur: "God be between them and harm." He climbed into the bed and lay next to Ma.

"Good night, Sean. God bless," Ma said.

"Good night, my heart. Sleep well."

Maureen stared into the darkness, listening to the creaking sounds of the cottage as the night wrapped around it. She wondered if Mammy was counting silently the number of potatoes stored in the shed and if Da was thinking of the long lines at the grain merchants. But Eamon Coyle said Ireland had known hard times before and people had survived. Perhaps this blight was only a passing thing, Maureen told herself, like a spell of bad weather.

Still, an uneasy feeling crept into her stomach. Da had looked different today, coming back from the village. It was not so much the lines of worry in his face she had noticed, but the sadness in his eyes. It was as if he had seen something of what was to come, and the sorrow of it had put a great burden on his heart.

ACTIVITY SHEET B - NOTHING TO EAT

(from "Under the Hawthorn Tree" by Marita Conlon-McKenna (Dublin: The O'Brien Press))

Instructions: Examine the questions and word bank before you read the story. After completing the reading, answer the questions and discuss your answers with your teammates. Be prepared to report to the full class.

Questions

- 1- Why did Mrs. O'Driscoll tell the children to beware of strangers?
- 2- What did the children do when a stranger knocked at the door? Do you agree with what they did? Why or why not?
- 3- Why are people in the village so frightened for the future?
- 4- What are people doing so they can survive the hard times?

Word Bank

turf - Also called peat. Dried plants that are dug up and used for fires.
spuds - potatoes
scones - small cakes
petticoat- a fancy skirt worn by women and girls
a ghile -
a stór -
draper - a store keeper who sells cloth and clothing

A few days later, Mother called them all together. She had built up the fire. She was dressed and her hair was pinned up with two combs. She had folded up her beautiful handworked lace shawl and grey knitted wedding gown with its matching lace collar and set them on the bed. Her Mother had made them for her, for that special June day when she had married John O'Driscoll many years before.

'Eily, share out the potato skins, then sit down.' They all had a drink and a bite to eat. Mother took up the brush and began to brush Peggy's long dark hair.

Then she slipped off her shift and put on a cream dress. 'Eily, Michael and Peggy, I have to go into the village today, because there's nothing left to eat. Bridget is gone. I have buried one child and I'll not let anything happen the rest of you. We must have food,' she said.

'But, Mother,' began Eily, 'you've no money ... oh no, not your dress and shawl, it's all you've left.'

'Listen, pet, what good is a dress and a shawl hidden away under the bed? I know they won't bring much, but maybe Patsy Murphy will trade me enough for a bag of meal and some oats or something. With every day we are all getting weaker and losing our strength. We must eat or we'll get sick. Do you think I can't see Peggy and the eyes shining out of her head and her arms and legs like sticks? And Michael, my little man, who can hardly lift the basket of turf and hasn't the strength to walk the

few miles to the river to try and catch a bit of fish? And Eily, my darling girl, who is worn out with the worry of it all? Now, listen. You must keep the fire going and get some water in. You are all to stay indoors. Dan Collins told me that the sickness is everywhere and that people are out walking the roads. I will be as fast as I can, but you must keep the door on the latch.'

Eily begged, 'Please, Mother, let me go with you.'

Mother shook her head and insisted they stay. She put a few things in her basket and pulled on her shawl. Outside it was a beautiful warm morning. The fields were covered in daisies and the hedgerows were laden with woodbine and honeysuckle. It was tempting to stay outside and play, but they dared not disobey Mother. They waved goodbye.

Peggy was cross and cranky and bored. Michael invented games and tried to think of things to distract her, but Eily still had to resort to raising the wooden spoon twice. Peggy lay down on the bed sulking, and angry with Eily.

Suddenly they became aware of footsteps coming down the laneway. Could she be back so soon? Eily was about to rush out and help with the bag of meal when she realised that there were two voices outside. The children stayed still and silent.

'For the love of God, let a poor woman and her son in for a sit down and sup of water,' whined the voice. They were standing just outside. 'We've walked for miles. We're tired and sore and thirsty. A little help is all we need.'

Eily made to go towards the door, but Michael stopped her.

'Remember what Mother said,' he hissed. 'Don't answer.'

The strangers were tapping on the door. Quickly Michael moved the turf basket and the chair in front of it. The two girls sat on the bed, scared. What if they guessed there were only children in the house?

'Did you hear us?' The woman raised her voice. 'We need a bit of help.' When there was no reply, the woman began to curse. She picked up two pieces of turf and flung them at the door.

'There could be pickings inside,' said the son.

Eily and Michael and Peggy stared at each other, all terrified out of their wits, wondering what would happen when the strangers pushed in the door.

Suddenly Michael got an idea. 'Oh, thank God for someone coming along,' he moaned. 'We need help. Oh, for the love of God, run to the well and bring us a bucket of water. My sister is burning up with the fever and my throat and head feel they are on fire.'

Eily put a hand over Peggy's mouth to stop her from giggling or saying something. The two voices outside the door whispered to each other.

'We buried my little sister last week,' continued Michael in a high quavering voice, 'and half the village is dying of the fever. For the love of God ...'

The woman raised her voice. She had moved away from the door. 'We meant you no harm and God spare ye for we cannot stop. Come on, son, away from this place of sickness.' The two gathered up their bundle of rags and set off down the lane.

Once the children were sure the danger was past they hugged each other.

'Oh, Michael, what a funny brother you are,' joked Eily. 'How did you think of it? And yet you saved us all.' Michael blushed pink even to the tips of his ears. 'People will pay money to come and see you act. You'll be a player, and famous too,' added Eily.

With all the excitement, Peggy's humor improved and she ran around the cottage making up songs about her brave brother.

The sky had begun to darken and the sun was going down when they heard another knock at the door. They all froze and could almost hear the pounding of each other's hearts.

'It's me, children, it's Mother.'

Quick as a flash, they opened the door and flung themselves at her, part in welcome and part in relief.

'Wait, wait, you young scamps, don't knock me over. Let me get my breath back,' begged Mother. She had a few small parcels in her arms and she looked exhausted. Her hair hung loose around her face.

'Mother, your combs -- your beautiful combs, they're gone too,' cried Eily.

'Your father always said he preferred my hair long and loose and free with the sun and the breeze through it. Well, now he'll have his wish,' said Mother, trying to smile.

'What did you get? What did you get?' asked Peggy, full of curiosity about what was in the parcels.

Mother put them up on the table and slowly opened each one. In times gone by the children would have paid no heed to Mother and her purchases from the village and would have kept on playing in the fields. But now their very lives depended on what was in those packages.

The largest was a bag of oatmeal. Then there was a bag with a few pounds of greyish-looking spuds, then a tub of lard, a few screws of salt, and lastly a small hard piece of dried beef. It wasn't much.