

Grade level: 7-9
Famine curriculum

Lesson aim: Students will respond to an excerpt from the emigration story "The Year 1912" by choosing objects to fill an emigrant's trunk and explaining the significance of each object.

New York State Standards: Language for Literary Response and Expression. Student will explain the meaning of a literary work with some attention to meanings beyond the literary level.

Historical background: Between 1911 and 1920, 74,877 Irish girls arrived in the United States. Many like the protagonist of Máirtín O'Cadháin's story "The Year 1912" emigrated from the west of Ireland; they left never to return.

Lesson:

1. An emigrant daughter's trunk is an important symbol in Máirtín O'Cadháin's story "The Year 1912." Read the following passage from the story:

A halfpenny candle stood on a small press by the wall in the bedroom, smeared by a breeze coming by the edge of the paper on a broken windowpane. Depth, magic, mystery of unfathomable seas, reflected by the guttering candleflame in the trunk's brass knobs. It was of pale yellow timber, the mother couldn't at once remember where she had seen that color before - the face of a corpse after a long wake in sultry weather. And a certain distaste kept her from looking into the trunk, the same tabu which had kept her, though she had often tried, from looking at a corpse in a coffin.

"Have you everything?" she asked the daughter keeping her eyes off the dimly lit thing. There were all kinds of things in it - a sod of turf, a chip off the hearthstone, tresses of hair, a bunch of shamrocks though it was autumn, stockings of homespun, a handful of dulse, items of clothing, papers connected with the voyage across. The daughter took her shoes, coat, hat and dress out of the trunk and laid them on the little press to put on her. During the week she had often laid them out like that but the mother had never encouraged her, and early in the night she had implored her not to put them on till morning.

The mother shut the trunk, threw the bedquilt over it. To keep it clean. She had long feared that the daughter once she was in American clothes would be estranged from her, alien as the trunk ("The Year 1912" in The Road to Brightcity, trans. Eoghan O Tuairisc. pp. 26-27).

Vocabulary: press-cupboard
dulse-(dulisk) an edible red seaweed

2. Look at the list of things that Maureen, the emigrating daughter put into her trunk. What significance might each of the objects have for her? Design your own emigrant's trunk with your choice of eight objects. Why are they important to you?

3. In Ireland emigration was often associated with death. The Kerry storyteller Peig Sayers said, "Going to America was the nearest thing to death." Does the trunk in "The Year 1912" support that association? What words support your conclusion.