

# What is the Legacy of the Great Irish Famine?

## PART TWO

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# Hunger and Hope in *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Poor People*

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## BACKGROUND

In this activity, students will be looking at the economic and social conditions of Ireland in the 20th century, using two works of literature. They will then create a graphic organizer, illustrating the connections between the two pieces and an Emily Dickinson poem.

Poverty and hunger in the 20th century are the themes of the narratives, from two different parts of the world. In the Indian novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ruku and Nathan's courage is tested with the agonizing death of their youngest and most beloved child Kuti. His sister had turned to prostitution to get money to help save the child. In an Irish story set on the Aran Islands, Patrick and Brigid Derrane lose their first-born son, a little boy aged four, who dies from illness, from poverty. Teachers may want to refer to the activity *Poetry and Painting in "At a Potato Digging."*

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## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

Poor People

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Kelleher, Margaret. *The Feminization of Famine*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1997.

Krishnaswamy, Shanta. *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Asish, 1984.

Lee, J.J. *Ireland 1912-1985. Politics and Society*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

McAlpin, Michelle Burge. *Subject to Famine: Food Crises and Economic Change in Western India. 1860-1920*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1983.

### CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Copies of *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya. New York: Signet, 1954.

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## OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Analyze literature from two different cultural settings, focusing on the economic and social conditions of the cultures of the protagonists.

Compare the characterization of Nathan in *Nectar in a Sieve* and Patrick Derrane in "Poor People."

Design a graphic organizer depicting the connections between three works of literature.

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## STANDARDS

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

**SS 4:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the United States and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and nonmarket mechanisms.

**ELA 1:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.

**ELA 2:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.

**ELA 3:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Explain how societies and nations attempt to satisfy their basic needs and wants by utilizing scarce capital, natural, and human resources.

Understand how scarcity requires people and nations to make choices which involve costs and future consideration.

Analyze evidence critically and demonstrate an understanding of how circumstances of time and place influence perspective.

Explain the importance of analyzing narratives drawn from different times and places to understand historical events.

Establish an authoritative stance on the subject and provide references to establish the validity and verifiability of the information presented.

Identify significant literary elements and use those elements to interpret the work.

Recognize different levels of meaning.

Produce interpretations of literary works that identify different levels of meaning and comment on their significance and effect.

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## DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

### INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

- . observe and conclude
- . reflective thinking
- . view information from a variety of perspectives
- . interpret information and data
- . synthesize information
- . conceptualize
- . identify patterns and themes

### MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

English Language Arts

### PATTERNS TO ORGANIZE INFORMATION

Graphic Organizers of contents of works of literature

### MULTI-CULTURALISM

Themes across cultures

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## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Ask students to read Chapter 16 of *Nectar in a Sieve*.

The chapter opens with Nathan facing the season of reaping, threshing and winnowing the rice. Ruku watches him and observes how thin and weak he has become and wonders whether he is strong enough for the job. What does Nathan say about the future? What gives him hope?

The title of *Nectar in a Sieve* comes from a line in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Work with Hope" (1825):

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,  
And hope without an object cannot live.

Why do you think Kamala Markandaya chose these lines for her title?

2. Ask students to read Liam O’Flaherty’s story *Poor People*. Patrick Derrane leaves his sickbed on a cold February morning to gather seaweed in the bay to fertilize his potato crop. Later he goes home to his cottage where the family food and fuel are gone and where his son lays dying. What gives him the courage to go on?
3. An optional follow up would be to put Emily Dickinson’s “Hope is a Thing with Feathers” on the board for discussion.

### Hope is a Thing with Feathers

Hope is a thing with feathers  
 that perches in the soul—  
 And sings the tune without the words—  
 And never stops—at all.

Emily Dickinson

Also optional, “Ask the Belly” can be put on the board for students to discuss. How does it relate to the other readings?

### Ask the Belly

Scratch your head  
 Bite your tongue  
 Grin  
 Bow low  
 Keep your hands tied  
 Your feet pressed firmly together.  
 “What’s all this?”  
 You’d better  
 Ask the belly,  
 It’ll tell you.

Shanmuga Subbiah

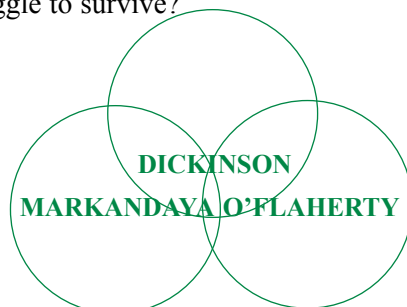
(Translated from Tamil—by T.K. Doraiswamy)

Ask students to create a Graphic Organize (or a diagram as given below) to show how the poem links *Nectar in a Sieve* with “Poor People.”

Ask students to read the first stanza of the three stanzas of “Hope is a thing with feathers.” What is the poet describing in the poem? How does Dickinson describe hope? How would students describe hope? We use the term *metaphor* when a poet describes one thing in terms of another. What is Dickinson’s metaphor for hope? Notice Dickinson does not say hope is a *bird* with feathers, she is more subtle. She says, “Hope is a *thing* with feathers.” Can students think of other metaphors for hope?

What else does Dickinson say about hope? Where does she locate hope? Why? She also says hope never stops singing. Why is it important that hope keep singing? What happens if hope stops singing?

How does Dickinson’s poem comment on the other texts? Do the characters keep singing? Why? What is it about hope that gives some people the courage to keep going? Can students think of people who exhibit hope in their struggle to survive?



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## ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

Write a five-paragraph essay: introduction, three paragraphs of discussion and analysis, using the information on the diagram and a conclusion, explaining how the poem comments on the characters in *Nectar in a Sieve* and “Poor People.”

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## TEACHER REFLECTION

In field tests, students who read “Ask the Belly” in the contexts of these texts found the poem a stark reminder about how hunger demeans people and makes them subservient. One student said, “When someone is starving, there is nothing else.” Students were asked to imagine a life where every minute was taken up with the matter of trying to gather enough food to get through another day.

Students described the poet’s instructions and wrote their versions of what they thought the belly would have answered. They recognized the tyranny of hunger and that people could be demeaned or controlled by the demands of the belly.

## Poor People

The sound of the sea grumbled through the calm darkness of the dawn, a long broken sound wallowing on the white sand of the beach; the poisonous cold of a February morning was in the dark air; the sandbank by the road above the beach was shrouded with mighty black ghosts; the form of the earth slept, covered in darkness.

The edge of the sea was full of seaweed, a great load spilling from the deep, red, slime-covered, dribbling in with every wave that broke slowly murmuring in the darkness of the dawn.

Patrick Derrane came running down the road with a pitchfork on his shoulder, his rawhide shoes squelching with the wetness of the road, a white frieze smock tucked into his waist belt, his slim thin body shivering with the cold. He reached the sandbank and saw the seaweed in the tide through the darkness, being sucked in and out by the mighty slow movement of the sea. He uttered a low, joyous cry and ran down, running ankle-deep in the soft white sand.

“Praise be to God!”

It was the fifteenth day of February and he had not yet gathered any seaweed to manure his potatoes.

He had been six weeks lying on his back with influenza, his wife was weak after the hardship of winter, his four-year old son was lying on his death-bed, the supply of peat had been all burned for the past month, there was neither flour nor milk in the house and they had to depend on the charity of their neighbors ... but ... work must be done...

The seaweed must be gathered and the potatoes must be planted because another winter was coming after the warmth of summer, another winter with cold and sickness and hardship. The great whip of poverty was lashing his back, driving him down the beach through the soft sand.

He had no thought now of his wife or of his son or of his hunger, walking rapidly back and forth from the sandbank to the tide, lifting the seaweed on his pitchfork and spilling it in a slipping heap. He worked wildly, gritting his teeth against the cold. He only remembered the crop he had to sow and that great lash of hunger, the dread spirit that ever taunts the poor, reminding them of the hardship that is to come, deadening the pain that is present.

Several other men came from the village, all in a hurry, running down the beach over the soft sand. They all saluted Derrane and asked him how his little son was.

“Ah, may the Virgin pity him,” they said sadly.

The poor pity the hardships of the poor.

The sun rose. Daylight sparkled on the land, on the beach and over the sea. The birds awakened and sent their sweet music dancing through the depths of the sky. The cloak of red seaweed on the beach shimmered, like freshly spilt blood on which the sun is shining, against the dark blue background of the freezing sea.

Derrane had gathered a great heap of seaweed, ten loads for a horse. He went home, weak after his sickness, he was hardly able to walk the road. His thighs were scalded by the brine. And now that he was going home, he remembered the sadness that awaited him there, lamentation and a grave being opened...

His house was at the head of the village, a little long house, with whitewashed walls, the straw thatch neat, everything tidy in the yard, little green bushes growing by the walls. A good housewife. A good husband. But poverty respects nothing...

In the kitchen there was only a neighboring woman sitting on a stool in front of a fire of briars, trying to get a kettle to boil. She saluted him in a whisper.

“Where is Brigid?” He said.

“She went out looking for a drop of milk for your tea. The table is set in the big room. Go in. The kettle is just boiling. She’ll be in a minute with the milk.”

She did not look at him.

He stood, trying to speak, looking at the door of the little room, where his son was lying.

“Eh...is there any change in him?” he said weakly.

She shook her head.

“Go in,” she said again, pointing to the big room. “I’ll go and see if—” he began.

“No, don’t,” she said, jumping up suddenly. “He is sleeping now and it will only be a heartbreak for you to look

at him. Go in and sit down to table.”

His wife entered with a small vessel under her apron. She was a little woman with a round face, two great blue eyes staring and her little mouth opened, as if her mind were wondering at some terrible thing which she could not comprehend. They looked at one another, the husband and the wife, but they did not speak a word. There was no need for them to speak. Looking, eye to eye, they both understood all that was to be said; simple, loving people, there was no need for them to speak. When two hearts are married there is nothing to hide...

He entered the big room with downcast head. He stripped off all his clothes. They were drenched by the seaweed. She gave him dry clothes. He put them on and sat down to table. She did not sit down with him because there was only enough bread for one and even that was little enough. But he divided the bread evenly and offered her half.

“I won’t eat it,” she said. “Let you eat all of it. I’m not hungry.”

He looked at her shyly. She was drinking a cup of tea, standing by the table, looking out through the window. Looking at her haggard frame and at the red veins in her little hands that used to be so smooth and comely a year or two ago, his heart filled with anger against the world. A salt lump came up his throat, choking him. God! God! Why could he not rend and break and destroy everything, instead of being tied down like this by poverty, without power, stricken, helpless, tied, tied, by the great chain of hunger.

“Eat it, Brigid,” he said softly. “While God leaves us one another sure everything will be all right.”

She turned to him, dropped her head on his breast and burst into tears.

“Stop, stop, darling,” he said. “There’s no use in crying.”

“Forgive me,” she said, wiping her eyes. “But I am so tired and I having only him, my little son, why couldn’t he be left to me?”

“Stop, darling, stop. God is powerful.”

He ate. He went away again for his horse and went to the beach. The horse ran wildly, neighing with his head in the air, his red body trembling with the cold of the day, the joy of motion in his heart, because there is the joy of life in the heart of every animal in spring. But Patrick sat on the horse’s haunches, with his heart as hard as a stone thinking, thinking, thinking...

About midday he had brought all the seaweed to the field. He came home. He was afraid coming near his house and as he ascended the hill in front of the village and saw several neighbor women approaching his door, his heart stopped beating.

He jumped off his horse in the yard and ran to the door crying: “What’s this? What’s this?”

On the threshold he heard his wife’s voice, mingled with the many voices of death-cry rising from the lips of the village women seated round the house; a long, broken sound, wallowing the sorrow of souls.

He ran to the little room and found her there, kneeling by the bed.

Side by side they wept.

Source: Liam O’Flaherty. *The Collected Stories I* ed. A.A. Kelly, Dublin: Wolfhound Press, pp. 238-241.  
Reprinted with permission of PFD on behalf of the estate of Liam O’Flaherty.

# Ghosts in Strange Children

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## BACKGROUND

In this activity, students will read Mahasweta Devi's *Strange Children*, a story about a relief worker in southeast Bihar during the 1970s. The state of Bihar is in northeastern India. Patna is its capital. The religious groups Jainists and Buddhists regard Bihar as a spiritual center, and Hindus make pilgrimages to the city of Gaya in Bihar.

The tribal people of Bihar's rural southeastern region are caught between an old feudal system and exploitive economic development. Writing about what inspired her to write her stories about the people of the region, Mahasweta Devi has said, "The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat" (Bardhan 24). Not only will students analyze *Strange Children* as a ghost story and a story of the people, students will also consider the character of the relief worker, and the conditions under which he worked.

In her introduction to *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels*, her translation of Bengali short stories, Kalpana Bardhan wrote this description of *Strange Children*:

*"Strange Children" is about the prejudice and the condescension of officials and the urban educated toward tribal life and culture. The tribals are the casualties of economic development projects, which disenfranchise them for the benefit of other people in other parts of the country. To this injury is added insult in the form of the patronizing gentlemen officials. The location is a remote hilly area with barren ferrous soil. Unable and unwilling to till the infertile soil, the community lives its demoralized, ebbing life on food handed out by the government. Underneath the sullen resignation is anger and hatred toward its violators. A new relief officer wants to live up to his reputation for efficient and compassionate service, refusing to follow the bureaucratic line of least initiative. One night the zealous official is faced with a reality that nothing in his training and his life has prepared him for. The shattering of an official provides a little amusement to the grievously and irreversibly wronged; but it does not end the tyranny and condescension of the dominant culture and its official elite (Bardhan 27).*

(NOTE: It should be noted that *Strange Children* is a powerful story with graphic descriptions of the environment and the physical characteristics of the characters. It is essential that teachers read the story in advance to determine whether they wish to use it with their students.)

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## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

Strange Children

Passages from Strange Children

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Bardhan, Kalpana. *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Keane, Fergus. "Spiritual Damage," *The Guardian*. (October 27, 1995), pp. 4-5.

Kelleher, Margaret. *The Feminization of Famine: Express the Unexpressible*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1997.

Murphy, Dervla. *Visiting Rwanda*. Dublin: Lilliput, 1998.

Nicholson, Asenath. *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*. ed. Maureen Murphy. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1998.

### CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Chart of Ghost Stories on board (see Learning Experiences)

Art supplies



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## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Describe the role of the *relief worker* in different countries during times of famine.

Analyze and explain various levels of meaning in Mahasweta Devi’s “Strange Children.”

Illustrate the colors and tones of the story “Strange Children.”

Identify the elements of a ghost story: character, plot, theme, and tone in Mahasweta Devi’s “Strange Children.”

Compare works of literature about provision of famine aid.

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## STANDARDS

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

**SS 3:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live—local, national, and global—including the distribution of people, places, and environments over the Earth’s surface.

**ELA 3:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Interpret and analyze documents and artifacts related to significant developments and events in world history.

Analyze the roles and contributions of individuals and groups to social, political, economic, cultural, and religious practices and activities.

Describe the relationships between people and environments and the connections between people and places.

Investigate how people depend on and modify the physical environment.

Analyze, interpret, and evaluate ideas, information, organization, and language of a wide range of texts.

Make precise determinations about the perspective of a particular writer or speaker by recognizing the relative weight he/she places on particular arguments and criteria.

Make effective use of details, evidence, and arguments and of presentational strategies to influence an audience to adopt their position.

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## DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

### INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

- . analytical thinking
- . evaluate and connect evidence
- . observe and conclude
- . probe ideas and assumptions
- . inquire, question, probe
- . view information from a variety of perspectives
- . probe for assumptions and viewpoints
- . interpret information
- . synthesize information
- . identify patterns and themes

## MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

English Language Arts

Arts

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## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Ask students to read the handout of Mahasweta Devi's *Strange Children* translated from Bengali by Kalpana Bardhan. What does the relief officer experience in the story?

Discuss what is meant by the following quotes:

It is a lifeless sort of red, the color of dried blood.

Whatever goes wrong is to them the work of evil spirits.

It's a cursed land.

I distinctly saw that the children running away with a sack were not like human children.

Then, his uncle being a state minister, he found at the gable the best quality rice for dinner.

He is convinced that to cover up their own excessive stealing the people in charge had spread that story of

child-shaped spirits stealing relief supplies.

With gleeful laughs of victory, the youths instantly take off in the direction of the forest.

But why should he run? These are only children.

Arguments of self-defense race through his head.

In sheer frustration, the relief officer starts to weep.

Ask students to analyze: the attitude of the main character, what Devi's story says about the relationship between poverty and development, what Devi's story says about the relationship between the helpers and those who are being helped, what role religion played in the story, what role local economics played in the story, how the geography of the environment influences the events in the story (water, agriculture, etc.), and the political implications of Devi's story.

2. Ask students to illustrate the colors and tone of the story, without drawing specific scenes. (For example, a watercolor wash of reds and oranges, or blacks and whites to depict the ghostly children.) Students do not need to be able to draw to capture the feeling of the colors of the story.
3. Discuss whether Devi's story is actually a ghost story. Think of other ghost stories you have read. What are the characteristics of a ghost story? Ask students to complete the chart below:

	<b>GHOST STORIES</b>	<b>Strange Children</b>
<b>character</b>	Soul of the dead manifests itself to the living	
<b>plot</b>	Ghost appears to the living in a place associated with the ghost.	
<b>theme</b>	The power of the unseen/dead over the living	
<b>tone</b>	eerie	

4. How does Devi describe the attitude of the block development officer toward the people of Lohri? Does the relief officer share his attitude? How does he feel about the poor? What is the block development officer's attitude toward the practice of relief officers selling what is intended for the poor? What is the new relief officer's response?

Ask students if they feel that there is a difference between people who do relief work as a job (a United Nations or USAID employee) and people who do relief work as volunteers or as staff of humanitarian organizations (Peace Corps, Friends World Services). During the Great Irish Famine there were two kinds of workers among the poor: government officials (the bureaucrats who ran the food depots and workhouses) and volunteers (local clergy and gentry, Irish and English Quakers, and individual relief workers like the American Asenath Nicholson.)

5. In her account of the Irish famine, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, Asenath Nicholson contrasted the paid relief workers with volunteers working with charitable organizations. Read it aloud to the students,

discussing the social, political, cultural, and personal aspects of relief workers during times of disaster.

*An officer paid by the government is generally well paid. Consequently, he could take the highest seat in a public conveyance; he sought for the most comfortable inns where he secured the best dinners and wines; he inquired about the state of the people, and did not visit the dirty hovels himself when he could find a menial who could for a trifle perform it. Sometimes when accident forced him in contact with the dying or dead, his pity was stirred, but it was mingled with the curse which always follows—“Laziness and filth,” and he wondered “why the dirty wretches had lived so long,” and he hoped “this lesson would teach them to work in future, and lay up something as other people did” (60).*

*Let us now follow the self-moved or heavenly-moved donor. He was found mingling with the poorest, often taking the lowest seat, curtailing all unnecessary expenses that he might have more to give, seeking out the most distressed, looking into the causes of distress that he might better know how to remove them, never upbraiding with harshness, and always seeking some apology for their misdoings when representing their case to the uninformed (61)*

How does Nicholson characterize each kind of worker?

According to Nicholson, what is the most important quality a relief should have? Do students agree with her? Why? Why not?

Are Nicholson’s criteria still valid? Can we find contemporary examples of the kinds of relief workers that Nicholson would praise or criticize?

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## ASSESSMENT OPTION

*Strange Children* has been translated from Bengali into English by two different people. Kalpana Bardhan’s version is titled *Strange Children*; Pinaki Bhattacharya’s version is titled *Children*. Compare the opening paragraphs of the two translations. Both translations are faithful to the meaning of the original stories; however, there are some differences. What do you notice about the two passages? Which of the two passages uses the most vivid language? Bardhan says, “The villages covered with a mantle of dust.” What is the difference between a shroud and a mantle? Is it important? Which of the two translations would you prefer to continue reading? Explain why.

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## TEACHER REFLECTION

Dervla Murphy’s narrative of her experience in Rwanda, *Visiting Rwanda* (1998), addresses another aspect of famine aid: the negative aspects of relief programs including those programs administered by international humanitarian relief organizations. Like the government block officer in *Strange Children* who tells the new relief officer that relief supplies sent to Bihar during the Bangladesh war would end up for sale in local markets, Murphy reports that little of the internationally-financed aid reaches the rural areas of highest need where 93 percent of Rwandans live (114). She faults international agricultural experts for disregarding conventional local wisdom and introducing agricultural disaster. For example, agriculture experts promoted a high yield bean that was vulnerable to climate and disease whereas the traditional method was to plant a number of different kinds of beans which offered a greater variety of flavor and a better chance to survive mishaps of climate or disease (103).

Students might also consider the way the media covers human tragedy only when it is newsworthy. In an article about Rwanda the Irish journalist Fergus Keane discussed the media’s role:

*The second act of the great Rwandan tragedy was played out in full view of the media. The disaster was a much easier story to cover than genocide. It was, on the face of it, very simple: refugees flee for their lives and end up starving and dying. For the United States television networks in particular, this had powerful resonance; there were unmistakable echoes of Ethiopia and the “feed the world” campaigns of the eighties. For a few weeks the story dominated the news bulletins. And then, when the body count dropped, they all packed up and moved on (5).*

Ask students if they think this is a case of the media spotlight shining on victims of war, famine or a natural disaster and then moving on when the story ceased to be news.

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## ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

### **For advanced students:**

Interview VISTA and PEACE CORPS workers, physicians from the GOOD SHIP HOPE, volunteers from the INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS, and other individuals who have provided relief services to countries in severe need. Discuss what they witnessed, how people reacted as they tried to survive, solutions that worked and/or backfired, and other questions related to being a relief worker. Write a summary of the findings, including a paragraph about whether working as a relief worker is an appealing job.

Write a ghost story that depicts the reality of the Great Irish Famine.

## Strange Children

The place is called Lohri. It is located at the meeting point of three districts of Bihar—Ranchi, Sarguja, and Palamau—although officially it is part of Ranchi. It does not look like any other area in the region, not like any earthly place at all. The entire place looks like a burnt out valley; it looks as if the temperature is extremely high just beneath the surface. The trees are all stunted, the riverbed dry like a cremation ground, the villages shrouded in dust and smoky heat. The soil has a strange, dark copper color. Even in this region of reddish soil, one never comes across such dark brownish red earth. It is a lifeless sort of red, the color of dried blood.

### 1

The relief officer was being briefed during his overnight stop before the last leg of his journey to the godforsaken place called Lohri. He was known as an honest and compassionate public servant. He had been carefully selected for the task and variously forewarned that the place where he was going on the special assignment was rather difficult. He was being told so once again. “The inhabitants don’t have any honest way of living.”

“What do you mean?”

“They don’t cultivate, for one thing.”

“Why not? Haven’t they got any land?”

The man talking with him was the block development officer inside his bungalow. The outside was not cooled yet. Later in the night, the watchman of the bungalow was going to make his bed on a rope cot outside in the compound. Nobody here sleeps indoors, as it becomes hotter at night.

The relief officer was on loan from the food department for just three months to handle this assignment. Never had he seen such a lifeless, disconcerting place. His first glimpse of the people coming to collect the relief supplies was far from pleasant. They were almost naked, emaciated creatures, bellies swollen with worms and sick spleen. He had always had an image of tribal men playing flutes and tribal women, with flowers in their oiled black hair, dancing to the tune. Somehow, he had always visualized them singing and running in the hills.

When he left the jeep at the foot of a hill, having to walk toward one of the villages above, he realized that running up the hill must be close to impossible. He was out of breath walking. He had always thought that singing had a very important role in tribal life. Now he could hear them singing in the distance. It was monotonous and whiny, like the wailing of a lonely old witch. He was terribly disappointed. His images of tribal life had been drawn from the movies, particularly Hindi movies. If this was their song, then how would their mourning wail sound? He was disturbed and uncomfortable with his first taste of the place.

“Why do they do that awful singing all the time?”

“Because they’re primitive people. Whatever goes wrong is to them the work of evil spirits. They’re singing to drive the spirits away.”

The block development officer caught the relief officer’s slight unease at the mention of the word *spirits*. He smiled and asked if he was afraid.

“Certainly not.”

“Even this drought and famine are to them due to the curse of spirits.”

It’s a terrible place. Any decent place would have a Hindu community and a temple of Mahabirji with a holy banner flying atop. No such thing here. I’m dying to be transferred. Any place but this!”

“Where exactly am I supposed to go tomorrow?”

“Lohri. The people there are the weirdest of the lot. If you gave them land, they would sell it to the moneylender. Then they would glare at you and sullenly complain, ‘Where’s water? Where’s seed? Where’s the plow, and the buffalo? How can we cultivate without those?’ But even if you gave them those things, they would sell everything to the moneylender and then argue back, ‘What are we supposed to eat until the crop is ready? We’d borrowed to eat. We have to repay the loan with the land.’”

“How long do I have to stay there?”

“You’ll set up the relief camp. You must stay until the camp is in running order. I’ll send help with you. Don’t

worry, and don't be afraid."

"What's there to be afraid of?"

"Thieves."

"Thieves?"

"Yes. Every time the relief supplies are sent up there, some small children come in the dead of night and steal them. A sack or two at a time. Rice, milo, *gur*, anything they can find."

"Small children?"

"Yes. Isn't it strange? Nobody manages to catch them. Some have seen them. Once I saw them myself. I even had the gun with me at the time, but . . ."

"You keep a gun with you?"

"I have a license for a gun. As I said, Lohri is a really wicked place. About ten years back, or maybe twelve, there was a massacre. A lot of trouble. The whole place really heated up. A village was burned down by the police."

The block development officer said that it had happened before he started on his present job. He paused and asked the relief officer if he had heard the legend about Lohri. The relief officer had heard no such thing, and he did not care to hear it now. He had come to the terrible place, leaving behind the lights and attractions of Ranchi, only because he had been assigned. He did not answer. The block development officer proceeded to tell him anyway.

"The people who live here, I mean over there, are the Agariyas; they were once blacksmiths. According to the legend, the Agariyas are descendants of subterranean demons. Their occupation was to dig up iron from underground and forge ironware in furnaces in their workshops. They used to eat fire, bathe in a river of fire, and Lohri was their city. Their king's name was Logundi. The demons let only the Argariyas, and nobody else, enter underground to collect the iron ore. King Logundi was one of twelve brothers. They shared one wife."

"Sounds juicier than Draupadi," remarked the relief officer.

"Their king Logundi became too proud, believing that he was stronger than the Sun. The Sun then turned the full blast of his glare to Lohri. It burnt the king, it burnt his eleven brothers, it burnt their city of Lohri, everything. The wife was in a different village at the time, and she survived. Driven by the scorching heat all around her, she ran to a milkman's place and cooled inside the vat of buttermilk. There, under a little tree, she later gave birth to a son who was named Jwalamukhi. When Jwalamukhi became a young man, he challenged the Sun to wrestle with him. The ground where they wrestled in Lohri was completely burned by their heat. After the fight, Jwalamukhi cursed the Sun that he would be unable to unite with his moonwife, except during the full moon. The Sun cursed Jwalamukhi that the wealth the Agariyas had accumulated through their work as blacksmiths would turn to ashes and blow away. The Agariyas have remained poor ever since. This is the legend, a primitive one, as you can see."

"Of course, it's all primitive."

"The Agariyas thus behave so strangely even to this day. They've lost their traditional occupation as blacksmiths, and they're hard to start in farm work. They believe that they're in a state of impurity. That's why the iron demon does not give them iron, the coal demon does not give them coal, and the fire demon does not grant them the right kind of fire. They still believe that their day will come again."

"Tell me about the trouble and the massacre you mentioned before."

"About twelve or fourteen years ago, the government of India sent a team to explore for iron ore in Lohri. The people of a village called Kuva were the most troublesome of the Atariyas. They said that because their three demon gods lived inside the hill they could not let anyone explore there. Why should two Punjabi officers and a Madrasi geologist back out because of some story of demon gods? They went ahead and blasted the hill.

"Then the Agariyas from Kuva village came in the night and butchered them. After that, they escaped into the forest and just disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes. Just imagine, Mr. Singh, they vanished in the forest and were lost forever. As if they had metamorphosed into something else! Nobody has seen them since. One hundred to one hundred and fifty people simply vanished!"

"That's unbelievable."

"That's the strange thing I'm talking about. They vanished without a trace. Without a clue."

“Didn’t the government investigate?”

“They did. They combed the forest, as thoroughly as a Brahman widow picks old rice clean of mites. But they couldn’t find a single one of them.”

“Was any other action taken?”

“The government carried on the search for one whole month. Except for Kuva village, nobody was missing from any other village. The investigation showed nobody else involved in the crime. When the investigation was over and the villagers could not be found, the police burned down Kuva village, poured salt over its soil, and left. To teach the other Agariya villages a lesson, the police did a few things to their people, beating them up and confiscating their things.”

“No news of those missing people to this day?”

“No news whatsoever.”

“Where could they have gone?”

“The forest has so many caves and hills, you know.”

“Why do you take a gun when you go to Lohri?”

“The place scares me. So many people missing! Who knows where they’re hiding, to jump on you from who knows where?”

“Is that the only reason?”

“No.”

“What is it?”

“Every time the relief supplies are sent there, some get stolen. It used to be four or five sacks. In the last few years, a bit less, about two or three sacks get stolen. Besides, the place itself is really nasty. Who knows what there is in the soil? Nothing grows in it. Once my nephew tried to grow some crops, but nothing came of it. The soil grows no rice, no wheat, no maize, no millet, nothing. The plowshare can’t enter the soil, as if it’s all iron right underneath. It’s a cursed land. One look is enough to remove any doubt.”

“Has the stealing continued?”

“Yes. They reported that some strange-looking children came in the dead of night to steal. Naturally, I thought that relief supplies were stolen as usual by those in charge of the distribution. They steal and sell in the market, and the government can never catch them. As you know, no matter if it’s summer or winter, they send blankets and clothes along with the food in relief supplies. What will these primitive people do with woolen blankets and clothes and sugar? They will sell them for a few matchboxes, flashlights, or hand mirrors. Knowing that, the relief distributors sell it themselves. There’s nothing unusual about it.”

“But it’s wrong.”

“Such wrong things go on all the time. Don’t you remember the relief supplies released from Calcutta at the time of the Bangladesh war? Clothes, blankets, shoes, stoves, pots, and pans donated from all over the world. Didn’t they turn up in the markets of Ranchi, and didn’t we buy them?”

“That’s true.”

“Anyway. I assumed that they stole themselves and made up the story about some children stealing. Once I went myself with twenty thousand rupees worth of relief supplies. I even took some armed guards along. The relief camp was going to be set up at Lohri for people to come from all the villages for their rations. The night was very dark, black like hair, and it was very hot. I was sleeping outside. Suddenly I woke up to a strange sound. I got up and saw these little people, must be children, running away with a sack of food.”

“What did you do then?”

“I fired in the air. What could I do? I couldn’t shoot children. They got away. They were naked, only children! How could I shoot them? But...”

The block development officer frowned and stared into the dark for some time. The darkness was very thick and hot, like some melting and dripping substance, smothering absolutely everything, plugging all the cracks and holes that might let in any light. The air was so thick with dust and heat rising from the ground that it dimmed the light of the stars in the sky. The new moon was to rise very late that night.

The block development officer resumed, overcoming whatever it was that made him hesitate. “I’ve told nobody

else. You're a trustworthy man; your uncle is a state minister. What I'm going to tell you, I've told nobody else. I'm telling you only to prepare you."

"What is it?"

"You know, Mr. Singh, the place has such bad associations. All these things about demons, spirits, ghosts, and what not. I distinctly saw that the children running away with a sack were not like human children."

"What do you mean?"

"Their limbs were somehow different from ours. Abnormal."

"Different in what ways?"

"I can't quite describe it. They had unusually long hair for children, and they sniggered strangely at me as they ran away!"

"Now I am scared."

"Don't be. It's to tell you this that I've stayed out tonight instead of leaving for Tahad as I had planned. Your uncle is a state minister, and your life is my responsibility. Here, I've got Mahabirji's *prasad* for you. Keep it in your pocket. No fear can touch you as long as it is with you."

"But I don't have a gun."

"That should be all right. You'll have attendants with you."

"What about an armed guard, at least a policeman...?"

"It's too late to get any now. You're leaving tomorrow. All right. I'll try to send a policeman with those going to join you in a few days.

"Shall we have dinner now because we have to start early tomorrow?"

"Would you like to have a bath first?"

The relief officer took a bath with the cool water freshly drawn from the well. Then, his uncle being a state minister, he found at the table the best quality rice for dinner. Fresh peas in the fried rice, meat, pickles, and dark brown syrupy *gulabjamuns* to end the meal with.

His bed was ready outside in a cot; the ground under and around it cooled by sprinkling water.

But sleep seemed to elude him. The image of a boy wrestling with the sun. A hill, with gods dwelling inside. The sudden flash of axes in the dark of night. Murdered bodies lying around. The image of a Brahman widow sitting all day long, peering and picking through old rice for mites. The police picking through the forest for fugitives. The relief camp. Children, not quite human running away with stolen sacks of rice. Rows of images marched through his brain. When he felt heat on his face, he realized that he had been asleep the whole time. The sun was on his face.

## 2

The relief officer started off that morning. Supplies and camping equipment went in the truck. The block development officer left for Tahad.

Very soon the road gave way to a dirt track. The vehicles could go through because it was summer. It must be impossible during monsoon. They passed a relief center opened by missionaries at the mission house. Groups of people were going there. They were all black, thin, and silent!

The jeep driver, watching them, spat out the window and remarked, "They're inhuman! As soon as there's a drought, they leave their babies at the mission door... The white missionaries turn them into Christians, ruining our religious tradition. But these people are wicked, too. They become Christians but go on worshipping their spirits and demons."

"Don't the missionaries know about it?"

"They know. Still, they give them medicine and nurse them. The rosy cheeked white women hold the babies of those animals in their laps and kiss their faces... Just listen to them singing. Would any normal people anywhere sing like that at this time of the day?"

Their singing, that infernally slow wailing, came in waves from the surrounding hills and forests, and hit them sitting inside the moving jeep.



“Why are they singing?”

“They’re strange! Those who still can walk go to pick up the relief. Those who can’t, the very old sit in a circle and sing like that. They sing on and on, until they die. When the singing starts in one village, the old women about to die in another village send the young to the relief camp and then sit down to start their own singing.”

The relief officer felt as if he were drowning. He thought of the city of Ranchi—the lights, the taxis, the motor cars. The sparkling life was flowing on there, but he was going to a bizarre place when subhuman children sniggered and ran away with relief supplies. There was nothing to see along the way but dusty hills and dull stretches of forest that held old women, who faced with the prospect of death, didn’t even try to live but just sat around in a circle and wailed their chorus for death.

“Have many of them died already?”

“Many. Look at all those vultures and kites flying above. Some are even eaten alive by the vultures! It’s a really weird place.”

“How far is it to Lohri?”

“We are entering it. See the strange copper color everywhere, on the ground, on the hills in the trees! That’s Lohri. There’s poison in its soil.”

A cluster of hills could be seen further off. The driver said that was where the relief camp was going to be set up. After some silence, the driver said, “There is something I want to tell you, sir. Please don’t take offense. We don’t know what’s there in Lohri, but we feel scared when we’re there. We’ll drink, if you don’t mind, and we’ll stay close to the camp. We’re too scared otherwise, after Bahadur went out of his mind with fear.”

“Who’s Bahadur?”

“The earlier driver. Didn’t the officer *saab* tell you about him?”

“No.”

“He should have.”

“What happened to Bahadur?”

“Nobody still knows exactly what. Those who were with him said that they were all deep asleep that night. Suddenly they heard Bahadur shouting “Thief! Thief!” Then they saw him run after somebody and disappear in the pitch dark. Those who went looking for him ran right back when they heard a strange laughter somewhere out in the dark. Next morning, they found Bahadur lying unconscious. His consciousness returned, but not his senses.”

“What happened to him after that?”

“He became raving mad. He still is, in the lunatic asylum at Ranchi. Here, we’re at our destination.”

The campsite had already been cleared. The tax collector of the area was there. He emerged from a shack and asked the relief officer to have some tea. He said that he had got some water stocked for him if he wanted to bathe, water that had to be hauled from a place half a mile away.

“From that tank?” asked the driver.

“Yes, from that one,” said the collector.

At the puzzled look of the relief officer, the tax collector explained, “During the Kuva incident, the hill was dynamited. The blast made a crater in the hillside. Water collects in it during the monsoon and serves as our water supply for the rest of the year.”

After they finished having tea, the tax collector put up the tent and stacked the relief supplies, carefully counting the number of sacks.

“Don’t worry about what I’m doing,” he said to the relief officer. “I do it every time. I even have the list of names of the villages to be covered. Distribute relief from ten to four and the day’s work is over.”

“How many are expected to come in a day?”

“A thousand, two thousand. Don’t know exactly how many will come this time.”

“There will be a medical unit this time. They’ll need a tent. Set one up for them.”

“Very well. But how come? No medical unit ever came along before.”

“This Janata government wasn’t in office before either, and a special relief officer didn’t come here before to take

charge.”

The tax collector thought, “Son of a pig!” But he said, “As you wish, sir.”

“Those who have come from the Sardoha mission will also work with us.”

“Them too?”

“Yes. Because they’ve got nurses and a doctor.”

“Very well, sir.”

“We need people to bring water, to keep the camp clean, to clean the pots and pans for cooking the relief food. Pick up ten young men from the villages to be hired. Take down their names. They’ll work here, have their meals here, and get a rupee a day.”

“They always work for just the meals, sir.”

“Are you here to instruct me or to follow my instruction? I’m going to run the camp. But you’ll have to come once a day.”

“For how long is the camp going to remain open?”

“A month, for now. This one is in my charge. There’s going to be a camp every twenty miles. And one more thing. I’ll sleep close to the tent with the food storage because it’s my personal responsibility.”

“That, of course, is the right thing to do. However, I would not stay with the stores even for a hundred rupees.”

“Why not?”

“There’s stealing at night. Those who come to steal are not human.”

“Ignore those tales. College students are coming to work as volunteers. They are going to deliver the relief supplies for those who can’t come. Tell the people in the villages that their old folks need not sing the death song.”

The tax collector was amazed, speechless. Every year he stole the relief supplies and enriched himself. He was utterly dishonest. But he was also very efficient. He immediately picked ten Agariya youths from the villages and hired them for cleaning and servicing the camp.

Next day, with the help of the two watchmen, he laid out the day’s relief supplies under the tree. Only dry food-stuff was to be distributed the first day. From the next day on, there would be *khichri* for everybody and milk for the children.

He told the relief officer that the Agariya youths would be staying there at night beside the storage tent, guarding it.

“None of us wants to be near it at night. It’s not right to let you sleep there alone. So, that’s what I arranged.”

The relief officer felt his suppressed anxiety diminish. The camp was started promptly and very systematically. *Khichri* was cooked and distributed from the following day. The medics gave shots against cholera and typhoid. The campsite was buzzing with activity.

People were coming from distant villages. From afar little lights could be seen moving toward the camp even after darkness fell. Because of the scorching heat during the day, many found it easier to walk to it in the evening, in groups, carrying lighted torches of oil-dipped rags.

After a few days, even the tax collector complimented the officer, saying that with his highly efficient relief work he had brought hope to the minds of even those hopeless primitive people. Earlier, the old folks knew they were bound to die and sat singing. Now the singing had stopped. He made a suggestion: “There seems to be no need to send supplies to the villages. Because the relief distribution is going on so well this time, why not ask the able bodied villagers to bring the old folks along on their backs?”

“No, no. Hunger makes people unkind. Anyone they don’t bring would then die. Besides, how are they going to carry the old all the way here? They’re too weak. Some of them even die on the way coming here.”

The relief officer became extremely involved with this work, with earning credit as an efficient administrator. The place, with its look of dusty burnt clay, its forests of stunted gray-brown leafless trees, the savage reddish hills, all seemed less terrifying now. Its starving destitute people soon assumed top priority in his mind. The young medics left after finishing the vaccination. He promised to help even the doctors and nurses from the mission. Although the regulation allowed for only cholera and typhoid vaccines, he got around that to procure from Ranchi supplies of antibiotics, salve for sores, baby food, even packets of nutri-nugget.

The ten Agariya youths remain clustered around him all the time, unwilling only to accompany him to the tank in the blasted hill for his bath after the busy day because they are forbidden to go to it. They take him instead to the hidden spring in the Lohri river, their own water source. There, while bathing in the cool water, he listens to them tell him in their words the legend of the fight between the Sun and Jwalamukhi. Jwalamukhi, an Agariya youth, is their hero, even though because of him they are now poor. Yet the power of his curse prevents the Sun from uniting with his wife except on the full moon. The Agariyas are suffering because the three-demon gods of iron, coal, and fire have withheld their blessings. It takes him well past evening to come back from the bathing trip in the company of the youths.

Lying down for the night in his rope cot in front of the storage tent, he does a lot of thinking. He is convinced that to cover up their own excessive stealing the people in charge had spread that story of child-shaped spirits stealing relief supplies. He starts wondering about how the condition of Agariyas of Lohri could be improved. An honest and compassionate man is certainly needed, someone who could rehabilitate them in farming. He must write an official note about it as soon as he is back in Ranchi. It is not enough to keep these people barely alive by sending them relief year after year. He falls asleep with these thoughts. He sleeps without anxiety. The Agariya youths are also sleeping near the tent. They have addressed him as *deota*, to him, that feels like winning a trophy. These people, notorious for their unwillingness to trust anyone outside their community, have addressed him as *deota*. That certainly is a victory for an honest, well-meaning official.

But the ten Agariya youths do not sleep. They stay awake, alert, listening hard. The camp is much bigger this time, with many more people, much more noise. Is that why they are not hearing what they are trying to hear?

Then one night they hear the expected foot steps; several pairs of feet approaching in the cautious manner of pack-hunting animals. There is a muffled whistle answered by another whistle. They get up and untie some ropes of the tent. Then there are activities, quick and silent. The youths lift the flap at the tent's entrance. The new moon is rising after midnight. Several pairs of small hands remove a sack of rice and a sack of milo.

At that moment the relief officer wakes up. He sits up with his flashlight and finds the Agariya youths gone. Quickly he goes to the other side of the tent and finds the youths tying the tent back to the stakes. Why? Why is the tent's flap lifted? Puzzled and hurt at the betrayal of his trust, he looks at their faces. Strange, unfamiliar faces, even though they are the very same youths. The desperate question in his eyes communicates nothing to them, produces no response in their eyes. With gleeful laughs of victory, the youths instantly take off in the direction of the forest. The officer runs into the tent to check the grain sacks and finds two of them gone. He comes out and runs after them.

He can hear some tiny footsteps in the dark ahead of him. Through the gaps in the forest, he manages to spot the sacks quickly moving away. They are humans, not spirits. From the height at which the sacks are moving, he concludes that the thieves are very short, perhaps children.

These people collect the relief and then send their eight and ten year olds to steal the relief supplies! So much for the government reports saying that the Agariyas never steal, never lie, never commit crimes. He has been so keen to do good for them. The youths have addressed him as *deota*. It was all deceit? Suddenly he feels as if he has been tricked, robbed and left destitute! He becomes angry, and the blood rushes to his head. He is a good and honest man, who never takes bribes, and he has sympathy for the tribals. He has tried to prove true to all the reasons for his selection for this job. He has dedicated himself to the work. He has even thought about a solution to their problems, more lasting than merely sending relief to keep them alive a year at a time. Is this how they return kindness? By sending children to steal the relief supplies? He is going to catch them and see to the end of this business of stealing.

Stubbornly he keeps chasing the sound of those fleeing through the forest. They keep running too. The forest becomes thin, giving way to dried up wild grass. Beyond that he sees a huge treeless area, which must be where Jwalamukhi wrestled with the Sun. The children put the sacks down when they reach that spot.

They must be exhausted, the relief officer thinks. He approaches them. They are standing around the sacks in a ferocious manner, the way beasts of prey crouch when getting ready to pounce. They are silent and still, watching him. In the faint light of the new moon, he can make out only their shapes and the postures, not their features and other details.

Suddenly, they move toward him, and he notices that there are not only boys but also girls. Claws of fear such as he has never known before sink into his chest. They fan out and surround him as they approach him. Then they stop moving. Why?

They watch him, and he watches them. The circle draws a bit closer and stops again. He looks over his shoulders and sees that he is encircled. He cannot easily break away. But why should he run? These are only children. Spirits never steal rice and milo.

He remembers the remarks he had heard. "The land here is cursed." "We'll drink at night otherwise we're too scared."

He tries to calm his wildly beating heart, but it does not seem to obey him. They come closer. Cold terror grips him. Why don't they speak? Why do they approach him so silently? Their bodies are more clearly visible now. But what is he seeing? Why are they naked? Why is their hair so long?...

"Stay away from me!" The words come out flat as his scream remains soundless....

They are adults! No sound comes out of his mouth, but the realization explodes inside his brain, devastating it like Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The old man sees that he has understood. He sniggers, a strange inhuman chuckle. The chuckle spreads around. They jump around him and bend over, laughing hysterically. Some do somersaults, flying through the air. Others crouch, ready to spring. What can the officer do now?

"We aren't children. We're the Agariyas of Kuva. Ku-va! Have you heard of it?"

No! No! No! The officer wants to cover his eyes, but his hands do not obey him, or perhaps his shattered brain fails to convey his wish to his hands. "Keep the prasad of Mahabirji in your pocket. No harm can touch you as long as you have it."

"Ever since we cut up your folks to save the honor of our gods inside the hill, we've been hiding in the forest. So many soldiers, so many policemen come to catch us. They couldn't!"

The old man sniggers. Ghoulis chuckles go around.

"A few of us have lived with the help of the Agariya villagers. The rest of us died off without food, having to hide in the forest for so long."

The circle gets tighter. They come closer.

"Don't come near me!"

"Why shouldn't we? You've so many sacks of rice there, so many sacks of milo, and you come after us for just a couple of sacks. Because you've come, take a good look. Come, all of you, let him have a good look."

...The old man is now very close to him. They all come closer...

"We're down to just these fourteen. Our bodies have shrunk... That's why we steal food. We must eat to grow bigger again. Don't you agree?"

..."The Agariya villagers help us with it. The massacre of Kuva! We're like this because of the massacre of Kuva."

The officer repeats to himself that what he is seeing cannot be true. If it is true, then everything else is false: the Copernican system, science, the twentieth century, the Independence of India, the five-year plans, all that he has known to be true. He keeps saying, "No! No! No!"

"What use is saying no? Saying no doesn't make it untrue. How did we get these things? Can't you tell from these that we aren't children?"

They snigger with the joy of revenge. Again they go around him, running and jumping and laughing...

How pathetic the new moon looks up there! How weak is the light she sheds on the burned-out empty field of battle between the Sun and Jwalamukhi, the field in which a handful of child-sized adults are now wildly rejoicing in their revenge. The thrill of decapitating the enemy with blows of axes. Retaliation.

Retaliation against what?

His shadow cast across their dancing little figures tells him what. It is against his five feet and nine inches of height, against the normal growth of his body.

Arguments in self-defense race through his head. He wants to say: "Why should I be the target of your vengeance? I'm only an ordinary Indian. The size of my body is much less than those of the Americans, the Canadians, or the Russians. I've never even seen many of the nutritious things they eat. Never have I eaten much more than the number of calories that is an absolute minimum according to the World Health Organization."

But the arguments do not manage to find his voice... It seems to him that the body of an average Indian, what he has always considered to be puny and short, is the most heinous crimes against human civilization, and that he is to blame personally for the hideously stunted forms of these once proud adults. He stands accused of the crime on behalf of all the others.

He turns his thoughts deliberately to condemn himself to death. Then he lifts his head to the moon and opens his mouth. With the dancing and the laughing ... going on about him, he decides that he must scream and go out of his mind. If he is to escape this predicament, he must let out a howl like a mad dog, shrill enough to tear the vast field and become totally insane. But how is it that his brain is disobeying him? Why is it failing to carry out the sentence that he has passed on himself? Why can't his brain make his voice scream, produce any sound at all?

In sheer frustration, the relief officer starts to weep.

Source: Mahasweta Devi in "Strange Children" in Kalpana Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. Used with permission of the University of California Press. Edited for purposes of *The Great Irish Famine Curriculum*.

## Strange Children

**The following passages are two different translations from the Bengali of a short story by Mahasweta Devi. Devi is one of Bengal's leading writers. She was a relief volunteer during the Bengali famine of the 1940s and she has continued to be involved actively in the welfare of the rural poor.**

The place is called Lohri. It is located at the meeting point of three districts of Bihar—Ranchi, Sarguja, and Palamau—although officially it is part of Ranchi. It does not look like any other area in the region, not like any earthly place at all. The entire place looks like a burnt out valley: it looks as if the temperature is extremely high just beneath the surface. The trees are all stunted, the riverbed dry like a cremation ground, the villages shrouded in dust and smoky heat. The soil has a strange, dark copper color. Even in this region of reddish soil, one never comes across such dark brownish red earth. It is a lifeless sort of red, the color of dried blood.

translation by Kalpana Bardhan

The place was called Lohri, and it was situated where the three districts of Ranchi, Sarguja, and Palamau shared a common boarder. On the official record it belonged to Ranchi district, but the place was a vast stretch, scorched and burnt beyond reclaim, as if the earth underneath were a furnace. That is why the trees were stunted and dwarfed, the bed of the river dry, and the villages covered with a mantle of dust. The color of the earth was unusual. Even in this area of red earth, one seldom came across such deep brown-red earth, the color of blood when it dries.

translation by Pinaki Bhattacharya

Source: Mahasweta Devi in "Strange Children" in Kalpana Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. Used with permission of the Regents of the University of California.

# The Role of Charities in Fighting Poverty

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## BACKGROUND

The history of the Great Irish Famine shows a significant role played by religious organizations, private charities and other humanitarian groups in the relief of the hungry poor. While the British government spent some 10,000,000 pounds in Ireland during the Famine, private contributions amounting to 1,500,000 pounds provided essential aid—particularly when the official response was delayed or inadequate. In the spring of 1847 soup kitchens were organized by the Irish Society of Friends (the Quakers). The Friends provided essential relief until the government passed and implemented its *Destitute Poor Act (Soup Kitchen Act)*.

While no one is critical of private charity, some people have criticized its role in eliminating hunger. In her recent book, *Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, Janet Poppendieck has argued that the proliferation of charity contributes to our society's failure to grapple in a meaningful way with poverty.

Teachers may want to refer to the activities *Heroes of the Great Irish Famine* and *New Yorkers Provide Relief During the Great Irish Famine*.

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## RESOURCES

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Kerr, Donald. *The Catholic Church and the Famine*. Blackrock: Columbia Press, 1996.

Murphy, Dervla. *Visiting Rwanda*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1999.

Poppendieck, Janet. *Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. New York: Viking Press, 1998.

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## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Analyze varying points of view and draw personal conclusions about whether private charities and humanitarian organizations relieve governments from taking full responsibility for societal problems.

Consider multiple points of view on a sensitive topic and form an opinion.

Describe the complexities of universal problems such as alleviating hunger and poverty.

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## STANDARDS

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

**SS 4:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the United States and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and nonmarket mechanisms.

**ELA 1:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.

**ELA 2:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Study about different world cultures and civilizations focusing on their accomplishments, contributions, values, beliefs, and traditions.

Understand the roles and contributions of individuals and groups to social, political, economic, cultural, scientific, technological, and religious practices and activities.

Describe the ideals, principles, structure, practices, accomplishments, and problems related to the United States economic system.

Collect economic information from textbooks, standard references, newspapers, periodicals, and other primary and secondary sources.

Support interpretations and decisions about relative significance of information with explicit statement, evidence, and appropriate argument.

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## DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

### INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

- . analytical thinking
- . reflective thinking
- . take and defend positions
- . identify premises and rationale for points of view
- . participate in interpersonal and group activities
- . communicate results of research and projects
- . interpret information and data
- . acquire and organize information
- . question arguments

### MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

English Language Arts

Mathematics

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## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Share the Background information of this activity with the class. In his book *The Catholic Church and the Famine* (1996), Donal Kerr calculated that the 1847 British pound is worth eighty times that amount today. Check the sterling/dollar exchange rate for 1996 and convert to dollars the amounts spent by the government and by private aid. What is the ratio?

Ask students what they think of Poppendieck's observation? Do students think that local, state and federal governments believe there is a "safety net" of private charities that supplements or replaces their program for the hungry and the homeless? On the other hand, is it important for us as human beings to be actively involved in making our society more caring to all members of our community?

2. In her book *Visiting Rwanda*, the Irish writer Dervla Murphy, commenting on the relationship between international relief organizations and government, quoted from an African Rights Discussion Paper (ARDP), *Humanitarianism Unbound*:

*In countries like Somalia and Mozambique, relief agencies play a crucial role in setting the international agenda. They may be the chief providers of public welfare, among the main sources of salaried employment and commercial contracting, but even more significantly they act as news agencies and diplomats. In short, relief agencies are expanding into a void left by the contracting power of host governments and the declining interest of Western powers. But it is a void they can not fill.*



What does the ARDP paper mean by “void they can not fill?” Does it mean that humanitarian organizations are filling the void left by the lack of official interest in the problems of hunger, homelessness and human rights violations expressed by the foreign policy of other governments?

3. In groups, ask students to discuss the differences between the relationship between the local/state/federal government and the private charities devoted to hunger in the United States and the government and humanitarian agencies in countries struggling under war or famine conditions.

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## ASSESSMENT OPTION

Take a personal point of view on the Poppendieck question and support their perspectives with rational arguments and supportive documentation.

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## TEACHER REFLECTION

This activity addresses the question as to whether private charities and humanitarian organizations combat or contribute to poverty. Invite speakers from these organizations to discuss what they do and how they feel about this question. Teachers may want to refer to other learning activities that describe relief efforts during the Great Irish Famine: *Irish Quakers, Soup Kitchens Then and Now, Soyer Soup, Soup Kitchen Journals, Famine Food: American Indian Corn, Designing Relief Legislation, New Yorkers Provide Relief During the Great Irish Famine, Creating Broadsides and Posters for the Great Irish Famine*, and *The Greatest Possible Good: Famine Grants*.

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## ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

**For younger students:**

Ask students to identify three charities and/or humanitarian organizations, describing their mission.

**For advanced students:**

Students can prepare a position paper for a dialogue on the question of whether private charities devoted to hunger and homelessness enable governments to avoid coming to terms with those issues in our society.

# Spin Doctoring: Using Language to Manipulate Information

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## BACKGROUND

During the Great Irish Famine Sir Charles Trevelyan, the man responsible for the British government's famine relief policy, often referred to the famine as the "distress." For example, he wrote in *The Irish Crisis* (1948) that in 1847, the worst year of the famine, when the government reduced the number of people employed in public works projects by 20 percent, "These orders were obeyed, and the crisis passed without any disturbance of the public peace or any perceptible aggravation of the distress."

In this activity, students will look at the use of words like *crisis*, *disturbance*, *perceptible aggravation*, and *distress*. Students will be looking at the effect of Trevelyan's abstract language on the reader and will be considering the term *spin doctor*. In recent years we have heard the term *spin doctor* applied to a person, usually a public relations expert, who is hired to put a positive *spin* on an image of a person in the public eye. Institutions and businesses sometimes create spin language to shade the meaning of information given to the public. Frequently, the language chosen is abstract and is designed to create a distance between the reality of the situation and the public. Using special language to manipulate meaning has a long history. This activity focuses on spin doctoring the Great Irish Famine.

(Note: This activity is especially challenging academically. Teachers should preview the handout and learning experiences to determine if students will be able to comprehend George Orwell's point about language and meaning.)

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## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

The Man With a Thorn in His Conscience

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Chandar, Krishan. "The Man with a Thorn in his Conscience," *Ann Data (I Cannot Die: A Story of Bengal)*, by Kwaja Ahmad Abbas, with cover design and illustration by Rathin Motra. Poona: 1944/1945.

Orwell, George. *Politics and the English Language: A Collection of Essays*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1954. pp. 162-177.

Trevelyan, Charles. "The Irish Crisis," *Edinburgh Review*, January 1848.

### CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Definition of *irony* on the board.

Optional: Examples of irony in literature already read/reviewed by students.

Optional: New examples of irony.

Optional: Examples of euphemisms and vagueness from current events (e.g., quoted from politicians, answers from major corporations undergoing scrutiny, etc.).

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## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Describe the use of spin doctoring in writing and the media.

Analyze documents, including current events materials, to identify how language can manipulate information and meaning.

Analyze and draw conclusions about the abstract use of language in the official response to the Great Irish Famine.

Describe and identify the literary device of *irony*.

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## STANDARDS

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

**ELA 1:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.

**ELA 2:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.

**ELA 3:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Analyze evidence critically and demonstrate an understanding of how circumstances of time and place influence perspective.

Explain the importance of analyzing narratives drawn from different times and places to understand historical events.

View history through the eyes of those who witnessed key events and developments in world history by analyzing their literature, diary accounts, letters, artifacts, art, music, architectural drawings, and other documents.

Interpret and analyze complex informational texts and presentations, including technical manuals, professional journals, newspaper and broadcast editorials, electronic networks, political speeches and debates, and primary source material in their subject area courses.

Make distinctions about the relative value and significance of specific data, facts, and ideas.

Make perceptive and well developed connections to prior knowledge.

Evaluate writing strategies and presentational features that affect interpretation of the information.

Identify significant literary elements (including metaphor, symbolism, foreshadowing, dialect, rhyme, meter, irony, climax) and use those elements to interpret the work.

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## DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

### INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

- . acquire and organize information
- . analytical thinking
- . draw conclusions
- . view information from a variety of perspectives
- . identify premises and rationale for points of view
- . present information
- . participate in interpersonal and group activities
- . interpret information and data
- . reflect upon content/form opinions
- . consult and interpret primary sources

### MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

English Language Arts

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## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Write the words *distress* and *famine* on the board. Ask students to say the words that they associate with each word. What do students notice about their word clusters? Which word prompts the more vivid associations? Does one word conjure up more negative images than the other? What adjectives would students use to describe famine (e.g., pain, suffering, torture, grief, etc.).
2. Ask students to read the handout by Krishan Chandar *The Man with a Thorn in his Conscience*, a story in the form of a series of letters written in 1943 by a foreign diplomat living in Calcutta during the Bengali famine. What does F.B.U. (The diplomat) report about the Bengali regional government's response to the famine? Ask students to pay special attention to the entries dated August 12th and 25th, September 25th, and November 25th.

If the government declares that a famine exists, does it have an obligation to the hungry? What obligations does it have?

Do you think that Chandar wants readers to be aware of the difference between what she says and what she means? (That is a characteristic of the literary device called *irony*.)

Is Chandar's story ironic? Why? If so, why does Chandar employ irony? Is she trying to get at the truth of the situation?

If it is not irony, why not? Look especially at the charge that the Bengalis are dying of gluttony.

3. Ask students to divide into small groups, each group discussing one of the following questions:

When would it be a good idea for a writer, speaker, or representative from an organization to be vague, use euphemisms, and limit details?

Why do some politicians respond to questions with vague generalizations? Are they being cagey, playing it safe, or are they honest because they have not decided upon their answers?

How does advertising use spin doctoring? Does it work?

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## ASSESSMENT OPTION

In 1946, George Orwell wrote an essay titled *Politics and the English Language* that talked about language and meaning:

*In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to care, and do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness.*

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## TEACHER REFLECTION

In field testing this activity, students made clipping files of issues which invite the kind of “euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness” that Orwell identified and Trevelyan and Chandar used in the texts. When they looked at the reality and the language used to describe the reality they realized how language can conceal meaning or makes it obscure. Other students tried hand writing their own *spins* based on the facts of school events or local news stories.

## PART ONE

### THE MAN WITH A THORN IN HIS CONSCIENCE

*(Letters written from Calcutta by a foreign Consul to  
the head of his country's Government)*

Moonshine Villa,  
Calcutta,  
8th August 1943.

Your Excellency,

I have just arrived in Calcutta. By popular repute Calcutta is the largest city in India. The Howrah Bridge is the most wonderful bridge in India. The Bengalis are the most intelligent community in India. The Calcutta University is the biggest University in India. "Sonagachi" is the most extensive Red Light district in India. The Sunderbans near Calcutta are the largest hunting-ground of tigers. Calcutta is the world's greatest jute centre. The most popular sweet-meat in Calcutta is called *rassogola*. It is said to have been 'invented' by a prostitute but by bad luck she could not take out a patent because in those days there was no such provision in the Indian law. So she died begging on the streets in her old age. In a separate parcel I am despatching two hundred *rassogolas* for

Your Excellency. Eaten with minced meat they will be found delicious.

I beg to remain,  
Your most obedient servant,  
(*Sd.*) F. B. ULLUSON  
Consul for the Republic of Silorica

Calcutta,  
9th August 1943.

Your Excellency,

Your second daughter Simara had asked for a snake-charmer's flute. Today I met a snake-charmer in the street and bought his beautiful flute for one hundred rupees. It is light and delicately fashioned, made out of an Indian vegetable called *lauki*. This flute is entirely hand-made. I have had it polished and have got a beautiful teak-wood box made for it. I am taking the liberty, with Your Excellency's permission, to send it as a gift for your second daughter, Simara.

Your most obedient servant,  
(*Sd.*) F. B. ULLUSON  
Consul for Silorica

10th August 1943.

In Calcutta there is no rationing as in our country. In the matter of food every one has complete personal freedom. Yesterday I was invited to dinner by the

Consul for Tilli. There were 26 different meat courses on the table, besides two dozen vegetable dishes, salads and puddings. The wine was excellent. In our own country, as you are doubtless aware, even onions and carrots are rationed but nothing is rationed in Calcutta. In this respect the people over here are really very fortunate.

At this dinner an Indian engineer was also present. He was educated in our country. In the course of conversation he mentioned that there is a famine in Calcutta. At this the Consul for Tilli burst out laughing and I too had to join in the laughter. Really, these educated Indians are most ignorant. Apart from bookish knowledge, they know nothing about the real conditions prevailing in their own country. Actually two-thirds of the population of India is busy producing grain and babies day and night. That is why there is never any dearth of grain and babies in this country. Indeed, before the war, large quantities of food grains used to be exported ; and children, when they grew up, used to be sent as coolie labour to South Africa. For some time this export of coolies has been stopped and the Indian provinces have been given Home Rule.

I think this Indian engineer must be some dangerous kind of agitator. After he had gone I spoke about him to M. Xan Xan Treep, the Consul for Tilli, and he said that after great deliberation, he had come to the conclusion that Indians were absolutely incapable of ruling

over their own country. Since M. Xan Xan Treep's government occupies a very high position in international affairs, I attach great importance to his views.

Yours obediently,  
(*Sd.*) F. B. ULLUSON.

*11th August 1943.*

This morning I have returned from Bolpur where I saw Dr. Tagore's Shantiniketan. They call it a University but you can imagine the kind of education they impart from the fact that there is not even a bench to sit on. Professors and students alike squat on the ground under the trees and I wonder whether they study anything at all or just keep dozing off. I did not stay long because it was getting too hot and up in the trees the sparrows were creating a frightful racket.

F. B. U.

*12th August 1943.*

Today, when I called at the Chinese Consulate, someone again mentioned the famine. But I cannot get any authentic confirmation. We are all awaiting the statement of the Bengal government on this subject. As soon as it is issued I will inform Your Excellency.

In the diplomatic bag I am taking the liberty to send a pair of Indian sandals for Your Excellency's second daughter, Simara. These sandals are made of green



snake-skin. Green snakes are found in large numbers in Burma. It is hoped that when Burma is reconquered by the British, the trade in these shoes will receive a great impetus.

F. B. U.

*13th August 1943.*

Today two women were found lying dead just outside our Consulate. They had been reduced to skeletons and it looked like a case of rachitis. Here in Bengal—perhaps in the whole of India—this epidemic of rachitis is raging extensively. This is a strange and terrible disease. The victim just wastes away and dies. So far no cure has been discovered for this disease. Quinine is being freely distributed but has not proved efficacious. The fact is that these tropical diseases of the East are quite different from the ailments known to us in the West. This again proves that there is nothing in common between the East and the West.

On the happy occasion of the sixty-second birthday of Her Excellency I am sending a marble statue of Buddha. I bought it for only two thousand rupees. It belongs to the era of Bindhusar and was once kept in the most sacred monastery of Benares. I hope it will serve as a decoration in Your Excellency's reception room.

Your most obedient servant,

F. B. U.

P. S. Along with the two dead bodies discovered outside our Consulate, there was also a child who was trying to suckle the dried-up breast of his dead mother. I have sent him to the hospital.

*14th August 1943.*

The doctor has refused to admit the orphaned child to the hospital. So he is still in the Consulate. I am at a loss as to what to do and await Your Excellency's instructions. The Consul for Tilli advises me to leave the child at the same spot where he was found, but without consulting the head of my government, I do not think it advisable to take any step which might have serious political repercussions.

F. B. U.

*16th August 1943.*

More dead bodies were found lying outside the Consulate. All these people seem to be victims of the same disease, which I had described in an earlier communication.

I have quietly placed the child among these corpses and telephoned the police to arrange to remove them at once from the steps of the Consulate. I hope that by this evening they will be removed.

F. B. U.

17th August 1943.

The English daily *The Statesman*, in an editorial, states that there is a serious famine in Calcutta. For some days this paper has been publishing pictures of alleged victims of the famine. It cannot yet be said with any authenticity whether these photographs are real or faked. Apparently, they are pictures of people suffering from rachitis.

But all the foreign Consuls are reserving their opinion.

20th August 1943.

The Government has at last allowed people suffering from rachitis to be admitted into hospitals. It is said that in Calcutta city alone over two hundred are dying of this disease every day. It has become a regular epidemic. The doctors are very worried because no amount of quinine seems to do any good. Even diaphoretic mixtures, castor oil and aspirin—i.e. the entire British Pharmacopia—have proved of no avail. The blood of some patients is being sent to Western scientists for clinical analysis. It is possible that an Expert may be imported or even a Royal Commission appointed to go into the question thoroughly in four or five years and then submit a report.

In short everything possible is being done to save these poor wretches. There is nothing more that man

can do. As the Bible says, life and death are in the hands of God.

The Bengali papers are repeatedly asserting that there is a famine in the whole of Bengal and that thousands are dying of starvation every week, but our maid-servant (who is herself a Bengali) says that these newspaper people are habitual liars. Whenever she goes to the market she can get everything she needs for our kitchen. The prices, of course, have gone up but that is inevitable due to the war.

*25th August 1943*

Political circles today have contradicted the famine rumours. The Bengal Assembly which has a majority of Indian members and even ministers has decided that neither Calcutta nor the other districts of Bengal can be declared "famine areas". This means there will be no rationing, at least for the time being. The news has been received with great satisfaction by the foreign Consuls stationed here because, if Bengal had been declared a "famine area" rationing would have had to be enforced and even we would have been affected.

Monsieur Jean Gulle, the French Consul, was telling me only yesterday, that in view of the danger of rationing being introduced in the near future, I should lay in a store of wines. I intend to order French wine from Chundernagore. I hear that in French India one can

get wines that are several hundred years old, some even date back to the period before the French Revolution. If Your Excellency so wishes, I shall be glad to send a few bottles as a sample.

F. B. U.

*28th August 1943.*

Yesterday a strange thing happened. I bought some toys from the New Market for my youngest sister, Maria. Among these was a beautiful little China doll which fascinated Maria very much. I paid six rupees for the doll and, leading Maria by the hand, I was about to get into my car when a middle-aged Bengali woman approached me and, clutching at my coat, said something in her language. Pulling my coat out of her dirty hands, I got into the car and asked my Bengali chauffeur what she wanted.

The chauffeur began talking to the woman in Bengali. While answering him she pointed to her daughter whom she held against her shoulder. A pale child with big black eyes, she looked so much like a China doll as she gazed intently at Maria.

Then the Bengali woman said something quickly. And quickly my chauffeur replied.

“What does she want?” I asked him.

The chauffeur put a few copper coins in the woman's palm and started the car. “Sir, she wanted to sell her daughter. For a rupee and a half.”

“ A rupee and a half ” ! I asked in amazement, “ But you can't buy a China doll for that.”

“ These days a Bengali child can be bought for even less.”

I was left speechless with amazement.

Then I remembered that period in America's history when Negroes were brought from Africa to be bought and sold in the slave-market. At that time even the most ordinary Negro slave could not be bought for less than twenty or thirty dollars. What a mistake those Americans made ! If, instead of Africa, they had come to India they could have got their slaves much cheaper. By dealing in Indians instead of Negroes millions of dollars could have been saved. An Indian girl for half a dollar ! The entire population of India is 400 millions. That means America could buy them all for only 200 million dollars. Just think of it ! After all, we spend more than that on establishing a single university in our country.

My chauffeur tells me that Sonagachi (where all the brothels are situated) is a regular slave-market. Hundreds of girls are being bought and sold every day. Parents sell them, and prostitutes buy them. The usual price is a rupee and a quarter. But if the girl is good-looking she might fetch four or five or even ten rupees. Rice costs about a rupee per pound. So if a family can

sell two of its girls, it has enough rice for a week or two. And the average Bengali family has more than two girls.

Tomorrow, the Mayor of Calcutta has invited us to dinner. There we are sure to hear some interesting conversation.

F. B. U.

29th August 1943.

The Mayor of Calcutta says there is a famine in Bengal and the situation is becoming increasingly serious. He appealed to me to persuade my government to extend relief to India. I assured him of our sympathy, but also made it clear that this famine is an internal problem of India and that our government does not wish to interfere in the affairs of another people. We are true democrats and as such would not like to encroach on the liberties of the Indians who should have complete freedom to live or to die. This is a personal or, at best, a national question and not an international one. M. Xan Xan Treep also joined in the conversation and pertinently asked : "When your own Assembly has not declared Bengal a famine area, how can you seek the help of foreign powers ?" At this the Mayor became silent and started eating *rassogolas*.

F. B. U.

30th August 1943.

In a statement made in the House of Commons, Mr. Amery, the Secretary of State for India, has declared that in India the population is very disproportionate to the resources of food. The population has increased a hundred and fifty times while the produce from the land has risen very little. Moreover Indians eat too much.

That, Your Excellency, is also my own observation. These Indians, though they have just two or sometimes only one meal a day, eat more than we Westerners do with all our five daily meals. According to M. Xan Xan Treep, the main reason for the rise in Bengal's death-rate is the gluttony of the people. They eat so much that sometimes their stomachs burst and they die. If the stomach does not burst the spleen bursts. It is also to be considered that Indians and rats have the highest birth-rate in the world and, in many cases, it is difficult to distinguish between the two species. Quickly are they born and quickly do they die. If the rats die of plague, the Indians die of rachitis—not infrequently of both plague and rachitis! At any rate, so long as the rats remain in their holes and do not come out to disturb the peace of the world, we have no right to interfere in their internal affairs.

The Food Member of the Government of India has arrived in Calcutta to study local conditions at first hand. Bengali circles are expressing the hope that it will now be clear to the Honourable Member that there really is



a famine in Bengal and that the reason for the alarming increase in the death-rate is food shortage and not the anarchist activities of the Bengalis.

F. B. U.

*20th September 1943.*

The Honourable Member has gone back to Delhi. It is believed that he will place his proposals before the Viceroy.

F. B. U.

*25th September 1943.*

According to reports published in the London newspapers, people are dying daily on the streets and pavements of Calcutta. But these are only newspaper reports. Officially there is no confirmation that there is a famine in Bengal.

The Chinese Consul was telling me yesterday that he wants to start a Relief Fund in China for the Bengal destitutes but he can't make up his mind, because some say there is a famine and others say there is no famine. I told him, "Don't make a fool of yourself. The only official information we have so far is that the food shortage has been caused by the Indians' habit of over-eating. By starting a Relief Fund for them you would only be encouraging their gluttony. This would be rank folly."

But the Chinese Consul did not seem to be convinced by my argument.

F. B. U.

*28th September 1943.*

A Conference is being called in Delhi for the purpose of discussing the food problem. Today several more people died here of rachitis. A report has also been published that the provincial governments—including the government of Bengal—have made profits of millions out of the food distribution scheme.

F. B. U.

*20th October 1943.*

Yesterday "Bengal Day" was celebrated at the Grand Hotel. Besides the local European gentry, high Government officials, merchants and ruling princes were present. The Cocktail Bar was well-stocked. I danced twice with Madame Juliet Treep. Her mouth smelt of garlic. She told me that as much as nine thousand rupees was collected for relief on this occasion. Madame Treep is a beautiful woman. Unfortunately she has too many Indian friends and, as a result, is not very popular in Consular circles. I understand, confidentially, that her husband may have to be recalled soon on account of her weakness for Indians.

Among Indian ladies present was a very good-looking and charming girl called Snehlata. She danced divinely.

F. B. U.

26th October 1943.

An ex-Minister of Bombay has calculated that nearly a hundred thousand are dying of famine in Bengal every week. But this is not the official figure.

Several more dead bodies were discovered in front of the Consulate today. My chauffeur said it was a whole family that had come from Barisal in search of food.

Yesterday I saw the corpse of a musician. In one dead hand he was clutching a *sitar*, in the other a child's wooden rattle. A musical instrument and a toy! I could not make out the significance of this peculiar combination.

Poor rats! How quietly they die. Not even a sigh escapes their lips. I have not seen meeker, gentler rats anywhere else in the world. If any nation deserves the Nobel Peace Prize, it is the Indian. They starve and die in their millions without a word of protest. They only keep staring at the sky with soulless, lifeless eyes, as if saying, "O, Lord! Giver of our Daily Bread!"

Last night that poor musician's dead, stony, unmoving, unseeing eyes kept haunting me in my sleep.

F. B. U.

*5th November 1943.*

The new Viceroy has arrived. I hear that he has deputed the Army to work for relief and that camps are being opened in the suburbs to accommodate the destitutes who by now have become quite used to dying on the streets of Calcutta. In these camps they will be provided with all conveniences and comforts.

M. Xan Xan Treep thinks it is just possible that, after all, there might really be a famine in Bengal and not an epidemic of rachitis. This has created a stir in all the foreign Consulates. The Consuls for Urbania, Pritania and Tiranica fear that this remark of M. Xan Xan Treep might be the signal for a coming war.

Refugees from European and Asiatic countries who are now in India have begun to be agitated over the implications of the Viceroy's scheme. They want to know what would happen to them and their allowances if Bengal were declared a famine area.

I would like to draw Your Excellency's attention to the political issues which have been raised by the Viceroy's statement. Should we not fight for the defence of the rights of the European refugees in India? What are the demands of Western culture and civilization? What steps should be taken to preserve Freedom and Democracy? In this matter I await Your Excellency's instructions.

25th November 1943.

M. Xan Xan Treep is finally convinced that there is no famine in Bengal. The Chinese Consul, however, is certain that there is a famine in Bengal. I am sorry that I have not been able to carry out the mission for which I was deputed to our Consulate in Calcutta. I have not a single authoritative confirmation of whether there is famine in Bengal or not. Even after three months of diligent enquiry I am unable to answer this question. I am ashamed and seek your forgiveness.

Furthermore, I beg to submit that I am in love with Your Excellency's younger daughter, Simara and (if I might say so) she is in love with me. Under the circumstances, would it not be better to recall me from the Calcutta Consulate, permit me to marry Simara and then appoint me to some other Consulate as Consul-General. For all these acts of kindness I shall be eternally grateful.

I am taking the liberty of sending herewith a sapphire ring for Simara. It is an ancient Indian ring which was once worn by the daughter of the Emperor Asoka.

I beg to remain,

Your most obedient servant,

(*Sd.*) F. B. ULLUSON,

Consul for the Republic of Silorica.

# Famine in Somalia

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## BACKGROUND

The purpose of this activity is to raise awareness and to understand the causes of world-wide hunger. This activity centers on a subject that is challenging for students because it may be difficult to envision and may be upsetting to realize that famine is a current event.

*Hunger* is a craving for food. *Malnutrition* occurs when the body gets less food than it needs to function properly. The average adult needs 2,400 calories per day. Anyone whose caloric intake is less than that amount is undernourished. The critical minimum number of calories is 1,600 per day. Below the 1,600-calorie threshold, over time, there is little chance of survival. *Malnutrition* occurs gradually. Those at the greatest risk are the elderly and children, but malnutrition affects the rural and urban poor, refugees and tribal peoples.

*Famine* occurs when people are unable to get the food they need to survive. Sometimes there is no food. Other times, there is food, but people do not have access to it. For example, they lack the funds to purchase food, or the price of food is beyond the means of a worker's wage. Famine results in a sharp increase in the numbers of deaths in a particular area. Famine deaths are caused by disease as well as by starvation. Famine is not an uncontrollable event. In our world today, famine is preventable.

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## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

Hodan's Story

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Dodd, Luke, Sheila Dillon, and Triona Sherwin. *Great Irish Famine and Famine Today*. Strokestown: Famine Museum, n.d.

Glantz, Michael H. ed., *Drought and Hunger in Africa: Denying Famine a Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Trócaire. *FAMINE Causes, Prevention and Relief: FAMINE in Ireland and Overseas*. Dublin: Trócaire, 1995.

See Teacher Reflection section for more readings

### CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Map of Africa

Map of the world

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## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Describe the conditions that can create hunger, starvation, and famine.

Describe the events that led up to Hodan's family moving to a refugee camp.

Describe famine from the perspective of a relief worker.

Explain how political conditions, particularly clan factionalism, can cause starvation.

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## STANDARDS

**ELA 1:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

**SS 3:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live—local, national, and global—including the distribution of people, places, and environments over the Earth’s surface.

**SS 4:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the United States and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and nonmarket mechanisms.

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Explore narrative accounts of important events from world history to learn about different accounts of the past to begin to understand how interpretations and perspectives develop.

Study about major turning points in world history by investigating the causes and other factors that brought about change and the results of these changes.

Investigate key events and developments and major turning points in world history to identify the factors that brought about change and the long-term effects of these changes.

Study about how people live, work, and utilize natural resources.

Identify and compare the physical, human, and cultural characteristics of different regions and people.

Investigate how people depend on or modify the physical environment.

Describe the relationships between people and environments and the connections between people and places.

Ask questions about where places are geographically; why they are where they are; what is important about their locations; and how their locations are related to the location of other people and places.

Study about how the availability and distribution of resources is important to a nation’s economic growth.

Explain how societies and nations attempt to satisfy their basic needs and wants by utilizing scarce capital, natural, and human resources.

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## DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

### INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

- . analytical thinking
- . reflective thinking
- . ask and answer logical questions
- . conceptualize and observe
- . make generalizations
- . identify patterns and themes

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## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Write the word *Famine* on the board. Ask students to name the images that come to mind when they see these words. Write their images on the blackboard. Discuss the difference between hunger, malnutrition, and famine.

2. Somalia is a country plagued by war and famine in recent decades. Ask students to locate Somalia on the map of Africa. What can the map tell students about the country?

Ask students to read the handout *Hodan’s Story*. Why are Hodan and her family described as poor? Why did Hodan’s land produce less maize each year? How did Hodan and her family survive without rain?

How did the shortage of food affect Hodan and her family? How did the war make conditions worse for her? What are the forces outside of Hodan's control that make it difficult for her to feed her family? What do students think will happen to Hodan and her family?

Working in groups, ask students to list the causes of famine today citing examples from Hodan's Story. The class will discuss the group answers. How is the famine in Somalia similar to and different from the Great Irish Famine?

3. Ask each student to adopt the persona of an American aid worker who is on the staff of the refugee camp in Somalia and who meets Hodan and her family. Students can write letters to friends in the United States describing the situation and their concerns for Hodan and others in her situation.

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## ASSESSMENT OPTION

How did this activity raise your awareness of the causes of hunger around the world?

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## TEACHER REFLECTION

In field testing this activity, teachers felt that it requires a map of Africa and a map of the world. Some students found passages of Hodan's story difficult to understand. Teachers found it helpful to preview the questions with students before reading Hodan's Story. Some teachers had found that Hodan's Story works best as a "read aloud" activity. The teacher reads the text and the students concentrate on meaning, rather than on decoding the text.

This is the first of two activities that look at famine today. (See also the activity *Famine in the World Today*) The activities are based on Luke Dodd, Sheila Dillon and Triona Sherwin's activity-based package for middle and high school students called the *Great Irish Famine and Famine Today*. We are grateful to Trócaire for their permission to use these materials.

*The Great Irish Famine and Famine Today* project was produced jointly by the Strokestown Park Famine Museum team and Trócaire (the Irish word for mercy), the Irish famine relief organization started by Irish bishops in 1973 to respond to the needs of people in the developing world. Trócaire addresses the problems of poverty and injustice in Africa, Asia and Latin America by supporting community programs: agricultural training, adult education, health care, and enterprises that generate employment and income.

In Ireland, Trócaire uses its educational programs to promote the awareness and understanding of world problems of poverty, hunger and homelessness. Trócaire's Famine Development Education Resources Pack is available from them at 169 Booterstown Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. Their poster *Famine in Somalia 1992: Some of the Key Causes* is particularly helpful for this activity. Their web site for students is: [www.trocaire.org](http://www.trocaire.org).

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## ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

### **For advanced students:**

Investigate the status of world hunger in the year 2000. Where are the world's hot spots for famine? What is causing hunger to still exist in places around the world? What is being done to combat hunger internationally?



## Hodan's Story

Hodan lived with her husband Gibreel and their three children near Baidoa, Somalia. She was poor; she had no money and just a few farming tools. Hodan's small plot of land was barely large enough to provide adequate food for her family. If she had been better off, she could have bought more land, but she was so poor that she sold some of her goats in order to survive. The few remaining goats supplied Hodan and her family with milk.

Hodan's land was very poor. Until a few years ago, Hodan had a larger piece of land; however, her neighbors, who belonged to another clan, took some of her best land. Hodan had to farm the same small plot of land. Over time the same plot, farmed seasonally, became less fertile and produced less maize. Her neighbors grew rich planting bananas and cotton.

Hodan cooked the maize for her family on their stove of three stones. Each day her children would gather firewood while the goats grazed on the vegetation nearby. Hodan knew that cutting the trees was damaging the environment. When the rains came, she could see the soil being washed away, but Hodan had no choice.

The first year that the rains failed, Hodan and her family survived on the maize that they had stored from the previous harvest. The next time the rains failed, they had nothing stored because the harvest had been so poor. They survived by eating wild grasses, berries, leaves and roots. Gibreel went to work on a neighbor's farm. Relatives gave them seed for the next year.

Hodan took her remaining goats to the market where she hoped to sell them to buy food for her family. Many of her neighbors were there with their animals to sell. Most of the animals were in weak condition because the grazing had been so poor. Few people had money, so the price for goats had fallen. Hodan received very little for her goats. To make matters worse, because food was scarce, the price had risen. Food was being imported from neighboring countries and that was very expensive.

Food shortages brought sickness. Hodan's youngest child was ill with the measles; the other children were suffering from malaria. Hodan could not afford the medicine she need for them. She herself was becoming weaker, and she was finding it harder and harder to work.

Somalia has a long history of war. Britain and Italy controlled Somalia at different times. Somalia had also been at war with Ethiopia. President Siad Barre encouraged clan rivalry and there were frequent clashes between clans. When Siad Barre fled to Kenya, there was no president, no government. Violence continued. Hodan's village was attacked one day by another clan; her home and crops were destroyed. She was left with nothing.

Hodan and her family left their village and walked for several days to a refugee camp administered by international aid agencies. Hodan was given a shelter made from plastic sheeting. Thousands had flocked to the camp, so the supplies of food and clean water were inadequate; there was a lack of proper sanitation. Sometimes the militia raided the camp for food, so the agencies had to pay the militia for security. Hodan could see that paying the militia contributed to the country's factionalism.

Source: Trócaire. *FAMINE Causes, Prevention and Relief: FAMINE in Ireland and Overseas*. Dublin: Trócaire, 1995.  
Used with permission of Trócaire.

# Famine in the World Today

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## BACKGROUND

See Background information in the activity *Famine in Somalia—1990*.

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## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

Causes of Famine in Africa  
Famine Relief Project Proposals

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Dodd, Luke, Sheila Dillon, and Triona Sherwin. *The Great Irish Famine and Famine Today*. Strokestown: The Famine Museum, County Roscommon, Ireland

### CLASSROOM MATERIALS

The Great Irish Famine and Famine Today  
Maps of Africa  
Map of the world  
Optional pictures of the Somalian famine

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## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Describe the elements that contribute to famine in Africa.  
Evaluate the famine conditions in Africa in the 1990s and recommend policy concerning allocation of relief resources.  
Write Letters to the Editor of the *Inter-Relief Newsletter* supporting or criticizing its funding decisions.

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## STANDARDS

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

**SS 3:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live—local, national, and global—including the distribution of people, places, and environments over the Earth’s surface.

**SS 4:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the United States and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and nonmarket mechanisms.

**ELA 3:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Explore narrative accounts of important events from world history to learn about different accounts of the past to begin to understand how interpretations and perspectives develop.

Study about major turning points in world history by investigating the causes and other factors that brought about change and the results of these changes.

Investigate key events and developments and major turning points in world history to identify the factors that brought about change and the long-term effects of these changes.

Study about how people live, work, and utilize natural resources.

Identify and compare the physical, human, and cultural characteristics of different regions and people.

Investigate how people depend on or modify the physical environment.

Describe the relationships between people and environments and the connections between people and places.

Ask geographic questions about where places are located; why they are located where they are; what is important about their locations; and how their locations are related to the location of other people and places.

Study about how the availability and distribution of resources is important to a nation's economic growth.

Explain how societies and nations attempt to satisfy their basic needs and wants by utilizing scarce capital, natural, and human resources.

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## DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

### INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

- . think rationally about content
- . probe assumptions for accuracy and viewpoints
- . work with others to solve problems
- . interpret information and data
- . make decisions about process
- . reflect upon content/form opinions
- . draw conclusions

### MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

Mathematics

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## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Ask students to review the handout *The Causes of Famine in Africa*.

Then organize students into groups of four to review relief project applications for funding. The key question is: How does each project address the famine in Somalia? Are these proposals *band-aids*, or will they help prevent future famine in Somalia? Each group is to review the proposals and prepare a report recommending just one of the proposals for an imaginary international relief agency called INTER-RELIEF.

Groups present their reports to the class who will act as the Board of Directors in INTER-RELIEF. INTER-RELIEF has a budget of \$30,000. What criteria will the agency develop to evaluate the proposals?

2. Students should then be organized into new groups of four to decide which programs they will recommend be funded with the \$30,000. They must provide support for their selections that refers to INTER-RELIEF evaluation criteria.

3. Ask students to discuss whether they are happy with the INTER-RELIEF allocations and explain why they agree or disagree with the decisions. Do they think the criteria drawn up by INTER-RELIEF would help to prevent future famine? Are there other things INTER-RELIEF should include in its funding criteria?

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## ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

Write Letters to the Editor of the *INTER-RELIEF NEWSLETTER* supporting or criticizing the African funding decisions. Letters should address the criteria developed for this particular funding cycle. Is the funding criteria adequate? Should any other criteria have been included?

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## TEACHER REFLECTION

This activity was adapted from material provided by Trócaire, the Irish famine relief organization, and is used with its permission. Trócaire has a great deal of information about famine in the world today. Teachers and students will find this information on their website: [www.trocaire.org](http://www.trocaire.org). As a follow up activity, students in a 5th grade class collected money through Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF. Other classes collected canned food for emergency hurricane relief.

In field tests it was found that maps should be prominent in the classroom. Pictures of famine are also powerful aids to creating the classroom setting for this activity. Videotapes are available from famine relief organizations and from the Public Broadcasting System (PBS).

## Causes of Famine in Africa

### Poverty:

Of the twenty poorest countries of the world today, eighteen are in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of these countries have become poor in the last thirty years. Poor people are at most risk during food shortages because they have little in reserve to help them survive.

### War:

From 1945 to 1989, there have been at least thirty major conflicts in the region. In the 1990s alone there have been major conflicts in Angola, Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia and the Sudan. Wars interfere with agriculture, so farmers grow less food. Animals and crops are destroyed. Money that should be spent on agriculture, health care and education is spent on buying arms and feeding armies.

### Environmental damage:

The Sahara Desert is expanding. Trees are cut down for firewood and to make room for crops. In 1880, 44% of Ethiopian lands were covered with trees; today, the percentage has dropped to 4%. The roots of trees hold water and control erosion by preventing the soil from blowing away. If there is erosion, harvests are smaller. Environmental damage has caused more than 10,000,000 Africans to leave their homelands.

### Poor land:

The best land in Africa is used for cash crops such as coffee. Cash crops are exported; most of the money goes to repay loans from foreign banks and governments. Small farmers are forced to move to smaller farms on poorer land.

### Drought:

Drought is not the cause of famine, but it often triggers the disaster. Many African countries have experienced drought in the recent past.

### Debt:

During the 1970s, many African governments borrowed large sums of money when interest rates were low. Many of those who borrowed and benefited from the loans have left office. Interest on the loans is very high. Food is sent overseas to pay off the debt while poor people go hungry and suffer from malnutrition.

Source: Luke Dodd et al, *The Great Irish Famine and Famine Today*, pp. 38-39.  
Used with permission of Trócaire.

## Famine Relief Project Proposals

1. We are a cooperative of twenty farmers. We work on irrigated plots of land and train farmers in the area on pest control and sustainable methods of agriculture. We need to buy tools and seeds to distribute to farmers who take part in this program. Cost: \$5,000.
2. We are a group who is providing wells for villages in the Southern region of Somalia. These wells provide water for vegetable gardens. The vegetables improve the diet of the villagers and allow them to have an income by selling any surplus in the local market. Three staff members need training on the assembly, installation and maintenance of pump systems. The course is being run in Mogadishu, the capital, and will last three weeks. Cost: \$500.
3. We are a group organizing an awareness program around water and soil conservation issues, and we are involved in setting up mini-nurseries in villages. We provide farmers with saplings that they can plant. Our aim is to help farmers to improve the quality of their land. We need to buy materials to set up three mini nurseries. Cost: \$2,000.
4. We are a community group concerned about the poor level of education in our area. We would like to rebuild our local school that was destroyed by the militia. We will build the walls of the school with local materials. We need funding for timber and iron sheeting for roofing, doors and window frames and to repair the furniture. Cost: \$1,000.
5. We are a medical team responsible for running the mobile health clinic. The mobile clinic visits six sites on a weekly basis. We also run a health program for mothers of young children. We need to buy drugs and medical supplies. Cost: \$10,000.
6. We are a group of Irish nuns working in Baidoa. We run a feeding center that provides food free of charge to the most needy people in the area. We work with the village elders and so keep food out of the hands of the warlords. We need to replace our distribution truck. Cost: \$25,000.
7. We are a group of Irish aid workers who are researching the nutritional needs of the population of southern Somalia. We plan to carry out a survey to assess the population's nutritional needs and to make recommendations about how best to meet those needs. To do this we need office equipment including a computer and printer. Cost: \$3,000.
8. We are a group of Somali workers involved in the construction of latrines. The latrines will improve sanitation levels and so reduce the spread of disease. We need to buy materials such as cement and corrugated iron. We also need to cover the cost of fuel that provides transportation to the villages where the latrines are being built. Cost: \$2,500.
9. We are members of an Education Board responsible for running a local school. Because of the war, many children have not been able to attend school. We are trying to encourage young people in our area to attend our recently constructed school. We need to buy text books, sports equipment and teaching aids. We also need to pay four teachers' salaries. Cost: \$2,500.
10. We are a local women's group interested in linking up with other women's groups at national and local levels to discuss the possibilities for reconciliation among women of different sub-clans\*. We also aim to work with these women's groups to identify income-generating possibilities and set up small scale enterprises. We need to run a series of five training workshops for women from different areas. Cost: \$2,000.
11. We belong to a group of young craftsmen who have come together to improve the level of carpentry and masonry in our area. These skills would provide a source of income for many families. We would like to send one of our villagers on a six-month course on carpentry and masonry in Kenya. On his return, he will train the rest of the group. Accommodation, travel and the course. Costs \$5,000.

\* Family groups.

**12.** We are members of the board of a local hospital. Recently a new wing was built to treat children who have been injured in the war. We need to buy beds for the wing. Cost: \$3,000.

**13.** We are members of a workshop that makes artificial limbs for people who have lost limbs as a result of the war. We need to buy need machinery and cover the cost of its transportation from Kenya. Cost: \$20,000.

Source: Luke Dodd et al, *The Great Irish Famine and Famine Today*, pp. 38-39.  
Used with permission of Trócaire.

# Developing Awareness of Hunger

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## BACKGROUND

Second Harvest, the largest domestic hunger relief charity in the United States, reports that one person in nine is hungry, that most of the hungry are the working poor, and that children, the disabled, and the elderly are three groups who suffer most from hunger.

When the British parliament drafted the Poor Law for Ireland in 1838, they identified the same people: children (orphans), the disabled, and the elderly as those who would require public assistance. (The only public assistance available was the local workhouse.) One hundred and fifty years later, the same populations are at risk. This activity asks the question: How can we help the hungry in our community?

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## RESOURCES

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

“They Deliver,” *Newsday*, Part 2, November 25, 1993, pp. 90-91.

### CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Chart for learning experience #1 on the board

Brochures and flyers from Social Service agencies, food banks, etc.

Access to computer graphics programs

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## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Describe the problem of hunger in communities through statistics, interviews, surveys, and other research.

Identify services that provide food.

Create a plan of action that raises awareness about hunger and encourages volunteerism.

Design and create a brochure that recruits volunteers.

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## STANDARDS

**Arts 1:** Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts (dance, music, theater, and visual arts) and participate in various roles in the arts. (Visual Arts)

**SS 1:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

**SS 4:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the United States and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and nonmarket mechanisms.

**ELA 1:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.

**ELA 2:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.



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## **PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

Gather and organize information about the important achievements and contributions of individuals and groups living in New York State and the United States.

Understand the interrelationships between world events and developments in New York State and the United States.

Collect economic information from textbooks, standard references, newspapers, periodicals, and other primary and secondary sources.

Make hypotheses about economic issues and problems, testing, refining, and eliminating hypotheses and developing new ones when necessary.

Develop conclusions about economic issues and problems by creating broad statements which summarize findings and solutions.

Interpret and analyze complex informational texts and presentations, including technical manuals, professional journals, newspaper and broadcast editorials, electronic networks, political speeches and debates, and primary source material in their subject area courses.

Make perceptive and well developed connections to prior knowledge.

Use a variety of print and electronic forms for social communication with peers and adults.

Make effective use of language and style to connect the message with the audience and context.

Know and use a variety of sources for developing and conveying ideas, images, themes, symbols, and events in their creation of art.

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## **DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING**

### **INTELLECTUAL SKILLS**

- . consult and interpret databases
- . present information
- . work with others to solve problems
- . communicate results of research and projects
- . interpret information and data
- . acquire and synthesize information
- . make decisions about process
- . conceptualize and observe

### **MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES**

Arts

English Language Arts



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## **ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

**For younger and advanced students:**

Ask students to volunteer to speak to other classes about the problem of hunger in their community.

# Hunger in Memory: Reflecting on Events Like the Great Irish Famine

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## BACKGROUND

The Great Irish Famine deeply affected the historical memories of the Irish and the Irish of the diaspora. The 150th commemoration of the Great Irish Famine has been an opportunity to consider the memory of that event and to study ways for people who have experienced traumatic events in their history (slavery, the European Holocaust, apartheid) to be reconciled with their past.

Teachers may want to refer to the activity *Developing Awareness of Hunger*.

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## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

Message From the British Prime Minister Tony Blair

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Kissane, Noel. *The Irish Famine: A Documentary History*. Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 1995.

O'Gráda, Cormac. "The Famine in Folk Memory," *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. pp.198-223.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Memory and Forgetting," in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley eds., *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 5-17.

Robinson, Mary. "The Irish Famine in World Hunger," in Noel Kissane. *The Irish Famine: A Documentary History*. Dublin: The National Library of Ireland, 1995, pp. 180.

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## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Analyze and explain the point of view of the British Prime Minister when he refers to the history of the Great Irish Famine.

Describe the impact of the famine on Irish memory of history and contemporary views about British/Irish relations and politics.

Create class proclamations and promises related to famine memory.

Describe the nature of historical memory and ways to reconcile the past.

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## STANDARDS

**ELA 3:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Analyze evidence critically and demonstrate an understanding of how circumstances of time and place influence perspective.

Analyze the importance of analyzing narratives drawn from different times and places to understand historical events.

Investigate major turning points in world history to identify the factors that brought about change and the long-term effects of these changes.

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## DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

### INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

- . reflective thinking
- . probe ideas and assumptions
- . ask and answer logical questions
- . present information

### MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

English Language Arts

Arts

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## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Ask students how people cope with memories of terrible events they have experienced. Some people try not to think about the event. Others suffer great pain recalling their memories, or cope with terrible events by giving testimony as a way of bearing witness to the past. Can students think of some examples of these narratives? They might include: slave narratives, first-person accounts of the Great Irish Famine passed down through oral tradition, evidence given at the Nuremberg Trials (1947), Eli Wiesel's *Night* and Holocaust survivors' accounts and testimony given to the South African and South American Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Recently, two of the survivors of Columbine have begun speaking to high school students across the country to share their observations and to help cope with the pain of the experience.

Repeating the narrative sets these events into history and, for many survivors, helps with the process of healing by speaking on behalf of those who suffered, and by teaching the lesson that this must not happen again to other people.

2. For many Irish and Irish of the diaspora, the memory of the Great Irish Famine is one of bitterness toward Britain. Some charge the British with genocide. Others cite the eviction statistics as evidence of the government's policy to clear the lands of poor Irish laborers and small farmers. Most agree that whatever the Russell government did, it was too little, too late and too brief. The British Prime Minister Mr. Tony Blair referred to these "deep scars" in his message delivered in Cork on May 31, 1997. Ask students to read the handout *Message From the Prime Minister*.

What is a "defining event?" Can students think of defining events in American history? (the American Revolution, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil War, Women's Suffrage, New Deal legislation). Using their knowledge of the events of the Great Irish Famine, why would Blair call it a "defining event?"

One of the questions about British treatment of the Irish during the Great Irish Famine is how the British viewed the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Was Ireland part of Great Britain or was it a colony? In his message does Blair say that Ireland was a colony or was it part of the Great Britain? How does he say the London government failed the Irish during the Great Irish Famine?

Mr. Blair says "Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy." The Irish revolutionary John Mitchel said, "The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight but the English created the famine." (Kissane 174). What is the

difference between these statements? Do students see in Blair's reference to the London government that we are called upon to answer not only for what we do but also for what we fail to do? He acknowledges that the London government failed its people by standing by.

When Blair refers to the "ways in which the Irish people have triumphed in the face of this catastrophe" what does he mean? What does the reader have to know to have this paragraph make sense? Blair speaks of the *resilience* of the Irish who went abroad. What does resilience mean? Why is it important that emigrants be resilient? Can students share examples of immigrant resilience?

3. The relationship between Ireland and Britain changed in the twentieth century. Twenty-six of Ireland's thirty-two counties established an independent state which today is known as the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland's six counties continue as part of Great Britain. The Republic of Ireland and Great Britain are members of the European Union; The Republic of Ireland and Great Britain have worked together to find peaceful solutions to the troubles in Northern Ireland. What do students think the British Prime Minister's famine message meant to the people of the Republic of Ireland? Was it an apology? (An apology is defined as an acknowledgment and an expression of regret.)
4. In his essay, *Memory and Forgetting* Paul Ricoeur has written that "the traumatic character of past humiliations brings us back permanently towards the past." That phenomenon explains why some Irish and Irish of the diaspora have focused on the trauma of past events. The commemoration of the Great Irish Famine of 1997 was an opportunity to reconcile the past with Ireland's vibrant present. The famine dead were mourned and famine sites were identified and marked with memorials including new public monuments in Ireland and abroad. There were special commemorative events and literary and artistic works created out of the legacy of the Great Irish Famine.
5. A new generation of books about the Great Irish Famine appeared as still another response to the moment to look back on the Great Irish Famine. Some of the books are new versions of the narrative of what people have remembered about the Great Irish Famine. Some were works of rigorous scholarship that involved objective accounts using primary source materials, sometimes with new methodologies and models. These works, particularly new testimonies in primary sources (oral tradition, journals, letters, and reports) have enlarged our store of literature of the Great Irish Famine. Ask students why reading primary sources and personal documentation would enhance interpretations of the causes and results of the Great Irish Famine.
6. In her keynote address to the International Conference on Hunger hosted by Glucksman Ireland House, New York University, in 1995, the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, spoke about the importance of current scholarship. She described its importance as that "...which allows us to look back at an event which more than any other shaped us as a people. It defined our will to survive. It defined our sense of human vulnerability. It remains one of the strongest, most poignant links of memory and feeling that connects us to our diaspora. It involves us still in an act of remembrance which, increasingly, is neither trivial nor narrow..."  
Ask students to think about other events in world history that shaped a people. What do such events have in common?
7. Ricoeur speaks about Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1992), where she speaks of being liberated from the past by forgiving and being bound to the future by promising (Ricoeur 10). Ricoeur suggests that forgiving might be expressed by amnesty. Are students familiar with the term *amnesty*, (a pardon of past offense)? A familiar example of amnesty is when a local library offers amnesty from fines for a period of time in order to encourage patrons to just return borrowed books, but the term has solemn importance when it is used in the process of reconciliation.  
Arendt's concept of promising could be realized by promising to honor the past, the victims of the Great Irish Famine and all other famines, by developing an awareness of hunger in our world, and by working with others to eliminate the poverty that causes hunger and homelessness.
8. Working on two different projects, one half of the class can do the artwork for a *Proclamation for a Famine Remembrance Day*, while the other half can write and design the artwork for a *Class Promise* to develop and awareness of hunger and to work with others to eliminate the poverty that causes hunger and homelessness.

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## ASSESSMENT OPTION

Why would it be important to understand the long-term impact of the famine on the Irish people?

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## TEACHER REFLECTION

Students can use their *Proclamation* and *Promise* as part of class, grade or school Famine Remembrance Day, a day to remember all famine victims by focusing on world hunger. For the Student Famine Museum Day at Hofstra University in December 1999, students made three-minute commercial spots about world hunger, dioramas, packs of informational trading cards about the Great Irish Famine or world hunger, posters, and big picture books for younger children on the subjects of the Great Irish Famine and world hunger.

Tony Blair's mention of bystanders in his message about the Great Irish Famine recalls Elie Wiesel's criticism of those who stood by during the European Holocaust. In field tests of this activity, high school students compared the European Holocaust with the famous Kitty Genovese case in Queens, New York, where people looked out the window and watched a young woman die while being attacked. The incident made the national news because it seemed to represent the American people's developing apathetic attitude toward violence.

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## ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

### **For advanced students:**

Look at the bystanders in Picasso's etching *Minotauromachy* where two women watch from a window and a man climbs to safety while watching the Minotaur charge a little girl holding flowers and a candle who faces him without fear. What do you see? What messages are portrayed? How does the painting relate to responses to the Great Irish Famine?

## **Message from the British Prime Minister Mr. Tony Blair delivered in Cork, May 31, 1997**

I am glad to have this opportunity to join with you in commemorating all those who suffered and died during the Great Irish Famine.

The Famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and of Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event.

It is also right that we should pay tribute to the ways in which the Irish people have triumphed in the face of this catastrophe. Britain in particular has benefited immeasurably from the skills and talents of Irish people, not only in areas such as music, the arts and the caring professions but across the whole spectrum of our political, economic and social life.

Let us therefore today not only remember those who died but also celebrate the resilience and courage of those Irish men and women who were able to forge another life outside Ireland, and the rich culture and vitality they brought with them. Britain, the U.S. and many Commonwealth countries are richer for their presence.



# The Great Irish Famine: A Symbol for Human Rights Activities

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## BACKGROUND

In the spring of 1847, a number of starving people from Louisburgh, Co. Mayo, in Ireland, walked 10 miles over the mountains to Delphi Lodge where the Poor Law Guardians, the men charged with famine relief for the region, were meeting. The people went to ask the Guardians for food or for admission to the workhouse. In some accounts the poor went to Delphi because they were told to appear there if they wanted to qualify for relief.

Whatever they asked, the Poor Law Guardians told them that there was nothing more that could be given to the poor. There were no funds. As the suffering people made their way back over the mountains to Louisburgh, a storm came up and many of the weak and exhausted walkers died of hunger or exposure. It is said that some of the dead were blown into the lake at the Doolough Pass.

The road is now marked with two memorials, and there was an annual *Doolough Famine Walk* in the 1990s through the Doolough Pass, a walk that has become a human rights pilgrimage. Members of the Choctaw nation who gave money in 1847 for famine relief took part in the Doolough Famine Walk (see the activities titled *The Long March*). In 1991, the walk was led by Bishop Desmond Tutu whose words, “In 1991, we walked AFRI’s great ‘Famine’ walk at Doolough and soon afterwards we walked the road to freedom in South Africa” are inscribed on one of the memorials.

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## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

Death at Doolough

Doolough Photo

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Lyons, John. *Louisburgh: A History*. Louisburgh: Louisburgh Traders, 1995.

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## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### Students will be able to:

Explain the significance of remembering events such as the March at Doolough.

Explain how the Great Irish Famine has become a symbol of famine suffering.

Explain the reasons for *walks*, pilgrimages, and other similar commemorations.

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## STANDARDS

**SS 2:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

**ELA 2:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.

**ELA 4:** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction.

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## PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Know some important historic events and developments of past civilizations.

Analyze the roles and contributions of individuals and groups to social, political, economic, cultural, and religious practices and activities.

View history through the eyes of those who witnessed key events and developments in world history by analyzing their literature, diary accounts, letters, artifacts, art, music, architectural drawings, and other documents.

Use appropriate language and style for the situation and the audience and take into account the ideas and interests expressed by the person receiving the message.

Make effective use of language and style to connect the message with the audience and context.

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## DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

### INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

- . inquire, question, probe
- . draw conclusions
- . view information from a variety of perspectives
- . ask and answer logical questions
- . identify premises and rationale for points of view
- . reflect upon content/form opinions
- . consult and interpret primary sources
- . make generalizations

### MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

English Language Arts

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## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Ask students to read the handout of James Berry's narrative, *Death at Doolough*. There appears to be only one other account of Doolough, a letter from *A Ratepayer* (Taxpayer) written in Louisburgh on April 5, 1849, (not 1847). In it the writer describes an order given to the poor to attend a morning inspection in Delphi or be dropped from the rolls of those eligible to receive relief. The Ratepayer says there were five people found dead along the road. In a later letter (April 13th), the Ratepayer reported that there were two more bodies found, that nine or ten others did not reach their homes and that "...several of those who did, were so fatigued with cold and hunger that they in a short time ceased to live." The bodies were first buried without coffins, but later the priest gave coffins so that the dead could be properly buried (Lyons, p. 63).
2. Berry was born in 1842 and lived until 1914. His narrative is based on the stories that he heard from his parents' generation. Compare the Berry narrative with the account of the *Ratepayer*. What do students notice? In what ways do the two accounts vary?
3. The two accounts differ in the numbers they report and in the scale of the tragedy, but they agree on the truth that the people felt a great sense of loss and that they resented those who did not do enough to help those who were suffering. Describe the way that Berry characterized the attitude of the Poor Law Guardians toward the people.
4. Folklore is valuable to historians. While it may not preserve facts, it reflects the attitudes of the people toward persons and events that are transmitted from one generation to the next. What kinds of attitudes toward the famine and toward the landlords does Berry's narrative preserve?

5. *Ask the Belly* is a poem from the Tamil-speaking region of India:

Scratch your head  
Bite your tongue  
Grin  
Bow low  
Keep your hands tied  
Your feet pressed firmly together  
“What’s all this?”  
You’d better  
Ask the belly,  
It’ll tell you.

Shanmuga Subbiah. Trans. from Tamil by T.K. Doraiswamy

Do you think the poem describes the poor who died at Doolough?

6. Ask students: why has the Doolough Pass become an important famine symbol. Discuss Doolough in the context of other human rights marches.

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## ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

Write a paragraph about what is to gain from commemorating the *Louisburgh March* with the *Doolough Famine Walk*.

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## TEACHER REFLECTION

Students might consider the question of why people march in support of human rights. Are there other walks (or runs) for human rights causes? What is the effect of a mass of marchers walking purposefully and peacefully? How do walkers feel? How do observers feel? The *Doolough Famine Walk* was a powerful symbol to famine suffering. The organizers from the Irish relief organization Trócaire made the 1999 walk the last one; they felt that it had come to its natural end.

Teachers who have read *The Long March: The Choctaw’s Gift to Irish Famine Relief.*, a story based on the Choctaw gift of \$170 to the Irish in 1847, might like to follow it with a mention of the Choctaws’ participation in the Doolough Walk. (See the activities titled *The Long March*.)

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## ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

### For younger and advanced students:

Ask students to describe *walks* or *runs* that they have participated in, explaining the purpose, their personal contribution, and their sense of the results. Emphasize speaking publicly after quiet reflection about their experience.

### For advanced students:

Organize a *walk* that recognizes an important event or message.

## Death at Doolough

On that day some four hundred of them arose shivering in their rags, all barefooted and still without food; they sighed and looked up to heaven before setting out on a journey from which none of them was to return.

When they reached Glankeen, they had to wade through the river which was swollen by recent rains. The rags from the hips downward were saturated with water on that cold, damp day. When they reached the southern bank of this rapid mountain torrent, there was nothing even resembling a road between that spot and Doolough, so that they had to negotiate the dreadful goat track along the brow of the precipice which overhangs the house of the late Captain Houston. They encountered another river far deeper than that of Glankeen, and since there were no bridges in those days, they had to battle their way through the stream, with the result that they were wet to the waist.

When the wet and suffering peasantry reached Delphi Lodge, the vice-guardians were at lunch and could not be disturbed, so the people sat down in their damp, miserable rags among the pine trees, and there many of them expired. When the two gentlemen condescended to see the peasantry, they refused to grant them relief or tickets to the work-house, so the fearful journey had been all in vain.

Night was now approaching and ten long weary miles of a wild, uninhabited region lay between them and that land where once had stood their happy homes. Now they were homeless, and with despair in their hearts they set out once more for the place of their birth. When they reached the river where Houston's house now stands, they once more had to wade through it, saturating their rags anew. The wind veered around to the north-west bringing a storm with showers of piercing hailstones. Their wet rags began to stiffen like cold sheet iron around their emaciated limbs, and soon they began to fall and die along the rough path, or to fall in their weakness into the lake below.

When they reach that terrible spot called the Strappa-bwee [Straapa buí: cliff path], on the very brow of the cliff, the tremendous squalls swept them by the score into the lake, and those who were trying to climb the steep-slanting pass or strappa, lost their hold and fell as they climbed. The corpses which fell into the lake were never recovered. The few who survived the struggle through the Strappa-bwee continued to fall and die until the last of them perished on the southern bank of the Glankeen river. On the next morning the trail from Glankeen to Houston's house was covered with corpses as numerous as the sheaves of corn in an autumn field. There is nothing in Irish history to equal this horrible butchery, nor is there anything in the history of Europe to equal it in horror, save the tragic retreat of Napoleon's army from Moscow.

On the following day, the Relieving Officer took gangs of starving men with him from Louisburgh along the corpse-strewn trail, and they buried the slaughtered peasants without coffins just where they fell. When they reached Doolough there was no earth along the goat track deep enough for graves save in the little glen or ravine which ran down to the brow of the cliff, and which frowns above the dark lough just beside the terrible Strappe-bwee. So they had to carry them to the little glen where they buried them in pits just as on a battlefield, and there they lie sleeping where the sighing of the winds through the tall, wild ferns which wave above their nameless graves forever sings their requiem.

Source: James Berry, *Tales of the West of Ireland*. ed. Gertrude M. Horgan. Dublin: Dolmen, 1966. pp. 39-42.  
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The Doolough Pass

Source: Photograph by Maureen Murphy. The Great Irish Famine Curriculum Committee.