



Under the Hawthorn Tree

by Marita Conlon-McKenna

2013 O'Brien Press Dublin (160 pages)

NOVEL STUDY

Under The Hawthorne Tree, by Marita Conlon-McKenna

SUMMARY

This novel follows the O'Driscoll children in nineteenth century Ireland, as they journey to find their long-lost relatives after being separated from their parents during The Great Famine. The journey is one filled with grief, hardship and difficult obstacles that they must overcome to reach their goal.

The book has 17 chapters, each between 9 pages long.

CHARACTER REVIEW

- Mother O'Driscoll
- Eily O'Driscoll
- Peggy O'Driscoll
- Michael O'Driscoll
- Mary Kate
- Aunt Lena
- Aunt Nano

SEL THEMES IN THE BOOK

- Rules
- The Golden Rule
- Goal setting and Problem Solving
- Feelings: *despair, hope, fear, sad, depression, optimism, guilt, scared, ashamed, lonely, isolated, worried, responsible, brave*



Activities to complete before reading Under The Hawthorne Tree

Before reading the book, **discuss with your peers what you know about The Great Famine. Read the additional chapter in this book A Simple History of The Great Irish Famine (1845-1850) and consider the following?**

- **What caused The Great Famine?** *The potato crop was diseased, and the potatoes were rotted in the ground.*
- **How did The Great Famine affect the people of Ireland?** *People relied on the potato crop for food. When The Great Famine happened, people were starving and died from hunger and disease. They sold everything they had to buy food. Some went to work on the public work schemes, others emigrated to Liverpool and North America.*
- **How did the government respond to The Great Famine? Did they help the people of Ireland?** *They helped the people by importing Indian corn meal to feed the people and they set up large public work schemes such as building roads and clearing land. They sold and exported other healthy crops to other countries which did not help the people of Ireland.*

STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 1 'Hunger'

- **In this chapter you are introduced to the O'Driscoll siblings. What are their names? Who is oldest?** *Eily (oldest), Michael, Peggy and Bridget*
- **In this chapter Eily remembers the day their lives changed. How did their lives change?** *The potato crop had failed and disease began to spread. There was very little food on the table or heat in the house.*
- **When Eily and Peggy arrived at Mary Kate's house Peggy lagged behind Eily clutching at her dress. Why? Peggy had heard stories about Mary Kate and was afraid of her. Do you think that Mary Kate was a scary woman? She gave the girls an apple which shows that she is kind and caring. Can you think of any people or groups of people in our society who may be judged because of how they look or what people say about them? People with tattoos, groups of teenagers on the street, people who drive motorbikes etc and any other relevant examples. Do you think that judging people is a good example of the Golden Rule? Why, why not?**
- **'Peggy carried the apple (that Mary Kate gave her) like a precious jewel safely home to be shared by all'. Has anyone ever shared something special with you? Tell your classmates about this experience.**

Activity

- **Diary Entry Activity** – Write a diary entry for Eily titled, 'The day everything changed'. Ensure you include, what Eily saw, the noises she heard, the smells that were in the air and how she felt. Include some of the worries you think Eily has for the future.

Chapter 2 'Under the Hawthorn Tree'

- **People did not visit each other often now. Why?** *The families tried to hide their feelings of shame at having so little.*
- **Mother had a problem that she could not solve. What was the problem? Bridget was sick and Mother didn't have the correct medicines or enough food to make her feel better. How did this make mother feel?** *Worried, anxious, sad, depressed, upset.....*
- **How did the children's feelings change throughout their journey to and from the bog?** *The children enjoyed the journey to the bog, playing and 'cod-acting' along the way. They became exhausted, tired and hungry after the long journey.*
- **When Bridget died how do you think Mother felt? Discuss these feelings (and the possibility of both comfortable and uncomfortable feelings).** *Sad, upset, hurt, angry, relieved, calm*



- **What other problems did the family encounter after Bridget's death?** *The priest was sick and couldn't bury Bridget and the coffin maker was dead which meant they had no coffin to bury her. How did they family overcome their problems?* *They buried Bridget in Grandmother's wooden chest under the hawthorn tree, a special place to them.*
- **The chapter finishes with Eily feeling scared. What do you think Eily is scared of?**

Activity

- **Thesaurus Activity** – Using your feelings thesaurus make a list of all the synonyms for ashamed. Pick one of the synonyms and write about a time you felt that way.
- **Feel Good Toolkit Activity** – Sometimes we have problems that we can't solve, just like Mother. Make a list of the things you can do to make yourself feel better when you have a problem you can't solve.
- **Art Activity** – The O'Driscoll family buried their little sister Bridget under the hawthorn tree because it was a special place to them. Think of a place that is special to you and draw a picture of this place. You might want to write why this place is special to you.

Chapter 3 'Nothing to Eat'

- **At the beginning of the chapter Eily is told to share the potato skins. Do you think it is easy for the children to share food?** *No, they are all hungry and need more food. Yes, they are family and care for each other which makes sharing easy. Think of a time when you found it easy/or difficult to share. Tell your peers about this time.*
- **Mother left the children alone to go to town with strict rules. What were the rules?** *Keep the fire going, get some water in and stay indoors. Why was Eily tempted to break her mother's rules?* *It was a beautiful warm morning. The fields were covered in daisies and hedgerows were laden with woodbine and honeysuckle. What might the consequences have been if the children had of broken mother's rules and not stayed indoors?* *The strangers who came to the door could have got in and taken anything valuable ('there could be pickings inside'), spread disease, harmed the children.*
- **Give some examples of the rules you have to obey at home. Invite children to share some examples. Why are these rules important to keep?**

Activity

- **Role-play Activity** – In groups of 4, create a role play that shows what the consequences might have been if the children had of broken the rules and stayed outside.
- **Art Activity** – Imagine what Mother looks like, based on what you have read so far and draw a picture of Mother.

Chapter 4 'On Their Own'

- **Mother calls Eily 'Little Mother'. Why?** *She is the oldest and responsible for the family when Mother is gone. How do you think this makes Eily feel?* *Worried, scared, responsible, sad, mature, burdened..... What is the most responsibility you have ever had? Share your experience with the class.*
- **What items did the O'Driscoll children take with them on their journey?** *A few scraps of clothes, blankets, frying pan, two tin cans, a ladle and a blade. Discuss why you think each item was important.*

Activity

Survival Guide Activity – Working with partner create a survival guide for someone your age who is about to set off on a big journey.

Family Tree Activity – Recall the names of the family members mentioned in this story Mother (Margaret), Father (John), Aunt Nana, Aunt Lena, Grandfather, Eily, Michael and Peggy. Create a family tree for the family. You might want to create a family tree for your family.

Writing activity – 'The children did not speak or look back', is how the chapter finishes. What do you think will happen next? Write what you think will happen.



Chapter 5 'The Road to the Workhouse'

- **In this chapter the children escape from the group on the road to the workhouse. Why do they not want to go to the workhouse?** *They would be separated from each other in the workhouse, the places are full of disease, they are over-crowded and people are fighting with each other.*
- **How does Mary-Kate help them?** *She pretends to be looking for her goat to put Seamus and Peadar off their trail. She then gives them food and shelter for the night and ointments for their wounds. Think of someone who has shown you kindness in the past. What did they do? Share this experience with your peers.*
- **Mary-Kate said that the children were brave. Why?** *They escaped from being sent to the workhouse. Think of a time when you were brave. Share your experience with your peers.*
- **Mary-Kate gives the children three jars with ointments for different ailments. What were they?** *One for the fever. You mix it with water and drink it about four times a day. This one is for the stomach aches and cramps, you take a pinch of herbs and leaves and never mind the taste. This one is for the cuts and wounds, bites and stings, first of all you must clean the wound well and put ointment on it.*
- **Mary-Kate gives the children some advice at the end of the chapter. What is it?** *Keep away from other people on the roads, keep close to the river, don't eat strange berries, mushroom or dead animal you find.*

Activity

- **Literacy Activity** – Create an acrostic poem for the word BRAVE
- **Compliment Activity** – Mary-Kate compliments the children for being brave. Write a compliment for Eily, Michael and Peggy based on what you have read about them so far.
- **Create a recipe Activity** – Mary-Kate gives the children many ointments and mixtures for different ailments that they might need on their journey. One thing the children will also need is to get along with each other. What is the best recipe for a good relationship with your siblings?

Chapter 6 'Follow the River'

- **Eily cleans Michael's wound, how did Michael react?** *Michael screamed with the pain. What do you think it means when people say 'you have to be cruel to be kind' To do or say something to someone that causes them pain because you believe it will help them. Do you think Eily is being cruel to be kind here? Yes, she has to hurt Michael by pouring the hot water over him to clean his wound. Can you think of any times when someone has been cruel to be kind? Share your experience with the class.*
- **What was Peggy feeling proud of in this chapter?** *She was proud because she found a dead rabbit and thought the children could eat it for dinner. How did Eily feel about the same event? Eily felt worried because she remembered Mary-Kates advice about only eating fresh meat.*

Activity

- **Letter writing activity** – Imagine you are Eily, write a letter to Mother and Father telling them about your journey so far. You should include her thoughts, feelings and worries. Swap your letter with a partner, write a response from Mother offering the children some advice for the remainder of their journey.
- **Storyboard Activity** – Create a storyboard to illustrate the 'journey along the river'. Ensure to write a short sentence under each image to describe what is happening.

Chapter 7 'The Soup Kitchen'

- **The children meet a new friend in this chapter. What is his name?** *Joseph T. Lucy. Eily said that Joseph T. Lucy was a good companion. What does this mean? He is a good friend to accompany them on their journey.*
- **How do you think the children are feeling as they arrive at the soup kitchen?** *Hopeful, curious, optimistic, nervous, worried, scared, afraid, grateful, relieved... explore the mixed emotions the children might be experiencing.*

- **Can you think of any similar organisations in your local community that help people in need? Barnardo's, St Vincent DePaul, NSPCC, Oxfam, Trocaire How do these organisations follow the Golden Rule? Do you think it is important to help the needy?**

Activity

- **News report Activity** – Imagine you are a news reporter in Kineen. Create a news report on the soup kitchen for the local news.
- **Good companion Activity** – Imagine you are going on an important journey. Who would your good companion be? Draw a picture of your companion and write a paragraph explaining what characteristics this person has that makes them a good companion.

Chapter 8 'Beside the Lake'

- **What did the children find beside the lake? The body of a man who had died from disease and was decomposing. How did this make the children feel? They felt scared and worried that they might die the same way. They felt sorry for the man dying alone. They felt sad that they might not live to fulfil their hopes and dreams. They felt grateful and thankful that they still had each other. The children reflect on what their hopes and dreams were. What did Eily, Michael and Peggy hope to be? Eily hoped to have a fine wool dress with a lace collar and combs in her hair. She hoped to fall in love get married and have babies of her own. Michael wanted to play on the hurling team, learn to ride a horse and have a place of his own. Peggy hoped to have her own doll, go to school and to be like Eily. What are your hopes and dreams for the future? How are they different from the O'Driscoll children?**
- **Eily decided to keep the gossip she heard to herself. Why do you think she did this? She did not know if it was true and didn't want to scare/worry her little brother and sister. Do you think this was the right thing to do? Explain your answer.**
- **Why did the people think it was ok to clear the turnip field? Because the old man had died and they thought it was fair for those in need to take the food that was growing in his field. Do you agree that it is sometimes ok to break the rules? Can you think of an example of when it might be OK to break the rules/law?**
- **Michael had a problem in this chapter. What was it? He wanted to fish but he did not have a fishing rod. How did he overcome his problem? He used the food sack and a bit of a willow tree to make his own fishing rod. Did his solution work? Yes, he caught some fish and they ate well.**

Activity

- **Gratitude activity** – In this chapter the children are grateful/thankful that they have each other. Who are you grateful for? Write a letter to someone you are grateful for telling them why you are grateful to have them in your life.
- **Rules group activity** – In your cooperative learning groups recall your school rules. Discuss each rule and decide if there are any examples of when it would be OK to break the school rules.

Chapter 9 'The Dogs'

- **Can you remember how Mother addressed each O'Driscoll child before she left to find father? To Eily, 'You must take my place'. To Michael, 'The man of the house'. To Peggy, 'My baby'. Do you think each character lived up to Mother's expectations in this chapter? Why/Why not? Eily: Fixed the food, told Peggy 'Don't make any sudden moves, just walk slow and steady, don't try to run.' Eily started to shout at them and pelted a young collie..., Eily tried to pull the crazed collie..., Eily ran to Peggy, 'Oh God, it's all right, pet, he's dead....., Eily got the water can. First of all she held it at Peggy's lips forcing her to drink some to revive her....., Luckily Eily had kept the cloths she had torn for Michael's leg..., Michael 'Michael poured a can of water on the embers to make sure the fire was out.' 'Michael flung stones at the dogs', 'Michael came charging with a short stick..' 'I don't like killing things..' Peggy, 'Peggy closed her eyes tightly', This was too much for Peggy to bear...tried to run'**
- **Peggy was very scared and shaken. On a scale of 1-10 how scared do you think she was with 10 being very scared. Probably a 10, Peggy was petrified. How could she have used her**

control signals to help her in this situation? *She could have stopped, took a deep breath and said the problem and how she feels.*

- **What feelings words would you use to describe Michael and Eily?**

Activity

- **Feelings Thesaurus Activity** – In your Feelings Thesaurus there are many synonyms for the word scared. Words like petrified mean extremely scared whilst words like uneasy mean a little scared. Draw a thermometer to represent 'a little scared' and 'extremely scared'. Pick three synonyms from the Feelings Dictionary that represent the each (one you think is in the middle). Do the same for Michael and Eily (using whatever feelings words you used to describe them). Colour in the thermometer to show the intensity of the feeling they each had.
- **Fight, Flight or Freeze activity** – when we are in a frightening situation our body gets ready to fight, flight or freeze. At this time there are changes that take place inside our body that will help us to either fight, flight or freeze. Working with a partner make a list of all the changes that take place (increased heart rate, breathing gets quicker, mouth goes dry, start to sweat, muscles feel tense, can't think straight). Draw a body outline and add the changes that are taking place. Link how our control signals red light helps us in this situation to think of good solutions.

Chapter 10 'At the Harbour.'

- **In this chapter the O'Driscoll children visit Ballycarbery for the first time. Why does Ballycarbery challenge their expectations of Ireland during the famine?** *The streets of the town were thronged, normal business was taking place. There was no sign of shortage, ladies and young girls were making their way to the draper's store, the windows of which were festooned with bales of cotton and ribbon and two or three hat-stands with gaily trimmed bonnets. Herds of cattle and sheep were being auctioned. Wooden carts laden with sacks of grain were being drawn through the streets. Lush green fields, the sea...*
- **Where were the carts of grain destined for? England. How did this make the poor and hungry feel? Angry, frustrated, annoyed, sad, desperate, left out, abandoned..... How did these feelings affect their behaviour?** *They attacked the soldiers and took the grain.*
- **At the end of the chapter the children are feeling hopeful. Why?** *They felt their luck might be changing, they had fresh bread and more food than they'd had in a while. They are close to Castletaggart.*

Activity

- **Newspaper report** - Imagine that you are a reporter who was at the harbour to cover the story of 'the hullabaloo that broke out in the main square'. Write a newspaper article to describe the events you have witnessed. In your article you should interview some of the witnesses including a soldier and some of the poor and hungry.
- **Our hopes for the future activity.** In your cooperative learning groups create a poster to demonstrate what your hopes for the future are.

Chapter 11 'Travelling by Night.'

- **Little Peggy asked, 'are we in hell?'. What do you remember from the beginning of the chapter that helps us understand why she said this?** *'The sun beat down mercilessly....At times the road, which was now hardbaked, almost burned the soles of their feet...All the little brooks and streams had dried up....Their lips were dried, cracked and sore. This was worse than the hunger...Everything in sight was charred and blackened...The smell of burning assaulted their senses...Nothing stirred in this bleakness, not a bird or an insect or bee or animal. It was quiet. Fields of what had been gorse and heather and pasture had been laid bare.'*
- **What was Michael's good idea? To walk during the night. Why was this a good idea?** *It was cooler during the night and they would be able to travel further.*
- **What were the sights, sounds and smells the children experienced during the night?** *'The moon shone down brightly on them.....There were lots of scampering and scurrying in the hedgerows....they jumped every time they heard the screech of the night owl getting ready to hunt*



and the almost silent beat of its wings....One time they saw a large grey badger shuffling along....they came upon a vixen and her cubs paying outside...

Activity

- **Wordle activity** – Create a wordle for this chapter. Include adjectives to describe what the children could hear, see and smell. Include feeling words also.

Chapter 12 “The Thunderstorm”

- **What are the children terrified of in this chapter?** *The thunder and lightning. It was getting closer, the children thought it was the end of the world.*
- **Why do you think that Eily was trying to control her own fears?** *She did not want her younger siblings to see she was as scared as them. Do you think Eily is responsible? What strategies could Eily have used to control her fear?* *Red light, taking deep breaths. Telling herself over and over again that everything will be ok. Imagining her favourite place. Counting to 20 in her head..*
- **How did Michael help in this chapter?** *Michael relaxed himself (refer to strategies above) and started to tell jokes, make up a story. What stories do you know about thunder and lightening that you could tell in a situation like this?*

Activity

- **Art Activity** – Draw an image to represent what happened in this chapter.

Chapter 13 “Peggy’s Fever”

- **In this chapter Eily is feeling guilty (uncomfortable) Why?** *She was making Peggy continue the journey because she didn’t realise she was sick. She gave her a ‘wallop on the bottom’/ She was frustrated with Peggy for holding them up because she didn’t realise she was sick. She didn’t recognise Peggy’s symptoms. She led her siblings on a journey to Castletaggart instead of the workhouse where things might have been better.*
- **Do you think Peggy has ‘the fever’? Why/why not?** *She has a very high temperature her skin ‘was burning like a fire with no sign of cooling down’. ‘However there was no tinge of yellow to it at all’ which suggests she didn’t*
- **How did Michael cope with this situation?** *‘Michael teased her which was his way of dealing with the annoyance’, ‘he preferred to be busy. He did not want to have time to think or worry.’ Do you think Michael’s strategies for coping with stress are good? Why/why not?*

Activity

- **Alternative ending** – In this chapter Eily has some regrets about not going to the workhouse. She thinks life would be better for them all had she have went with Tom Daly? What do you think? Write a story describing what you think would have happened if the children had of went to the workhouse instead.
- **Literacy Activity** – Have you ever regretted something? Write about your experience.

Chapter 14 ‘Michael’s Desperate Search’

- **This chapter is called Michael’s desperate search. Why is this title used?** *Michael has had to leave his sisters to search for help. He hopes to find out if they are near Castletaggart or a workhouse so the family can find a place to get food and some shelter. They are tired, weak, hungry and Peggy has a fever. They are too weak to travel together, he feels this is the last chance for his family to survive.*
- **‘He could feel a pain in his chest and knew that his heart was broken in two and his childhood was gone forever. He slowed down, he had a long and miserable way to go. There was no God, and if there was, he was a monster’.** *What feeling words can you use to describe how Michael is feeling at this moment? Hopeless, depressed, distraught, sad, angry, confused....*



- **What happens in this chapter that might change how Michael feels?** *He finds some garlic and comes across a cow that is stuck; this could be food for the family. It also seems like Peggy is getting better, this will give the family a new sense of hope.*

Activity

- **Diary Entry Activity** – Write a diary entry for Michael titled, ‘Our last hope’. Ensure you include, where Michael is going and the reason for his journey. What he finds, the noises he heard, the sights he saw and smells that were in the air. Include how Michael is feeling in this chapter.

Chapter 15 ‘The Cow’

- **What does Michael do to the cow?** *He ‘bleeds’ the cow. How does he know what to do?* *‘I heard father tell us stories often enough about times before the potatoes failed and he and his father bled the landlord’s cattle.’* **What things have you learned from adults in your life? How will these things help you in the future?**
- **What did the children have to eat in this chapter?** *Eily made a blood cake from the cow’s blood, a few bits of grain and husk and garlic. Michael caught a rat and a hedgehog, they had nettles and berries. How would you feel if this is what you had to eat?*
- **Why was Michael surprised in this chapter?** *He awoke to find Peggy was sitting up and well. Was this a comfortable and uncomfortable surprise for Michael? Comfortable. Have you ever had a comfortable surprise? Share this experience with your peers.*

Activity

- **What happens next? Group Activity** – Chapter 16 is called ‘Castletaggart’. In your co-operative learning groups discuss what you think will happen next. Share your ideas with the class and make a list of each groups’ predictions.

Chapter 16 ‘Castletaggart’

- **‘They all kept their heads down and did not speak, everyone wrapped deep n their own thoughts.’** *What thoughts do you think Eily, Michael and Peggy are having? How are the thoughts of each character similar or different?*
- **In this chapter Eily and Michael allowed Peggy to enter the demesne to steal some fruit. Do you think this was a responsible thing to do?** *Yes, they needed food to eat and she was the only one who could fit through the gap. No, she could have been caught and punished. The children might not have been able to protect her.*
- **Who do you think lives in the grand house? Do you think the people who live here would have helped the children? Why/why not?**
- **A man passed by the children. Who was he and what did he do?** *A priest. He held his handkerchief to his face, gave them directions to Castletaggart and then drove on without offering them a lift. Were you surprised by how the priest treated the children? What would you expect a priest to do in this situation?*

Activity

- **Feelings graph** – Make a list of all the feelings the children experienced in this chapter (relief, curiosity, happy, hopeful, excitement, worried, anxious, satisfied, sick, hurt, amazed, proud, afraid, lonely, ashamed, eager). Draw a graph, list the feelings on the Y axis. Recall and summarise the main events from this chapter in chronological order. (walking to Castletaggart, at the demesne, waiting on Peggy to come back, sitting down eating the fruit and berries, feelings cramps in their stomach, talking to the priest, reaching Castletaggart, talking to the soldiers, walking to the shop, standing outside the shop. Place these events on the x axis. Now plot an x to show how the children felt at each event to represent how the children’s feelings changed throughout the chapter.

Chapter 17 ‘Journey’s End’

- **Revisit chapter 3. How did Mother describe Aunt Nano and Lena’s shop?** *‘I can still see them standing in their white starched aprons, and fruit pies and tarts spread on the counter, and the*

shelf packed with jams and preserves. Lords and ladies and gentlefolk and big farmers came from far afield for their confections and it was said on market days you would hardly fit into the shop it was that busy.' **What did the shop look like when the O'Driscoll children arrived there?** 'beside it they noticed a house with a small bay window. The paint was peeling and the doorway was dirty. It could have been a shop! ...they edged their way into a gloomy room, divided by a wooden counter. On a shelf behind, dusty rows of jams and preserves stood to attention.' **How do you think this made the children feel?** *Disappointed, let down, surprised, confused, sad, relieved, happy, content* **Do you think it mattered that the shop was old and derelict?** *No, they were with family and that's all that mattered.*

- **Do you think this is a good ending for the O'Driscoll children?** *Yes, they achieved their goal of reaching Castletaggart and finding Aunt Lena and Aunt Nano.*

Activity

- **The Mother Chapter** – Write an additional chapter that covers Mother's journey since leaving the children.
- **Character Review** – draw a picture of what you imagine Eily, Michael, and Peggy to look like. Make a list of the characteristics and qualities that each child has.
- **The most important character** – State which character you think is the most important and give reasons why. Mother, Father, Eily, Michael, Peggy, Mary-Kate, Aunt Nano and Aunt Lena.
- **Book review** – Complete a book review for this book.

