

# THE HUNGER TIMES

Produced by Tile Media for Ireland's Great Hunger Museum,  
Quinnipiac University with the support of The Ireland Funds.

## TEACHER NOTES

THE HUNGER TIMES is intended to entertain and educate and is designed for viewing both inside and outside classroom conditions. Its ideal context however is within learning units dealing with the Great Irish Famine (1845-1852). Within such a context, it can act as a point of entry into this period and function as a means of exploring, reinforcing and visualizing the period. Through the inclusion of relevant artworks, it also aims to provoke reflection on how this event has been represented and remembered.

Taking Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University, Connecticut as a literal and symbolic point of departure, the film follows two young characters that travel back in time to encounter the causes and legacy of the Great Hunger.

While primarily seeking to illustrate historical events for young audiences, a number of choices were made in the scripting and production of *The Hunger Times* in order to create as rich a resource as possible. An awareness of such decisions may be useful in shaping teachers' use of the film in a classroom context:

- The narrative is structured as an investigation, but it reverses a traditional cause-effect narrative structure by beginning in a contemporary scene of commemoration (a 'hidden' room in the museum), and moving backwards through time to confront various stages of the famine.

- Enlarging upon the conventions of the 'quest' narrative, the multi-racial, male and female protagonists work to offer an inclusive point of entry and identification for contemporary audiences and underscore the point that the Famine has resonances - on both sides of the Atlantic - down to the present day.
- The film includes a brief meeting with the former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Douglass' visit and unique eyewitness testimony about Ireland at this time is often overlooked, and is included here to increase the range of the story and its implications for a variety of audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.
- The film concludes with a series of paintings dealing with the Irish Famine. These are included to articulate the complex relationship between history and its subsequent remembering/representation as well and encourage students to produce their own images and representations.

THE HUNGER TIME

## **THE HUNGER TIMES**

### **A SHORT FILM ON IRELAND'S GREAT HUNGER**

#### **First Viewing** (Oral or Written Exercises)

- Ask students for their first impressions; identify the main characters, scenes, and incidents.
- Where and when is the story set?
- What elements were familiar or surprising?
- What did you learn in watching the film?

#### **Second Viewing**

As you re-view the film note:

- How many sections there are.
- Where (location) and when (time) each is set.
- Map this structure (on the board or in notebooks)
- What do we learn by travelling backwards in time like this?

#### **Detailed Analysis**

##### **Prologue**

- Where does the scene take place?
- What does the teacher ask the students to do?
- What is the purpose of this scene for the rest of the story?

##### **Opening Credits**

After the curator tells the students to follow her, we encounter a series introductory graphics and images. Describe these. What is their purpose?

##### **Act 1: Meeting Patrick**

- Where and when does this scene take place?
- What does the Curator mean when she tells Niamh that her phone won't work?
- Why is there a language difficulty?
- What do Jayden and Niamh find out about the boy?

##### **Additional Activities**

Try to find out more about workhouses during the Famine. Why were they built? Who went there? What was required in order to get in? What happened to those who entered them? Ask students to imagine life in the workhouse through poetry, prose or images.

## Act 2: The Reality of the Famine

Where and when does the second scene take place?

The scene is divided into three events:

- What do we witness in the first section?
- Who do the students meet in the second part? Why are they surprised to meet Frederick Douglass here? How does his presence affect our understanding of the conditions of the famine Irish? The words he speaks are taken from his letters.
- The third section introduces the theme of potato blight. What was this disease and why was it so significant?

### Additional Activities

- Find out more about evictions during the Famine. What happened to the cottages that families were evicted from?
- Research Frederick Douglass' life and campaign against slavery. [You may find Douglass a useful pathway into teaching about slavery. Excerpts from his autobiography *Narrative Life of Fredrick Douglass* (1845) are widely available on the web as are lesson plans around his life for this age group]

## Act Three: Consequences of the Famine

- Where and when is this scene set?
- What do we learn about Patrick's family?
- What do we learn about the impact of the famine on the Irish language and on the histories of Ireland and America?

### Representing the Great Hunger

- The final moments of the film show us paintings that commemorate or try to give representation to the Great Hunger.
- Try to remember the imagery and title of each.
- Make a list of words or ideas generated by the paintings.
- Which makes the strongest impression?
- Either by pausing the images or looking online, can you guess when each of these works were made and who their intended/imagined audience might have been?
- Examine one or more of the paintings in detail, describing what is shown as well as elements such as colour and composition.

### STRUCTURE

*The Hunger Times* is structured as a 'quest'. What does this mean? So you know any other films or stories that have this structure? Is there anything different or unusual about the quest in this film?

Discuss how the story is told: (a) frame narrative (story within a story); (b) told in reverse.

What is the effect of this structure? Does it draw you more into the story?

Compose a simple story in three consecutive parts. Can these sections be moved around? How? Do you know any stories or films which change story structure e.g. through flashbacks, reversing the order of events?

### **FURTHER EXPLORATIONS**

**Living History:** Students imagine themselves in an **historical** situation and write about how they would have reacted:

Imagine you were able to travel back to a moment in the distant or recent past. Why this moment? What do you encounter? Describe some of the following: the setting, sights, smells, clothes, and appearance of people.

**Visualizing History:** Students visually represent their chosen historical moment. Allow students to describe their artwork and/or that of others.

What choices have been made in terms of (for instance) details, colour, materials, scale? What events or people have been included or excluded? How do such choices affect our understanding of history?

Notes by Dr. Tony Tracy, NUI Galway

<https://www.artandthegreathunger.org>