

Under the Hawthorn Tree

THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE

A Study Guide to the Novel and the Film

IRENE BARBER

Introduction

Across the centuries of myth and legend in the oral tradition, folk culture and literature of Ireland, the hawthorn tree has long been associated with the supernatural. The hawthorn was the shrub around which the fairies were said to gather for their midnight revels. In rural tradition it has long been considered an omen of ill luck to damage or dig up a hawthorn tree. There are instances in the recent past of roads and motorways being realigned for fear of damaging an old hawthorn.

Marita Conlon-McKenna has used this powerful symbolism not only in the title *Under the Hawthorn Tree* but also in the setting of her famine novel in Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The potato crop has failed and famine stalks the land between 1845 and 1848. Three children, Eily, Michael and Peggy O'Driscoll, are left to fend for themselves when they are separated from their parents. Their baby sister has died and is buried beneath the hawthorn tree. In desperation, they set out on a perilous journey in search of their great-aunts, their last resort. Their journey is full of adventure and danger but eventually they reach their goal.

Apart from being a cracking good read, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* has proved to be popular with both teachers and pupils alike in the exploration of a wide variety of social and political issues in nineteenth-century Ireland. This Guide extends that inquiry and provides good opportunities for pupils to undertake a range of integrated and graded language and history activities.

The film treatment of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* was produced for Channel 4 by Kilkenny-based Young Irish Film Makers. It is Channel 4's first investment in a training-led film production process controlled entirely by children. They achieved remarkable results and C4 Schools is pleased to have backed them.

The O'Brien Press and Channel 4 Schools are interested in your comments on this Study Guide. You can e-mail them to Channel 4 Schools website at: <http://www.channel4.com/schools>. Go to the Forum section and click on the *Under the Hawthorn Tree* topic.



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DRAMA OUTLINE

The story is set in Ireland in the middle of the last century. The potato crop has failed and famine stalks the land. Three children, Eily, Michael and Peggy O'Driscoll, are left to fend for themselves when they are separated from their parents. In desperation, they set out on a perilous journey in search of their great-aunts, their last resort. The journey is full of adventure and danger but eventually the children reach their goal. **The film is in four episodes.**

Episode 1, Hunger, corresponds to book pages 1-26

Episode 2, On Their Own, to book pages 27-42

Episode 3, The Journey, to book pages 43-77

Episode 4, The Search, to book pages 78-150.

AIMS

To provide an opportunity to experience the pleasure of reading/watching an engaging and engrossing story.

To explore a wide variety of social and political issues of nineteenth-century Ireland.

To enable the students to undertake a range of integrated and graded language activities.

BEFORE VIEWING

Students should be encouraged to read the appropriate pages of text prior to viewing. If planning to read the book aloud to the class, allow one minute per page (more if pupils are reading aloud).

This book/film is set in Ireland, then part of the British Empire, in the middle of the *nineteenth century*. The country is in the grip of *famine* and the action centres around the plight of three children who embark on a *journey* of survival. Discuss these three central topics before viewing: nineteenth century, famine, journey.

Nineteenth Century

Brainstorm what the students know about life in the nineteenth century:

- from their family history (allowing 30 years per generation and working back from their own date of birth, let them calculate which of their relatives were alive in the last century).
- from the locality (what public buildings, statues, grave-stones, landmarks, street furniture, houses, shops etc. were built in the last century?).
- from their knowledge of national and international history (what major events were taking place at that time?).

Famine

What does the word mean? What causes famine? Who is most vulnerable and why? Does it still occur? Where and why? What can we do?

Journey

Brainstorm books which tell the story of a journey. Explore the many types of journeys: sea, land, air, physical, emotional, spiritual, imagined, pilgrimages, quests, crusades, escapes, exiles, myths, legends, in different ages and places, unaccompanied, in small or large groups. Display findings.

THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE 1845-1848

The population of Ireland in 1841 was over 8 million. They lived on the potato, an abundant and nutritious vegetable, which didn't require much land to cultivate. Most people lived on tiny farms rented from landlords. Almost half of the farms were less than 5 acres (2 hectares). Living conditions were poor and there was always the threat of eviction for non-payment of rent. Workhouses were set up.

1845

Blight, a fungal disease, destroyed much of the potato crop. The Government imported maize, known as 'yellow meal' – initially people did not know how to cook it. Public Works Schemes were set up to provide employment so that people could earn money to buy food. Some landlords did their utmost to help their starving tenants, others evicted those who couldn't pay rent and pulled down their cabins. Some landlords lived outside the country and did nothing to help.

1846

The crop failed again. Soup-kitchens were set up by government agencies, private organisations and religious groups, and soup was given free. This was a new policy but government initiatives were totally inadequate. People were starving and disease was rampant – famine fever, typhus, dysentery and later cholera.

1847

This year was known as 'Black 47'. The early months were particularly cold and windy and, though the crop did not fail, supplies were low as people had had no seed potatoes to plant. People were desperate and those who could left the country for England and North America. People died on the roads, in the streets, in the cottages, in the fields. Direct government aid declined and the cost of famine relief fell to the Irish landlords. This led to greater pressure to evict pauper tenants.

1848

Blight returned again and many more died. But gradually conditions improved, though in 1870 the crop failed once again in the West of Ireland – but aid came quickly and the crisis was localised. The impact of the famine was felt for many years. The population declined by 2 million between the years 1845 and 1851. The Irish language declined. A pattern of emigration began. The inequity of land ownership led to the land war of 1879-1882.

EPISODE 1 – HUNGER

SUMMARY

The three main characters, Eily, Michael and Peggy O'Driscoll, are introduced at a point where famine is becoming widespread due to failure of the potato crop. Their parents, Margaret and John, work a small plot of land but when the potatoes are destroyed by blight John goes to seek work on a government relief scheme. We meet Mary Kate, a wise woman with healing powers, but even she cannot save their baby sister Bridget, who dies of fever at the end of the first episode.

NOTE TO TEACHERS

Some scenes in this episode may be upsetting for children who have recently been bereaved.



BEFORE VIEWING

Pupils to select one of the three characters to shadow during the viewing of the four episodes of this film. At the end of each episode pupils will be required to write an original journal entry through the eyes of the chosen character (to be written from the viewpoint of looking back over events which have occurred).

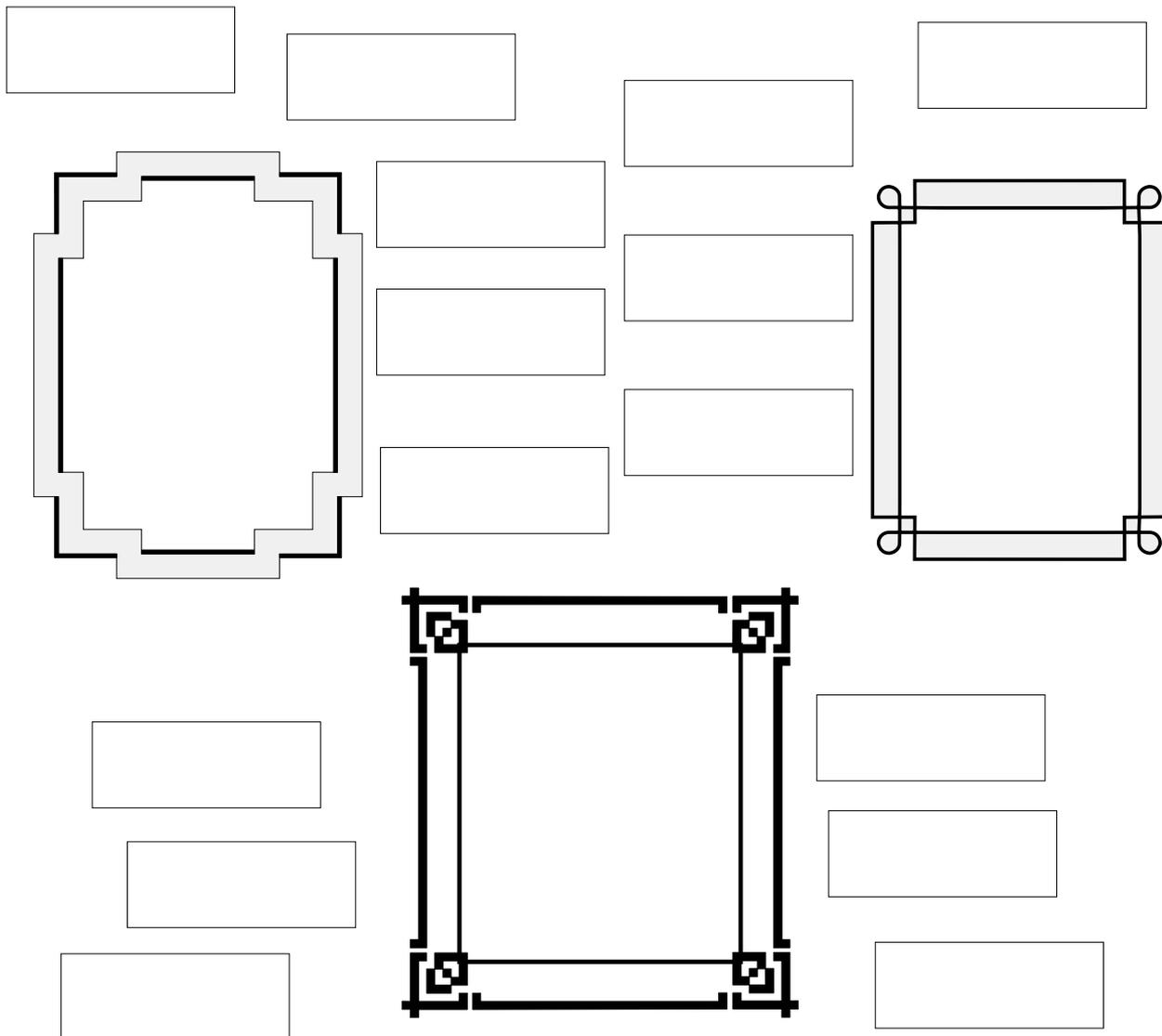
AFTER VIEWING

With pupils, summarise the episode orally. Questioning might be guided by the summary above.

WORKSHEET ACTIVITIES TABLE – AT A GLANCE

W/SHEET NO.	TITLE	ENGLISH	HISTORY	MEDIA STUDIES	SPHE/PSHE
1	Character Sketches	Character sketches/diary writing			
2	Beginnings	Opening paragraphs/setting/ first impressions		Opening sequences/setting – compare novel and screenplay	
3	Everyday Life in Ireland in the 1840s	Period detail	Everyday life in the 1840s		Hygiene
4	Housing for Rich and Poor		Housing in the nineteenth century		Living conditions
5	Crop Failure, Hunger, Famine		Crop failure, famine, population decline		Diet
6	Disease and Death	Haiku	Famine diseases and burial		
7	The Hawthorn Tree in Folklore	Hawthorn as an image / descriptive writing	Folklore and the hawthorn tree		

CHARACTER SKETCHES



1 In the boxes above write adjectives which describe the three main characters. Decorate the frames above.

2 Journal entry: On a separate sheet, write a journal entry for the character you are shadowing. The title might be, for example, 'May 1846, the day we buried Bridget'. You might like to complete these sentences:

- Today I feel ...
- I wish ...
- My mother ...
- My father ...
- The only good thing ...

Now continue on your own.

Or you may prefer to structure your journal entry in your own way. Keep this piece of writing carefully. Write a

journal entry directly after each of the other three episodes.

3 Make a 3D frame using materials of your choice, eg pasta shapes, fluff, stones, shells. Draw a portrait of the character you have chosen and mount it in your frame.

4 Read diary accounts of other events. Check out the following:

The Diary of a Young Girl, Anne Frank (Puffin Modern Classics, 1998, ISBN 014-03856-30)

Sisters ... No Way!, Siobhán Parkinson (The O'Brien Press, 1997, ISBN 0-86278-495-6)

The Life and Loves of Zoe T. Curley, Martin Waddell (Walker Books, 1997, ISBN 0-7445-4166-2)

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, age 13¾, Sue Townsend (Methuen, 1984, ISBN 0-413-53790-0)

BEGINNINGS

First impressions last.

The first few paragraphs of a book, or the first few scenes of a film, must introduce the characters and set the scene and they must do so in a way that grabs your attention or else you may switch off.

Here is what Siobhán Lyons, co-director of the film *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, had to say about the opening sequence and the potato scene:

THE OPENING SEQUENCE

'The pre-credit scenes of the film had a number of jobs to do: firstly, they had to introduce the main characters to the audience, and secondly they had to create a certain tension before the final climax, ie, the news of the potato blight. In order to create a mood of apprehension the scenes are choppy and no-one is sure what exactly is going on until the running boy bursts into the schoolroom. The contrast between the quiet of the classroom and the energy of the running boy is another way of confusing and misleading the audience.'

THE POTATO SCENE

'Once the children reach their home after hearing of the disaster, they behold the pathetic sight of their father, on his knees in the mud, looking sorrowfully at his potato patch. They run to survey the damage; Michael tries to salvage the last of the potatoes. Eily, realising what has happened, seems dazed and Peggy, in total confusion, watches her father and looks to Eily for an answer. This is a sorry scene – it is the beginning of the end for the three O'Driscolls. The sudden scream of their mother adds even more panic to the scene and the audience have more sympathy for the family. The final words, before the roll of opening credits, are spoken by the wise old woman, Mary Kate: "Now surely, the hunger will come." These words are a signal for what is to come.'

1 View the opening sequence of the film again just as far as the opening credits. Does this sequence achieve what the directors intended it should?

2 Read the first two-and-a-half pages of the book. In what ways are the book and the film similar?

3 In what ways are they dissimilar? Which do you prefer? Give reasons for your answer.



READ IT AND WEEP

The Edward Bulwer Lytton Prize is awarded annually to the author of the worst possible opening line of a book. The prize has become so successful that Penguin Books have published a number of books containing entries submitted from all over the world. Here is one:

'With a curvaceous figure that Venus would have envied, a tanned, unblemished oval face framed with lustrous thick, brown hair, deep azure-blue eyes fringed with long black lashes, perfect teeth that vied for competition, and a small straight nose, Marilee had a beauty that defied description.'

Makes you weep.

4 Look at the opening paragraph of three books of your choice. What do they tell you about: the setting? the characters? the plot?

5 Write an opening paragraph of your own or select one of those chosen above and write on ...

EVERYDAY LIFE IN IRELAND IN THE 1840s

What information can you find out from the book and film about everyday life in the last century?

1 Record your findings below (see Medicine example).

2 Plan a research project on everyday life in Ireland or Britain in the nineteenth century. You might like to divide into groups and examine the topics below. Other topics you might explore: children, work.

TOPIC	PAGE OF BOOK	SCENE FROM FILM
Housing/bedding	pp. 9, 11, 14	
Food/fuel	pp. 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21	
Clothes	pp. 9, 10, 22	
Medicine	p. 13 Mary Kate had cures – goose grease to rub on Bridget's chest	Mary Kate collects herbs, has bottles and jars in her window, has herbs drying in her house, has the name of being a witch, recycles jars, shows doubt in the ability of her cure to heal the strange new sickness
Washing/hygiene	pp. 12, 13	
Recreation (visiting, storytelling, swimming, fishing, playing)	pp. 17, 19	
Education	p. 10	

HOUSING FOR RICH AND POOR



The village above is the type of village in which many people lived in the nineteenth century. The houses were one-roomed mud cabins, thatched with straw, potato stalks or sods of turf. There was one door, no windows and frequently the houses were shared with animals – cows, calves and pigs. Potatoes were grown on small plots of land beside the cabin.

The inhabitants might have worked as labourers for tenant farmers. The tenant farmer's house might have been large and comfortable, with windows and chimneys. He would have had a farmyard, with outhouses

for the animals. He would have owned a horse and trap for transport. These farmers rented their land from the landlords who lived in houses like those below.

The worst off were the wandering labourers who did seasonal work for farmers when they could get it, otherwise they begged or stole. They lived in temporary hovels along the side of the road.

I Make four sketches which show the differing levels of prosperity of the people: a labourer's hovel, a cottier's cabin, a tenant farmer's house, a landlord's mansion.

2 Which houses in your area were built in the nineteenth century or even earlier? Were they the homes of the rich or the poor? Sketch or photograph them.

3 Mount a classroom display of local pre-twentieth century buildings.

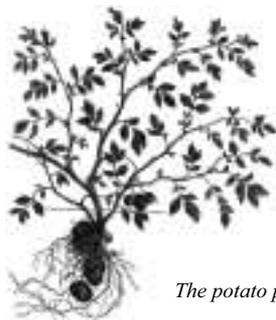
4 You might like to make a model of the O'Driscoll cottage with *papier maché*.



CROP FAILURE, HUNGER, FAMINE

Famine was not uncommon in Ireland prior to the Great Famine (1845-1848). The famine of 1740-41 may have been as serious but evidence is scant – foreign travellers spoke of the extreme poverty of the Irish at that time.

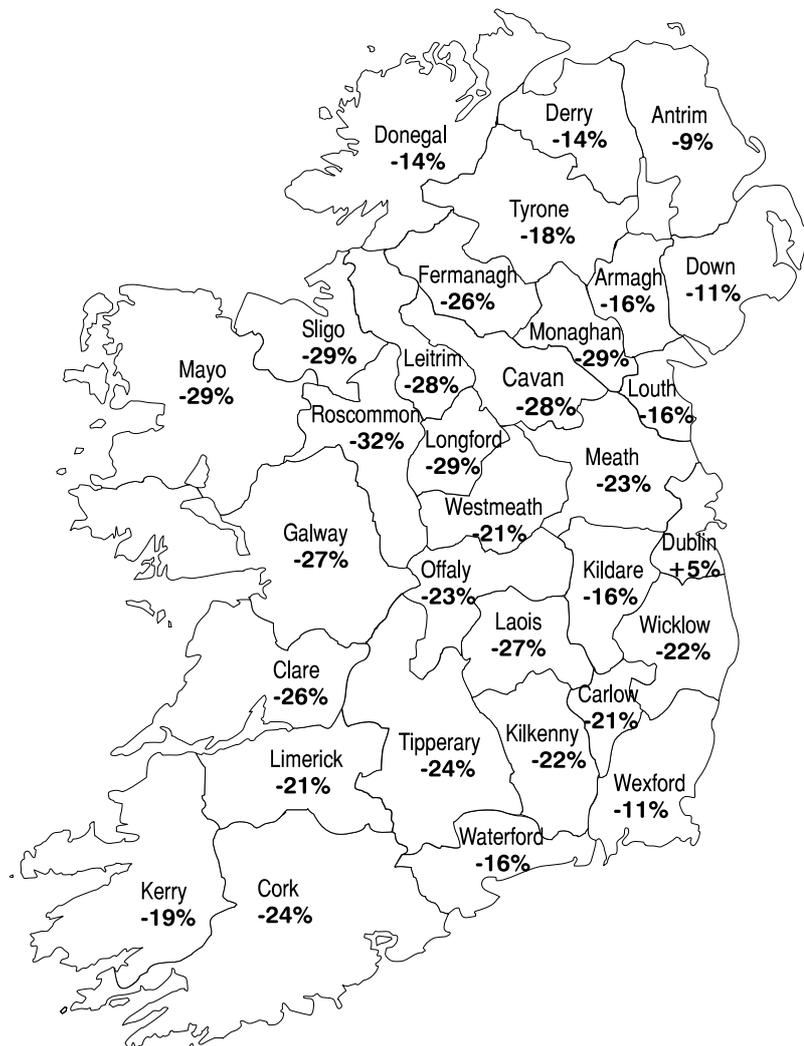
- In 1800 there were 5 million people in Ireland. By 1840 the population had increased to over 8 million. Farms were subdivided into smaller and smaller portions so people were depending on very small areas of land to support them. Increasingly, potatoes became the staple diet as they were filling, nutritious and did not need much land for cultivation.
- The famine was caused by continuous failure of the potato crop due to a fungal disease (thought to have come from South America via Europe) called blight. This disease still attacks potatoes today but farmers spray their crops to control it.
- Over a million people died of disease and starvation. Over a million emigrated to Britain or America.



The potato plant

This map shows the changes in population brought about by the famine.

- 1 Colour the counties with a decrease of between 0 and 10% purple
- 2 Colour the counties with a decrease of between 11% and 20% red
- 3 Colour the counties with a decrease of between 21% and 30% blue
- 4 Colour the counties with a decrease in excess of 30% black
- 5 Which area of Ireland was worst affected?
- 6 In your opinion, why did the population of Dublin increase?
- 7 What advantages do you think people living by the sea had?



The potato was the staple diet of the Irish people in the last century. This table shows the typical daily diet of a labouring man.

- BREAKFAST** 4.5lbs potatoes, 1 pint of milk
DINNER 4.5lbs potatoes and herrings when milk could not be obtained
SUPPER 4.5lbs potatoes, 1 pint of milk

8 If an average potato weighs 200g, calculate how many potatoes a labourer would consume each day (1lb = 454g).

9 Is this a balanced diet? Give reasons for your answer.

DISEASE AND DEATH

- Many people died of disease as well as starvation.
- Dysentery, typhoid and later cholera wiped out hundreds of thousands of people.
- So many died that bodies were often carted uncoffined to mass burial places.
- As in any famine, the old and the young, being the most vulnerable, were the first to die.
- In all, over one million people died.

Read pages 21-26.

1 In your workbook, record how the main characters reacted to Bridget's death. Write your notes under the headings: Mother, Eily, Peggy, Michael, Dan Collins, Kitty Collins. Record how they prepared for her funeral.

2 What circumstances surrounding the burial added to the mother's grief?



3 The funeral in the picture above took place near Skibberreen, Co. Cork, one of the areas to suffer most during the famine. Look at the clothing, transport, mourners, coffin. Why do you think burial scenes like this took place in a country which usually showed great respect for the dead?

4 Interview old people you know about the practices surrounding death, burial and mourning in their childhood.

5 Find out about a wake, or about the banshee.

The following books may prove helpful: *Irish Wake Amusements*, Seán Ó Súilleabháin (Mercier Press, 1979, ISBN 0-85342-1455); *Death Customs*, Lucy Rushton (Wayland, 1995, ISBN 0-75021-6662), *A Pocket Book of the Banshee*, Patricia Lysaght (The O'Brien Press, 1998, ISBN 0-86278-501-4).

HAIKU

A haiku is a three-line poem, the first line having 5 syllables, the second line 7 syllables and the third line 5 syllables. Write a haiku entitled 'For Bridget', or 'The Hawthorn Tree'.

Here is a sample haiku:

A bitter morning
sparrows sitting together
without any necks

THE HAWTHORN TREE IN FOLKLORE

According to folklore, the lone hawthorn was the shrub around which the fairies gathered for their midnight revels. Even today it is considered bad luck to dig up a hawthorn. (It is said that the real curse placed upon the failed de Lorean car plant in Belfast came when an old whitethorn was cleared to make way for it!)

HAWTHORN Latin name: *crataegus monogyna* Irish name: *sceach gheal*

In this extract from the poem, 'The Fairies' by William Allingham, there is a warning not to interfere with the fairies!

THE FAIRIES

(A Child's Song)

William Allingham

Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men;
Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather!

By the craggy hill-side,
Through the mosses bare,
They have planted thorn-trees
For pleasure here and there.
Is any man so daring
As dig one up in spite,
He shall find their sharpest thorns
In his bed at night.

William Allingham (1824-1889): born Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal; editor, playwright and poet.

Seamus Heaney (b. 1939): born in Derry; awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.

1 The hawthorn is an image which is used often in the book and film. It is referred to on pages 24, 117 and 150. Read these pages and record the purpose of the hawthorn image at that particular point of the story.

2 Do you think *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is an appropriate title? Give reasons for your answer. Can you think of alternative titles?

3 Why not try to find out about hawthorn tree traditions in your area and e-mail them to Channel 4 Schools website: <http://www.channel4.com/schools>. Go to the Forum section and click on the *Under the Hawthorn Tree* topic.



An extract from
'Poet's Chair' by Seamus Heaney

My father's ploughing one, two, three, four sides
Of the lea ground where I sit all-seeing
At centre field, my back to the thorn tree
They never cut.

'In early summer, right now, it comes to its sumptuous best, when it not merely turns our fields into rolling wolds of white, but of roseate and golden tints too, well beyond the mastery of any painter's brush, and the air is filled with the sweet marzipan fragrance of the blossom.'

Kevin Myers, *The Irish Times*,
30 May 1998



Here is a wonderful description of hawthorn in full bloom. It tells us not only what the hawthorn looks like but what it smells like and hints at what it might taste like. 'Wold' means an expanse of open country.

4 Look up the meaning of the following adjectives: sumptuous, roseate, marzipan.

5 The use of carefully chosen adjectives adds greatly to the impact of your writing, especially if you are describing something. Write a descriptive passage about your favourite place. Before you start, list suitable adjectives; get help from a thesaurus.