



# Lily at Lissadell

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## Teaching Guide

By Peter Heaney

### RATIONALE & THEMES

Lissadell is a 'grand' Irish house; its luxury in contrast to the grinding poverty of the surrounding countryside.

Lily is forced to leave school and take a job in Lissadell as a maid.

The story paints a picture of the final days of the old order, where despite the benevolence of her employers, Lily and her friends have a sense that the world will become a fairer place where opportunity will replace patronage.

The themes explored are:

- Friendship
- Poverty / child labour
- Deference & privilege
- Equality
- Coping with loss
- Growing up
- Forgiveness

### SUMMARY

Lily's childhood ends abruptly when she is taken out of school to work as a maid at Lissadell. Her father had died, plunging them into deeper poverty, so Lily must earn a wage to support the family.

Lissadell is one of the last Irish 'grand' houses with a full complement of servants and Lily must find her place within its hierarchy, learning the duties and deference that are expected of her.

Although her conditions are bearable and her employers are kind, Lily misses her family terribly.

Paired with Nellie, who has a reputation for rudeness, Lily struggles, but, when she discovers the reason for Nellie's behaviour, they become friends.

The Gore-Booth family are her employers and as the social order dictated, remain remote from her. However, loneliness encourages Maeve, the daughter of Constance (Countess Markievicz) to begin a friendship with Lily.

Although their friendship is ill balanced, Lily gains an understanding that conditions like loneliness are universal.

After an exhausting Christmas attending all the house guests, Lily is allowed a two-day visit home in January to celebrate with her own family.

Renewing friendships with her school friends, she learns that an American wake is being prepared for one while the other is moving away to work in Sligo.

Returning to Lissadell, she realizes that change has begun and accepts her role in the process looking forward to a better future.

#### Approach:

This is a compelling story of friendship and a developing sense of fairness and equality in the last days of the 'grand' houses.

The story highlights aspects of social division and the impact of poverty.

The themes sit firmly within the remit of the SPHE and PDMU guidelines.

Development can be more effectively facilitated with small group discussion.

The guide has been divided into four sections to reflect the development of the story.

## Section 1 The First Week Pages 5 - 76

### SUMMARY

Lily enjoys the comforting world of her school with her friends and familiar routines. Since her father died, the family have struggled and now circumstances dictate that she must leave school and earn a wage. Her mother announces that work as a maid has been secured for her at Lissadell. Her school days end and she will only be able to visit home once a week.

Packing her few belongings, she sets off alone and steps into a world that is alien to her.

Gradually she adjusts to her surroundings and learns what is expected of her and how she must behave.

She is relieved to learn that her employers, the Gore-Booths are known for their kindness towards their servants.

Nellie, the other housemaid she shares her room with has a reputation for unpleasantness and plays a prank on her first day to make Lily look clumsy.

Lily tries to copy Nellie as she manages the chores, however Nellie is determined to be unhelpful until Mrs Bailey, the housekeeper makes it very clear that her role is to instruct Lily.

Working together through their punishing cleaning schedule, Lily picks up some of the Gore-Booth family history, particularly about Countess Markievicz and her daughter Maeve who often visits Lissadell.

Through all this, Lily and Nellie build a rapport.

Dining in the servant's hall, Lily is introduced to the hierarchy that supports the regime and her place in it.

To Lily's surprise, Nellie chooses to remain at Lissadell on her day off and a suspicion of tears alerts Lily to a chink in the armour of rudeness that Nellie uses to protect herself.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- (**Read p25**): Before she leaves for Lissadell, Lily's mam warns her not to forget her place. What does this mean? How does your place determine your opportunities? Does this type of discrimination still exist today?
- (**Read p47**): Lily is astonished by the wealth at Lissadell. Is great wealth acceptable while poverty exists? How should resources be shared fairly? Which of your resources would you be prepared to share?
- (**Read p51**): Lily sees that the Gore-Booths have a life of privilege and understands that everyone thinks they

are entitled to it because they are part of the aristocracy. Why do we accept this? Should a title be allowed to give you an unfair advantage?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. The Prank (Read pp6-8)

Lily and her friends play a harmless prank on Martin.

Have you ever been pranked or played a prank on a friend?

Describe the most entertaining prank that you can remember. You can illustrate it if you wish.

### 2. Sour Milk (Read p33)

Lily describes Nellie as having a face that would turn milk sour. It is a colourful way to describe her.

Draw an illustration of the look on Nellie's face as she peered around the door at her.

### 3. Dear Lily (Read p41)

When Lily unpacks her things, she is surprised when a scrap of paper falls from her bundle.

It is a letter from her mam. On the night before Lily left, her mam wrote down all her feelings about Lily having to leave school to work at Lissadell, remembering how she herself felt at that age.

Make a copy of the letter.

### 4. The Comforter (Read p49)

Everyone has their own comfort blanket; something that we cling to when we need to feel secure.

For Lily it's her mother's shawl.

What's your comforter?

Describe and illustrate what it is and explain why it makes you feel safe when you're holding it.

### 5. You're Here to Work (Read p57)

Nellie reminds Lily that their purpose in Lissadell is to work.

Lily has been taken from school while she is still a child.

Many children across the world today face the same situation.

In small groups create campaign poster to highlight the injustice of children having to work.

[stopchildlabour.org](http://stopchildlabour.org)

[youtube.com/watch?v=q4CWtFzj0Po](https://youtube.com/watch?v=q4CWtFzj0Po)

[developmenteducation.ie/media/documents/Concern%20Child%20Labour%20Resource.pdf](http://developmenteducation.ie/media/documents/Concern%20Child%20Labour%20Resource.pdf)

## 6. The Countess

### (Read pp63 & 97)

Lily is very curious who Countess Markievicz is, but Nellie has little information to give her.

Use the library or the links below to research a short profile on her for Lily.

Choose five things that you think Lily should know and write them as a short, illustrated pen sketch.

[bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-43176232](http://bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-43176232)

[askaboutireland.ie/learning-zone/primary-students/5th-+-6th-class/history/people-in-history-countes/her-life-in-brief/index.xml](http://askaboutireland.ie/learning-zone/primary-students/5th-+-6th-class/history/people-in-history-countes/her-life-in-brief/index.xml)

*(It is good practice that pupils should NOT research on the internet unsupervised and that sites should be vetted by the teacher before the pupils are directed to use them. Please apply your own school Internet Safety Policy when directing children to use the internet)*

### 7. Memories (Read p73)

Lily misses her school days and the activities that she did there.

When you leave school, what will you remember fondly from your time in class?

Think carefully about the people you met and the things that you did.

Compose a letter to give to your teacher on your last day describing the memories that you will carry away from your own school days.

## Section 2 The Letter Pages 77 - 144

### SUMMARY

When her day off arrives, Lily is surprised when Nellie wishes her a nice day.

At home, the welcome is warm and Lily distributes the cakes she has managed to hoard during the week, her mother's smile making all the effort worthwhile.

Meeting the neighbours, Lily is prompted for gossip and when the subject of the Countess comes up, her mother deflects the conversation.

Later, chatting to her mam, Lily shares her feelings about Nellie's behaviour and is encouraged to continue to treat her with kindness.

The rest of her visit passes quickly and she reminisces with her friends about school.

When it is time to return, she makes an excuse to decline a food parcel knowing that her mam has little to spare.

Scraps of information about events in Dublin filter through the servant's hall and when the name of the Countess is mentioned, Lily is

intrigued by the mystery that surrounds her.

The routine merges into a daily round of cleaning until a new guest arrives and Lily meets Maeve, a girl of her own age and the Countess's daughter.

Lily has a conversational duel with her and finds herself an accomplice in Maeve's scheme to retain her as a companion under the pretext of having her portrait painted.

When Maeve tries to recruit Lily for a sitting on her day off, Nellie risks dismissal by pointing this out, persuading Maeve to reconsider her plans.

Attempting to thank her, Lily finds that Nellie has reverted to her old bad-tempered self.

An errand to the nursery allows Lily to confide in Isabelle, the children's maid about Nellie and she learns about Nellie's workhouse background.

That evening before they go to sleep, Lily makes a more successful attempt to say thanks.

At their first sitting, Lily realizes that Maeve simply wants a companion to talk to.

When Maeve offers her a sheet of writing paper, Lily takes the opportunity to write a 'thank you' letter to Nellie, but is shocked when it is rebuffed.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read pp81, 88 & 121):** Lily and her family live in poverty while the Gore-Booths live in luxury. Why is it tolerated? Why do the servants think it is appropriate for the Gore-Booths to have so much? How does the idea that everyone has a station allow this to happen?
- **(Read p83):** Lily is dazzled by the thought that she is sweeping the carpet that the Countess has walked on. Why do we gather autographs and selfies from people we don't know just because they are famous? How does this shape what we think is fair?
- **(Read pp100-101):** Nellie is praising the charity of Lady Mary and Lady Georgina. Is she right? Should the poor be grateful when this happens or are they simply getting what they have a right to expect anyway? Does anyone deserve to be poor?
- **(Read pp115-116):** Lily and Nellie live in constant fear of being dismissed. Their job is to clean and remain invisible. Is this an acceptable way to treat employees? How do the Gore-Booths regard their servants? Do they see them as equals? What is the difference between an employee and a servant?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. The Shoes (Read pp86 & 105)

Lily's mam advises her not to judge Nellie

until she'd walked a mile in her shoes.

What did she mean by this?

Choose a child your age from anywhere in the world and use your imagination to describe what it would be like to swap shoes with them for a day.

Highlight three key differences each of you would notice about your swap.

Create a poster to explain the differences.

## 2. The Staircase (Read pp92)

Lily is impressed by the main staircase in Lissadell and would love to make a sketch of it for her mam.

Use your imagination to draw a picture of what it might look like.

## 3. Workers (Read pp96 & 99)

After her conversation with Harry about the Dublin lockout, Lily tries to explain to Nellie that they should see themselves as workers and not servants.

To help her understand, Lily draws two figures on a large sheet of paper. One is a worker and the other is a servant.

Working in small groups, create her diagram, list the differences between them and give examples of the benefits of being seen as a worker by your employer?

## 4. Is Mise (Read pp103-104)

Maeve and Lily have begun a simple word duel describing themselves and their parents.

Join in and add your own contribution describing your own parents.

Try adding another three exchanges for each of them and yourself.

## 5. The Workhouse (Read pp123-124)

Lily is terrified at the mention of the workhouse, yet she has very little information on it.

Create a fact-file guide about the workhouse and what life was like for those forced to live there.

Work in small groups to create an illustrated leaflet for Lily of ten facts about the Workhouse.

[askaboutireland.ie/learning-zone/primary-students/subjects/history/history-the-full-story/ireland-in-the-19th-centu/soup-kitchens-and-workhou/](http://askaboutireland.ie/learning-zone/primary-students/subjects/history/history-the-full-story/ireland-in-the-19th-centu/soup-kitchens-and-workhou/)

## 6. Read it (Read pp143-144)

Lily doesn't realize that Nellie can't read.

Although reading is a life skill, many people across the world and even in Ireland are unable to read and are too ashamed to admit it.

Design a poster to raise awareness about the problems people with limited reading skills might face.

# Section 3 The Portrait Pages 145 - 204

### SUMMARY

Still smarting, Nellie gives no indication about what has annoyed her and Maeve renews her demands for Lily's time to complete the portrait.

Sitting and chatting, Lily realizes that all Maeve wants is her mother's attention.

Later in the servant's hall, Maeve's scheme has made Lily the butt of a joke.

At bedtime, when they are alone, Lily learns that illiteracy is the reason behind Nellie's behaviour and she determines to find a way to help.

When Maeve goes to visit some cousins, Lily has a respite from sitting.

Lady Mary announces that she intends to buy a Christmas present for each of the staff and Lily chooses a doll.

Preparing to visit home on her day off, Lily is pleased when Nellie wishes her a happy day and shocked when the cook offers her a basket of groceries to take to her mam.

It is a joyous return to see her mam and siblings, however when her mam deflates her anticipation for the Christmas present with a more practical suggestion, Lily decides to change her choice at the earliest opportunity.

The rest of the day passes quickly and when her brother tells her that he has been helping their youngest sister to read, Lily realizes that this is the way she can help Nellie.

Back at Lissadell, Lily enlists the help of Isabelle to borrow some of the children's books and presents her idea to Nellie that evening. Nellie is overcome by Lily's kindness and the reading lessons begin.

When Maeve returns, the sittings resume and Lily, emboldened, asks Maeve about her mother, learning that she is involved with many causes, to the dismay of the family who expect her to behave in a more socially appropriate way.

Lady Mary asks Lily to mend a torn curtain, praising her needlework and suggests she enter a home-industry show. She provides her with material for dresses for her sister to practise on and Lily takes the opportunity to change her Christmas present request.

When Maeve organizes another sitting without any pretense of painting, Lily's suspicions are confirmed that she is really seeking a companion.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

□ (Read pp149 & 150): Maeve longs for her mother's attention; however, her mother has many demands on her time

from worthy causes. Is she neglecting her daughter? Where should a mother's first responsibility be?

□ (Read pp154-155): Lily is upset by the treatment she receives from the rest of the staff for her involvement with Maeve. Why did they disapprove of what she and Maeve were doing? Why was it important for Lily not to rise above her station?

□ (Read p176): Lily's mam deflates her when she says that she should have asked for boots instead of a doll. Was she right? Should luxuries be forbidden to the poor? If you have little money must you always spend it sensibly?

□ (Read p175): Lily believes that she and Maeve are becoming friends. Is she correct? What sort of friendship do they have? How is her friendship with Nellie different to her friendship with Maeve?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Reading (Read p157)

Nellie is unable to read. Her education was interrupted and she never learned.

If you were unable to read, how would it affect you?

In groups, make a list of the ways that you might be affected.

Now choose the five most important and explain how each of them might limit your opportunities to enjoy your life.

#### 2. A Christmas Present (Read p167)

Lily chooses a doll when Lady Mary asks her to nominate a present. If you were allowed to pick your next Christmas present what would you choose?

Describe and explain your choice.

#### 3. Dear Lily (Read pp169-170)

Nellie understands that Lily is her friend and appreciates the letter she has written to her.

She would like to write a short letter to Lily to thank her and explain how she feels having her as a friend.

Unfortunately, she is unable to write it at the moment.

Help her to write the letter.

#### 4. Choices (Read pp176-177)

Poverty is an unhappy way to live. It can affect every part of your life. It can force people to make difficult choices, whether to buy food or clothes.

Working in small groups create a poster that will show some of the difficult choice people who are very poor have to make.

[childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/ending-child-poverty/what-are-the-effects-of-child-poverty](http://childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/ending-child-poverty/what-are-the-effects-of-child-poverty)

## 5. The Cow & Calf (Read pp189-190)

Maeve explains a prank that her mother and aunt played on a local farmer.

They hid his animals and then enjoyed his distress as he looked for them.

Use your imagination to write a description of the event from the farmer's point of view. What did he do and think?

What did he say to the girls when he discovered what had happened?

## 6. The Outfits (read p200)

Lady Mary explains that Bridget has more outfits that she has days to wear them.

If you had three different dresses / shorts then you could wear them on three different days. If you also had three different tops, how many different combinations would that make? (solution = 3<sup>2</sup>)

Now imagine you had three different pairs of trainers, how many outfits would that make? (solution = 3<sup>3</sup>).

What about socks? How would you calculate the total possible outfits including three different types of socks?

(solution = 3<sup>4</sup>)

## 7. Lily (Read pp196-202)

That evening after she had spoken to Lily, Lady Mary makes an entry in her diary describing her thoughts about what happened and her impressions of Lily.

Create the page she wrote.

## Section 4 It's all Changing Pages 205 - 278

### SUMMARY

Complaining about how tedious their work is, Lily realizes that Nellie lives in fear of being returned to the workhouse.

When Maeve arranges for Lily to accompany her to the beach, Lily engineers that Nellie is included and they both enjoy a trip in the motor car.

Speeding along the country lanes, Nellie begins to sing, revealing a wonderful voice and they all join in.

Maeve compliments her voice and offers to lend some songbooks. Nellie defers the offer, admitting her reading limitations and admitting since Lily's lessons she no longer feels ashamed.

Maeve treats them to afternoon tea before they return to Lissadell.

With all the house guests, Christmas preparations are hectic.

Maeve is delighted when her mother arrives and the festivities continue for several days

with little respite for the servants.

Carrying coal upstairs, Lily spills the contents at the feet of the Countess; Lily is astounded when the Countess stoops to help her.

It is January before Lily has the chance to visit her mam and before she leaves, Lady Mary surprises her with an extra present of a doll.

At home she learns that her friend Hanora is leaving for America and they reminisce about school, anticipating the changes that are approaching, identifying the unfairness that prevails for them.

Buoyed by Hanora's encouragement, Lily returns to Lissadell determined to take advantage of the changes that are approaching.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read p216): Lily's kindness towards Nellie has been seen by Mrs Bailey. Why is kindness important? How have Mrs Bailey and Lily herself been affected by this kindness?
- (Read p265): Lily's two sisters are anxious to nurse the doll. Why do girls like to play with dolls? Are there toys that boys prefer to play with? Should boys be encouraged to play with dolls too?
- (Read p236): When the new servants arrived for Christmas, the servants' order of importance was upset. Why do we think we are more important than some people, but not as important as others? Where else does this type of order appear?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. The Black Cloud (Read p206)

Fear of returning to the workhouse follows Nellie like a black cloud.

Describe a fear that follow you and explain why it frightens you

Write a cinquain poem and draw illustration to describe how it makes you feel and how you deal with it.

[writeshop.com/writing-a-cinquain-poem](http://writeshop.com/writing-a-cinquain-poem)

#### 2. Words (Read p207)

Nellie is now able to recognize some words.

In groups create a list of 40 high-frequency words and compose 10 sentences with them to make a reading chart of Nellie.

Try to make the sentences useful for her.

#### 3. The Memory (Read pp209-210)

Lily remembers a day at the seaside before her father died.

Describe the happiest day that you remember.

Who did you share it with and what did you

do? Describe how the memory makes you feel now?

## 4. Four Hours (Read pp222-232)

Maeve, Lily and Nellie has been left by themselves for four hours and they have a wonderful time.

In groups, use your imagination to plan a four-hour adventure for yourself and your friends.

Describe where you would go and what you would do.

## 5. Today (Read p223)

After their trip to Rosses Point, Maeve write an entry in her diary to remind her of the day.

She describes how she felt and her impression of both Lily and Nellie, not just as servants, but as girls of her own age.

She also wrote about what she learned about her own lifestyle from the experience.

Create her page.

## 6. Kindness (Read pp247-250)

Lily is touched by a simple act of kindness from Countess Markievicz. Most acts of kindness are unnoticed.

Think carefully about both the last acts of kindness you received and performed.

Describe what you did, what you noticed and how you felt.

## 7. I'm Lucky (Read p251)

Lily realizes that Maeve's life and hers are different.

Things have changed in Ireland today but injustice still exists for other children.

In groups create a list of 'I'M LUCKY HERE IN IRELAND BECAUSE...!' statements to describe the benefits you have living in Ireland that are not available to other children across the world.

Create ten statements and explain with illustration how each of them makes you fortunate.

[trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/childrens-rights-nicaragua-junior-primary.pdf](http://trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/childrens-rights-nicaragua-junior-primary.pdf)

[trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/childrens-rights-nicaragua-early-years.pdf](http://trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/childrens-rights-nicaragua-early-years.pdf)