



Black Wreath

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Peter Sirr Teaching Guide

RATIONALE & THEMES

Set in the Dublin and Pennsylvania of the early 1700s and loosely based on a true story, this novel immerses the reader in an often dangerous world of lawlessness, violence and human adversity. Through the eyes of James and his friends, we experience the daily challenges faced by a cast of characters of almost Dickensian proportions, many living outside the city walls, cast out by a society only beginning to show concern for those in unfortunate circumstances. This novel shines a light on a time when order and truth seemed in scant supply, when great wealth existed alongside extreme poverty, and when those who possessed money and position could do largely as they wished. But the newly-established colonies offered rewards for those with sufficient courage and determination to succeed, and we can learn much from the way the young hero draws on all his resources in this fictionalised account of the life of James Annesley.

Themes which might be explored when reading this novel with the class include:

- Friendships and loyalty
- Coping with strong emotions, eg fear, anger, pride, arrogance
- Adult/parental weaknesses
- Family relationships
- Asserting independence/overcoming adversity
- Domestic servitude/slavery
- Bereavement and loss
- Homelessness

SUMMARY

James Lovett's life is changed forever when he is abandoned by his father, Lord Dunmain, in the Liberties, outside Dublin's city walls. With the support of lifelong friend, Harry, an impoverished but

hard-working shoeshine boy, he struggles to stay alive in a turbulent city that shows no pity for the weak and powerless in society. Attempting to gain acceptance as the rightful heir to his father's estates, his life takes yet another unexpected turn when his uncle condemns him to exile by selling him into indentured servitude in the colonies.

Confronted with the horrific conditions experienced by those even poorer and less powerful than he, James sometimes loses heart, but draws on reserves of courage and strength to help himself and eventually overcomes almost insurmountable obstacles with the help of loyal friends.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into four units, though clearly the pace at which the novel is read is *up to the teacher*. Discussion points aim to create a suitable environment for whole-class and small-group participation so that pupils can together explore and consider actions from the story and apply these to their own experiences. Directed discussion of this novel will enable students to reconstruct elements of the past and to imagine and discuss the feelings and motives of people in their historical context, skills that are needed in SPHE and other subjects. Activities, many aiming to develop literacy-based skills, are also suggested at the end of each unit.

Before you begin

Look closely at the front cover, read the blurb, and discuss what these might tell you about the story. Think about the genre of the novel, where it is set and what might happen. What might the title (see pp40, 43) mean? Consider the sub-title.

Do you think it tells you more about what to expect from the book?

Informed speculation: Read the table of contents carefully and discuss with a partner any ideas they give you about the story. Write your thoughts on a piece of paper and, when you have finished the novel, check back to see if you were right.

Discuss with your partner the elements that combine to make a good story/say what you think is necessary to hold the reader's attention and what makes you want to read on.

Fear and overcoming fear is a recurring theme in this book. Explore the idea that fear can be a form of paralysis that may stop us living life to the full. As you read, make notes of the times characters experience fear and consider how, through our fear, we may hold others back. Does fear manifest differently for others in the story than it does for James?

On page 2 there is a photograph of the author and a brief biography that tells us he is a prolific poet. As you read, make note of any passages of prose that might indicate his poetic background.

Unit 1 Pages 9 – 81

SUMMARY

The only son of aristocratic parents, James should be destined for a life of ease but he stands in the way of a much-needed inheritance. Abandoned by his family, and pronounced dead, he is sent to live in the Liberties, outside the city walls, but escapes and wanders the streets alone, surviving with the help of his friend Harry the shoeboy. Caught up in a vicious faction fight, he and a student from Trinity College are saved by a butcher, John

Purcell. James's fortune seems finally to have changed when the student, McAllister, employs him as a skivvy. It is not long before he hears that his father has died and that his uncle Richard has wrongfully assumed the title. James is content with his routine in college and in no hurry to confront his uncle, but a drunken argument results in the death of an innocent man, and McAllister, partly responsible, beats a hasty retreat to the colonies. Once more, James is on his own in a lawless city.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Reflection: James remembered good times when his father had been proud of him (eg p15). Think of reasons why Lord Dunmain might have changed so utterly. James's mind often drifts back 'to the time when they lived in the house in Wexford' (p38) – Why do you suppose James thinks of his childhood in Wexford? Does it perhaps give him some comfort? Do you have any especially special early childhood memories? Close your eyes for a minute and conjure up images of times you consider to be 'good'.
- Flight or fight: 'James was afraid.' (p9) With a partner or small group, discuss the evolutionary origin of fear, say whether it serves a useful purpose, and list situations in which to feel fear is positive. Consider the influence of 24-hour news channels and social media on our perception of immediate danger. Does our modern world trigger fear to an unhealthy level? Reflect on the question and say if you agree or disagree, stating your reasons.
- Many of the characters in this unit are 'angry'. There are healthy and unhealthy ways to deal with feelings. When people feel hurt they may express anger to hide that hurt. Others, like Lord Dunmain, Miss Deakin, the herring women, Kavanagh's landlord, the dancing master etc express their feelings in ways that hurt others. Can you suggest strategies which the characters above might have used to cope with their strong feelings/anger in more positive ways?
- Decisions have consequences: McAllister makes a choice or decision that he comes to regret. Consider the effects of the irresponsible choice made by McAllister with regard to the sword-scabbard. How many people suffered as a result of his poor decision-making?

□ '... James learned the life of a street boy ... (p45). Fr Peter McVerry has been working with homeless boys (aged 12-16) in Dublin since 1979 – now his Trust works with almost 3,600 vulnerable youths. In December 2014 a homeless man in his forties was found dead in a doorway near Dáil Éireann. Reflect upon the many situations that might cause someone to become homeless. Do you think that providing 'cold-weather shelters' is the solution to the problem of homelessness? What do you think the government might do to solve the problem?

□ 'He didn't have time to puzzle out the rights and wrongs of it. Someone else would have to do that' (p75). James didn't want his friend to die, but was his decision morally and ethically correct? Put yourself in his place. Discuss his motivation and his 18th century attitude to justice. With your 21st century insights and knowledge, what might you do?

WRITING AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Missing, Presumed Dead

Using your prior knowledge, if any, from your study of life in the 18th century, and also from the information in Chapters 1 and 2, speculate on the possible fate of James's mother, Lady Dunmain. Do you think she died, and if so how? Or do you think she was alive in London (p16). Explain your thoughts in an article from a 'contemporary' journal/newspaper.

2. Hideaways

Many people have a place where they go to get away from the world. James uses 'the darkest part of the cellar' (p9), others might use a bathroom or a secluded spot in a garden – anywhere will do so long as it's safe and private. Do you have a hideaway? Write a short paragraph describing an idealised, imagined hideaway. You might share your idea with your partner/group.

3. Strategies for Survival

In the 21st century, many countries assign identity numbers/cards to children at birth and insist that they receive education, medical and other care. Do you think it possible for a child of 'barely twelve summers' to spend months roaming city streets alone, without interference from State bodies nowadays? (It might be more possible than you think!) Work out how

you might survive on your own for a day/a week and list your strategies.

4. Timetable

The son of a gentleman, James attended the school of Barnaby Dunn in Werburgh St (p24). Do some research about the course of a typical 18th-century school day, find out what subjects might have been studied etc. Compare James's probable timetable with yours. Would you like to study any of the subjects commonly studied in the 1720s?

5. Menu

Lord Dunmain and Miss Deakin were served herring and beef for breakfast (p22). If you happened to be rich in Ireland in the 1700s you could live in luxury and enjoy the best of food. But what about the poor? Write a day's 'menu' for a poor/a rich adult of the period.

6. Hot Seat

Dublin was a dangerous town in the 1700s with 'gangs everywhere, Bloods and Bucks and Pinkindies' (p13). In Chapter 6 we read about some of these gangs – the Liberty Boys of the Coombe and the Ormond Boys 'strong, armed and vicious-looking butchers' (pp46, 47). Sometimes hundreds participated in these street fights along the quays. Put a professor from the college in the Hot Seat and ask his opinion of rumours that some of his students secured the heavy keys to their rooms in their gowns and used these as weapons. And/or ask the watchmen, powerless to intervene, and the shopkeepers, possibly barricading themselves in to their premises, for their thoughts on the fight.

7. What If?

The Pinkindies ... were noted for their humane desire to avoid seriously injuring their victims; by cutting off the tips of their sword-scabbards they were enabled ... "to prick their victims full of holes without ever going beyond the bounds of a good practical joke." (p18 *Noted Irish Lives - Henry Grattan by Roger J McHugh, 1936*). When Vandeleur gifts to McAllister a sword 'in a scabbard with the end removed' (p64) McAllister reluctantly straps on the sword and heads off to the taverns. What might have happened had he stuck to his original refusal to wear that scabbard? What made him reconsider? Write the rest of the chapter using this

sentence as the first of your piece: 'But McAllister remained firm and laid the sword and scabbard on the table ... and the two left the college grounds. ...'

8. In Memoriam

If, as an act of kindness, James decided to commemorate the death of his father and write a short In Memoriam or epitaph, what might he want people to feel as they read his words? Would he remember his father with bitterness and anger or with sorrow and affection? What might you say about a friend/and what would you want them to say about you? Is it always better to speak well of the dead? Is it important also to speak well of the living?

Unit 2 Pages 82 – 200

SUMMARY

Taking refuge in the Phoenix Park, James makes himself relatively comfortable only to be woken by a notorious highwayman and his gang of bandits. Forced to join their company, James now survives on the proceeds of crime and is instrumental in the execution of some daring robberies, though neither he nor Jack Darcy indulge themselves in the senseless and vicious assaults so enjoyed by the gang. That winter James and his new friends celebrate their robberies until, seeing his old foe Vandeleur head to the gallows, he decides to change his life. But the decision comes too late as Darcy is caught and James becomes central to an elaborate plan to plead the highwayman's wrongful arrest and mistaken identity. James gives false testimony in the witness stand, and Darcy is consequently found not guilty. James enjoys a brief respite, sheltering in the house of Purcell the butcher, experiencing the simple pleasures of family life, reacquainting himself with Harry and even receiving a letter from McAllister, now living in Philadelphia. But his enemies know where he is. The butchers of the Ormond Market foil one abduction attempt but it is only a matter of time before Miss Deakin and James's uncle end any hope that he will be allowed to live in Dublin town. New horizons beckon.

DISCUSSION POINTS

□ Stung by the suggestion that he might have robbed his uncle's man, James announces that he is Lord Dunmain's son and heir (p87), a boast he

immediately regrets as revealing his identity could make it easier for his uncle to find him. Do you think that James's pride will have far-reaching consequences for his safety? Can you suggest other instances where pride may have tempted characters to behave impetuously and foolishly? (eg p115 /117, p121, p125 etc)

- Harry has always been a very good friend to James and has been hurt by James's failure to keep in touch. He tells James honestly what he thinks of James's recent life, but James thinks the comments 'unreasonable' (p180). What does being a good friend mean to you? What do you do with your friends? Why are friends important? In groups, discuss why we need friends, what being a good friend involves, and what we look for in a good friend. Who gains more from the friendship between Harry and James, or do they benefit equally, or can friendship ever be judged in terms of 'benefit'?
- Not for the first time, James receives practical as well as emotional support from someone who has very little (pp90-92). A millionaire might give thousands of euro to a charitable cause, but how does this compare with a worker on the average industrial wage who gives €10, or a pensioner who shares food with a homeless person? Should acts of charity only be valued for the amount of money involved, or are there other considerations?
- '(James) began to wonder what might happen if he didn't stop at Newgate but fled westward through the gate ... into the heart of the country.' (p132). Think about what might have happened had James taken the decision to flee the city – can you visualise the next few days and say what you think might have happened to him?

WRITING AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Role-play

What do we take in to consideration when seeking out someone to ask for help? James didn't confide in the cobbler (p36) nor did he enlist the help of his friend McAllister. Yet he now tells the coopers that he is Lord Dunmain's son (p87). Use role-playing scenarios to explore what might have happened if James had told the full story to a trustworthy adult and had asked for help earlier. Then explore what might have happened had the sceptical cooper

informed James's uncle of the events of the morning. In groups, improvise/role-play some possible scenarios and share with the class.

2. Homeless

In October 2014 there were almost 700 children in Dublin, and a further 120 outside the capital, living in emergency accommodation. 168 people were found sleeping on Dublin's streets in November 2014 when the official 'winter rough sleeper count' was conducted. Imagine you have recently become homeless. You may be living in a hostel or other temporary accommodation, waiting to be housed. Recount: Write or record a diary entry saying what you most miss about your old home, and what you hope to find in a new home. Or work with a partner to write/record a mini-documentary about homelessness in this and other countries.

3. Society, work and culture

Recreate curds and whey. Curds and whey are formed when milk is treated with an enzyme called rennin, a process known as curdling. Rennin causes some of the proteins in the milk to change and become insoluble. These solids are known as curds, while the remaining liquid portion is called whey. The curds are the main ingredient in cheese, while whey is often used in margarines or protein supplements for athletes. Try making curd in class – there are many simple recipes available online.

4. Thief Lord

Jack Darcy, 'highwayman, footpad, murderer' (p94) was handsome, had fine features, and 'his clothes were respectable, even foppish', but his gang had 'scaffold faces, pocked and unwashed' (p96). Why might there have been such a difference between Jack Darcy and the men in his gang? Think of and research the lives of other famous footpads eg Dick Turpin etc. Songs or ballads were often written about highwaymen to mark their execution. Can you write at least four lines to mark the life of Jack Darcy or some other fictional highwayman/robber hero (eg Robin Hood)? You might include some traditional images/words, eg moor, inn, scarlet, moonlight, blood-red, pistol, rapier, Stand and deliver etc. You might take inspiration from songs such as 'Stand and Deliver' (Adam Ant) or 'The Highwayman' (Andy Irvine).

5. Idioms

'Put your best foot forward' (p57) 'earn your onions' (p113) – what do these phrases mean? Can you think of other phrases that mean something different to the literal meaning of their words eg raining cats and dogs/to hit the road/crocodile tears/play it by ear/run off one's feet etc? What might someone learning English/someone who interprets words and phrases very literally understand from these words? See if you can find out the origin some idioms. (Each pupil might humorously illustrate one phrase and the class set might be displayed.)

6. Household Chores

[James] 'was surprised at the amount of industry a house demanded ... provisions to be bought ... sewing and mending.' (p171). In one column, list the daily/weekly household chores necessary to run an 18th century household and, in another, those necessary in a 21st century household. What things are similar and what different? Can you list any advantages to living in the less technological age?

7. Home Schooling

James learned much from Nancy and Sylvia Purcell (p174). The right to home education is enshrined in Bunreacht na hÉireann (Art. 42) though children must be registered, and parents regularly assessed by the National Education Welfare Board. Read the Article and discuss. List the advantages and disadvantages of both home and school education.

Unit 3

Pages 200 - 315

SUMMARY

James wakes to find himself in a ship's hold, bound for the New World. Weak and malnourished from the voyage, he is now indentured for seven years to a cruel master, Robert Mackenzie, who demands his money's worth, and more, from servants and slaves. Though forced to watch him viciously flog a runaway servant, James's thoughts are always of escape, but when the letter he prepares begging McAllister for help is found, he realises he must trust to his own resources. Meanwhile, Sylvia, her father and Harry have arrived in Philadelphia and reach Mackenzie's plantation after James has escaped. He is re-captured after a few

days. Barely able to survive the resulting flogging, and bitterly disappointed that he has missed his would-be rescuers, James resigns himself to a life of endless toil and drudgery just as John Purcell is resigning himself to the idea that they will never find James. But Sylvia and Harry do not give up and succeed in tracing McAllister and, with his help, rescue James, though Mackenzie is killed in the doing. Back in Dublin, Harry once again saves his friend's life, as does Jack Darcy the highwayman when James confronts his uncle in Stephen's Green. James could place his faith in the law to reclaim the title and estates to which he is entitled by birth but, in the end, a black wreath and some street justice serves, and offers James the chance to spend the rest of his life with Sylvia and Harry.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Once again, James seems to antagonise those who might have helped him (pp204, 205, 208, 235). Do you think his behaviour was caused by foolish and/or mistaken pride? Say if you think James's impulsive streak has hindered and harmed him. Or do you think he was right not to deny his background?
- Dealing with strong feelings, such as loneliness or grief, can be very difficult. When first abandoned, '... James had never thought about returning to his own house ... hoping the pain would shrink ...' (p38). Now it is as if he doesn't 'want to be touched by the human world of the farm' (p216). Is avoidance the best way to deal with pain, anger and worry? Do you think it's good for your mental health to 'park' bad memories or sad feelings instead of confronting them? What advice would you give James?
- 'If you live a lie, at the end of the day you will be no one.' (p174) 'I just think that who you are isn't as important as what you are' (p180). Consider each of these quotes. Do the statements hold true for the text? Having read the book, do you agree/disagree with the quotes?
- 'I know the rich can do pretty much what they like ...' (p18). 'In this city, those who had position could do as they wished ...' (p90). 'You can do what you want if you have the money to pay for it' (p231). Harry and Darcy were thinking of their own times but do you think the same could be said of the world today? Do you think there are

now different rules and laws for the rich /famous than for the poor/unknown?

WRITING AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

1. The Value of Work?

The Liberty Boys had 'tailors, weavers, buckle-makers, farriers' among their number (p46), while butchers (pp 51, 166) and coopers are central to James's well-being (pp84- 86, p206). In small groups, discuss, then list the ten modern-day occupations/jobs you consider most important on a scale of 1–10. Did any group rank 'bin men/women' as the most important? If not, why not? Did any group rank 'surgeon' or 'barrister' as the most important? Why/why not? Why did your group choose these jobs? Did any group agree with your first choice? Do you agree with their choices? Say why/why not.

2. WANTED!

Design the modern advertisement Mackenzie might post for his missing servant, or a poster for a lost/abandoned youth of James's age. What particulars might you include? Would you include a recent photo/mobile phone number? Why/why not? Think carefully about the colours, font-size and details. Think of a reward that might be given for finding the young person. Or design a poster to promote the author of this book. Consider the number of books he has written, where he lives, explain what he looks like, etc Think of a suitable venue in which to meet and greet this author.

3. Conscience Alley

William, the man to whom James entrusts his letter, makes a decision not to help (p236). Democratically select a volunteer from your class to take the part of William. With the class split into two groups (for and against), let each pupil speak, as any characters from the story, or as themselves. In a word or a sentence, try to persuade 'William' to keep the letter and not betray James. 'William' walks down an 'alley', ie children in a line on either side, as each child takes a turn to speak. At the end of the alley William should say what it felt like to hear the conflicting arguments, if his decision has changed etc Do you/your class acquire insights in to the attitudes and actions of the characters from this exercise?

4. The Pennsylvanian Way

James made a map of the district in his mind (p241). Think about the route James travelled and produce an information leaflet to promote the route he took to potential tourists. Or choose an Irish tourist route such as Slí an Atlantaigh, a scenic route for walkers from Donegal to Kerry. Research and include information about different modes of transport which might be taken between stops (consider sustainable and environmentally-friendly modes of travel), mention rare flora and fauna which might be seen on different parts of the route, an important landmark to be found at/ near each stop, languages/ dialects spoken on the route, distances between each stop, refreshments available at each stop etc

Extension work

When you have finished the book:

1. Stranger than Fiction?

Read the author's note page carefully and discuss with your group/class the origins of this novel. You might do some further research on the internet and read more about the true story of James Annesley, and share your thoughts and opinions.

2. Society and Culture

James recites lines from 'Sonnet 15', written by William Shakespeare (p92). Dublin society heard the first performance

of Handel's *Messiah* and saw the famous actor David Garrick's performance of *Hamlet* before Londoners did. Write a short description of Dublin in the early 18th century using this book as a source. Remember to include information about the lives of the rich as well as of the poor.

3. Primary Sources

Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, and many other works, was also famous for the letters he wrote to his friend 'Stella'. A diary kept by Samuel Pepys provides an eyewitness account of important events. Diaries, journals and letters often provide us with eyewitness accounts of important events as well as personal reflections and thoughts and accounts of everyday events, eg the foods eaten at meal-times etc Keep a diary for two days. Record everything you do, eat etc Can you say why records such as yours might be important for future historians?

4. Rare Auld Times

The Liberties is the name given to an area in the centre of Dublin. Can you find information about his historic area? eg Why is it called the Liberties? Become historical detectives and investigate the history of the cathedrals of Christ Church and St Patrick's, and the churches of St Nicholas of Myra or St Mary's Abbey; or the Markets areas, or the Guinness Brewery/Storehouse, the Tenter House, Iveagh Buildings etc Some groups might

work on a map or 3D representation of the area. Try to find Skinner's Row, Cornmarket, Tailor's Hall, the Fish Shambles and other placenames that give clues to the work once done in the area.

5. The Liberties

Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) was once dean of St Patrick's Cathedral. Robert Emmet, patriot and republican, sentenced by Chief Justice Lord Norbury to be hanged, drawn and quartered, was executed in Thomas Street near St Catherine's Church. Do some research, ask friends and family – can you think of other famous people from the Liberties in Dublin? (eg Imelda May)

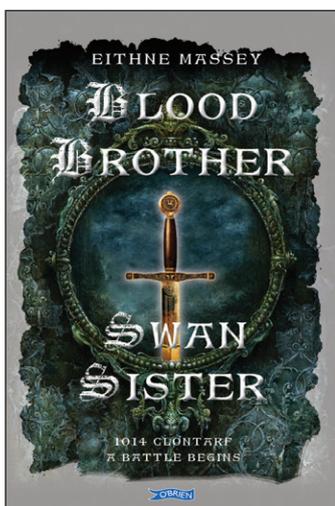
6. History

The strand *Continuity and change over time* suggests 'Transport' as a possible unit for study. Coaches are mentioned several times (eg p20, p39 etc) Make a note of all references to the stagecoach as a form of transport and investigate its importance to travellers in 18th century Ireland.

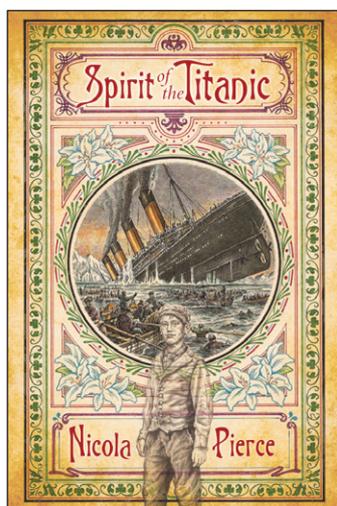
7. Equality

The 1916 Proclamation (*Forógra na Poblachta*), promised 'to cherish all the children ... equally'. After 100 years, do you think the State has honoured this promise? Discuss and then debate the motion 'That this State cherishes all the children of the nation equally.'

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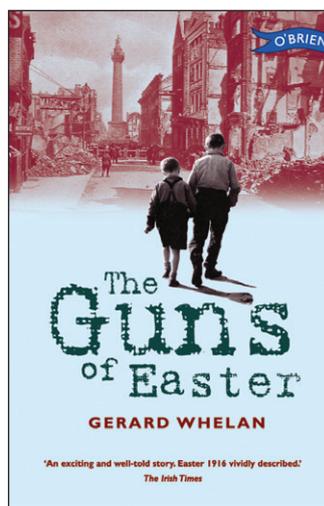


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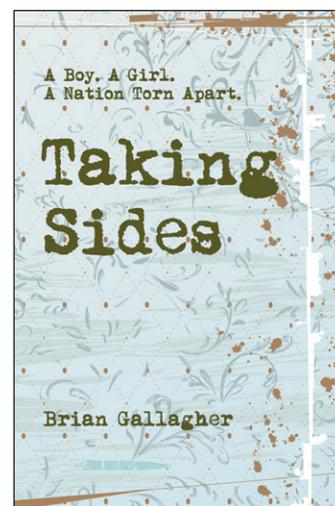


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