



Lily Steps Up: A Lissadell Story

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Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE AND THEMES

This guide has been designed to complement a class reading of the book in a way that brings the text alive whilst also enriching students' critical abilities. The activities aim to inspire young readers by encouraging them to question the characters' motivations and the overall themes. The guide aims to develop empathy skills, stimulate discussion and encourage readers to dissect literary techniques in fresh and engaging ways. There are also activities included to hone communication, presentation and literacy skills as well as those that encourage students to develop their ability to collaborate with others. This historical novel is the second in the 'Lissadell' series and centres around a young servant girl working and living in the famous Sligo family home. It's a tale of friendship across the class divide as Lily tries to balance her dreams with reality. Themes include:

- Friendship,
- Courage,
- Dreams and ambitions,
- Family,
- Justice,
- Equality.

SUMMARY

From the beginning it's clear that Lily is a very special girl. We first meet her helping another servant girl Nellie to read, but it's not long before she's having fun with another friend – Maeve Markievicz, the niece of Lily's employers.

Thanks to her friendship with Maeve, Lily has access to Lissadell beyond the servants' quarters and is sometimes given special privileges – such as the loan of a bicycle or the ear of Lady Mary Gore-Booth when she needs help with something important. However, despite her closeness with Maeve, she is aware of her position in the world, especially since Maeve doesn't fully

understand what life is like for families poorer than her own.

Family is very important to Lily and her favourite part of the week is when she is able to go back to visit her mother and siblings. She's keen to share this warmth and support with her orphaned friend, Nellie, but this opens old wounds and leads the girls, Maeve and Lady Mary into an emotional adventure.

Meanwhile, Lily is given a very exciting opportunity in the household and she starts to hope that her ambition of becoming a schoolteacher may not be such a foolish dream. Thanks to the efforts of Maeve and Lady Mary, Nellie is reunited with someone very precious, but this isn't always easy for Lily. However, her mother is, as ever, full of excellent advice and Lily finds a way to make things work. Before long, life in Lissadell is blissful for everyone, so when trouble comes, it causes even more distress.

APPROACH

This is a very enjoyable and entertaining read, with many opportunities for discussion on topics as diverse as family, class divides, inequality and ambition. This guide has divided the story into three sections and the activities and discussion points aim to initiate the development of an understanding of the themes, techniques and characterisation within the novel.

Part One Pages 5-104

The Importance of Family

The book opens with Lily supporting her friend Nellie who is learning to read. Both girls work in a stately home, where their days are long and filled with difficult physical labour. Although she lives at Lissadell as a servant, Lily is friends with Maeve, the niece of the family of the house.

There's a lot of excitement in the house as the family prepare to go on holiday – but Lily soon finds out this means more work for her and the other servants. Lily and Nellie are exhausted by all the extra chores, but Saturday soon rolls around and Lily gets the chance to visit her family.

As a result of all their hard work, Nellie and Lily are given an extra day off – much to their excitement. Lily offers Nellie the chance to visit her family and after some persuading, the girls have a wonderful time with Lily's family. Sadly, this brings up some sad memories for Nellie and Lily feels powerless to help her.

When the Gore-Booths return, it's not long before Maeve is back to her usual mischief and bringing Lily along on adventures. Lily confides her worries about Nellie and her sisters in her friend about. Despite not really understanding the difficulties being a servant girl brings, Maeve is very keen to help. However, this means involving more senior members of the household, which means Lily has to be very brave.

There's drama at Lissadell when young Michael Gore-Booth rescues a seal pup, which means lots of excitement and an unexpected guest in the garden pond. Thanks to Maeve's generosity with a bicycle, Lily can get to and from home even more quickly and spend more time with her family. However, her arrival on a bicycle causes a huge stir in the village.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read p.7.** Lily explains that she and Nellie weren't always friends but "Now I knew her better and understood why she had been like that." Do you think it's important to try to understand why people behave in the way that they do? Why do you think this? Do you know what empathy means? Why do you think it might be an important skill to learn?

- **Read p.10.** Lily remembers something her father used to say, ‘We might be poor, Lily, but you’re as good as everyone else on this green earth...’ Why do you think that this is such an important message? Have you ever heard anything like this before? Why do you think equality is so important?
- **Read pp. 16–18.** Lily is waiting for Maeve when Lady Mary speaks to her. Do you think this is the normal type of conversation between lady and servant? Why do you think this? What are your first impressions of Lady Mary? Why do you think this?
- **Read p.34.** Nellie comments to Lily that “I try to be happy with what I have”. Do you agree with this statement? What sort of girl is Nellie? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp. 51–54.** Why is Nellie so nervous about going home with Lily? How do you think she feels? What advice would you give her?
- **Read p.62.** It takes a while for Lily to get to her friend’s house due to stopping to chat to everyone. Is this common nowadays? Do you know your neighbours? Why do you think people don’t know their neighbours as much as they did in the past? Do you think this is a good or bad thing? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp. 82-83.** Do you think Lady Mary will help Nellie find her sisters? Why do you think this? What are your impressions of Lady Mary? Do you think she was a typical lady of the house? Why do you think this?
- **Read p. 85.** Lily observes that “It must have been hard living in a world where a young girl like Maeve was seen to be more important than a grown-up like her.” What do you think of this statement? Do you agree? Do you think you would have found it difficult? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp. 97-103.** Why do you think the bicycle has caused so much excitement? Do you think Maeve and the Gore-Booths would be surprised if they knew how excited the children were about the bicycle? Has something like this ever happened in your neighbourhood/family where someone has brought something home others have wanted? What happened?

ACTIVITIES

1. Workhouse

Lily’s friend Nellie and her sisters were sent to the workhouse when their parents died. But what was ‘the workhouse’? Complete a

research project investigating what life was like in the workhouse, what it was, why people were sent there and workhouses they no longer exist. In your project, you could create an imaginary diary of a child living in the workhouse, find images of workhouses in Ireland and create a timeline of their existence. Use the information at the end of the book as a starting point.

2. Countess Markievicz profile

What do you know about Countess Markievicz? Work in pairs to research her – what sort of things did she do with her life? Was this how women were expected to behave? Why was she such a special woman? Be prepared to present a short speech on why she can be seen as such a good role model for women today.

3. Returning home

Returning home to see her family is the highlight of Lily’s week. Why do you think it only happens once a week? Work in small groups to freeze frame her return home – try and capture her excitement at arriving and the atmosphere in the house and what happens as she leaves. How do her family react once she is gone?

4. Letter to Hanora

Hanora’s letter is full of the adventures she has in New York and her impressions of life there. Imagine you are Lily and write a letter to Hanora telling her about your life at Lissadell. She’s your best friend so you can tell her all your fears and worries – maybe your doubts about your friendship with Maeve, your worries about Nellie, your sadness at not seeing your family would all be good topics to explore. Don’t forget that if Hanora is feeling homesick, you will need to be a bit sensitive. How will you do this?

5. Nellie’s diary

Imagine you are Nellie. You’ve just returned from a weekend at Lily’s home. What are your thoughts? How did you enjoy things? Does it make you miss your own family? Write a diary entry exploring your thoughts and feelings about your weekend. Has it brought back memories of the workhouse? Write these down too.

6. Debate

Lily is worried that she has made the wrong decision by involving Lady Mary. Do you agree with her? Why do you think this? In small groups, draw up a list of the reasons Lily should involve Lady Mary and the Gore-Booths to help find Nellie’s sisters. Once you

have at least five reasons, draw a list of five reasons why Lily should NOT ask for help to find Nellie’s family. Debate as a class – remember to think about what Nellie might want too.

Section Two Pages 105-199 The Hunt for Johanna

SUMMARY

Lily returns to Lissadell to find a visitor in her quarters. She and Nellie are stunned to have Lady Mary as a guest in their tiny room, but their mistress has come with some sad – and some hopeful – news about Nellie’s two sisters.

After some weeks, Lady Mary approaches Lily with the bad news that her friends have not been able to find Nellie’s sister Johanna. Despite her sadness for her friend, Lily is excited by the prospect of a visit from Maeve’s mother, the famous Countess Markievicz. There’s drama when one of the servants disappears and Lily finds herself having to do a very important job.

Maeve’s mother arrives and Lily is lucky enough to catch a glimpse of her and get the opportunity to listen to some of her radical views.

While Lily is enjoying her new position as lady’s maid, she begins to notice that some of the other servants are becoming more hostile towards her. She realises that there are politics amongst the servants she wasn’t aware of and tries to make things right. Her sewing skills draw praise from Lady Mary, which leads to a very interesting conversation with Maeve’s grandmother Lady Georgina and a very exciting opportunity for Lily. Lady Georgina brings Lily to see the needlework school on the grounds of Lissadell and Lily is enchanted by the beautiful items the women there have made.

Maeve returns to Lissadell full of good news about Nellie’s sister, but unfortunately, she seems to have made a mistake. The girls are very disappointed until Lily has a brainwave, which sends Maeve and her Aunt Mary on an expedition. They return with a wonderful surprise for Nellie – but the reunion between the two sisters doesn’t go as smoothly as they’d hoped at first.

Even worse – when morning comes, Lily has a nasty shock when it turns out Johanna isn’t as sweet a girl as her sister and is cruel and unkind to Lily. Lily is worried that she has lost her friend, but tries not to make a fuss for Nellie’s sake.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p. 105.** Would it have been normal for the lady of the house to visit the servants' quarters? What does this tell us about Lady Mary? How do you think Lily feels? What do you think is going through Nellie's mind at this point? Why do you think this?
- **Read p. 114.** How do you think Nellie feels not knowing what happened to her sister? Why do you think it's the 'not knowing' that is the most difficult thing? Do you think there is anything else Lily can do?
- **Read p. 120.** Why do you think Lily feels sorry for Maeve? Do you think life is easy for Maeve? How do you think she feels about not seeing her mother very often? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp. 134-136.** Lily says that "at Lissadell, no one ever asked me what I wanted to do..." Do you think this is right? Do you think this is the case in the workplace today? How do you think things have changed? Do you think it's good or bad that these changes have been made? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp. 144-145.** What do you think of the politics between the servants? Why do you think they don't trust servants who spend too much time with the masters? Do you think this is fair? Why do you think this? Do you think Lily's reaction is the right thing to do? What would you have done in her situation?
- **Read p. 154.** When admiring the beautiful pieces of embroidery, Lily can't help but think about her mother and what she would have spent the money on. Think about luxury items in modern society – how many people can afford to buy them? Do you think such things should exist? Why do you think this?
- **Read p. 160.** Lily describes Nellie's freckles as standing "out like spatters of gold paint on a snow-white page." What sort of description is this? What sort of image does it create of Nellie's face? Does it make her seem pretty? Why do you think this?
- **Read p. 173.** Maeve and Lily have hatched a plan to find Nellie's sister but they decide not to tell Nellie. Do you think this is the right decision? Why do you think this? What do you think they should do?
- **Read pp. 193-194.** Why do you think Johanna is so unfriendly to Lily? How do you think Lily should react? Do you think she does the right thing? What would you do if you were in Lily's position?

ACTIVITIES

1. Nellie analysis

What sort of a girl is Nellie? Choose five adjectives to describe her personality. Find a quote for each adjective in the book – something she says or does (or is said about her) that shows she has this type of personality. How do your chosen quotations prove your point? Structure your thoughts in five short paragraphs, each one answering the following three questions: What sort of girl is Nellie? Is there an example from the text to show this? How exactly does this chosen quote prove the point?

2. Educating Maeve

Lily's friend Maeve is a kind girl who is always willing to help her friends. Her behaviour towards the servants would not have been very common for a lady at that time, but despite all her efforts, she doesn't know a lot about life as a servant. Imagine Maeve is your audience. In small groups, create a presentation that brings to life what life as a servant is like. This can be either a presentation or a piece of drama – the objective is to make her see (in a kind way) that the lives of those less privileged was much more difficult than her own. For reference, make a note of any examples in the text where Maeve clearly doesn't understand Lily's life.

3. Personal assistant

Re-read through the instructions Mrs Bailey gives Lily. Do you think this sounds like a difficult job? If you had a robot at home that was your personal assistant, what ten things would you like it to do and why? Design your robot and write a series of instructions of what it should be able to do every day to help you around the house.

4. Maeve character study

On page 157, Lily says that Maeve's news "was going to be about her, and not about Nellie or me." What sort of a girl is Maeve? Choose four adjectives to describe her personality and find four examples of her behaviour or things she says from the book to prove your points. Structure your thoughts in four short paragraphs, each one answering the following three questions: What sort of girl is Maeve? Is there an example from the text to show this? How exactly does this chosen quote prove the point?

5. Scary descriptions

On pages 175-176, the girls admit that they are scared of the stuffed secretary bird

in the front hall. Is there anything in your house you're scared of? Why is it so scary? Write a description of the object, including as many details as you can. Once you have finished, see if your partner can draw the object based on your writing. How accurate is their drawing? Was your description detailed enough? How could you improve your writing?

6. Freeze frame

In small groups, create a series of freeze frames based on the sisters' reunion. You should start from Johanna's arrival at Lissadell. Be prepared to explain what each character is thinking in each frame.

Section Three Pages 200–313 The New Arrival

Johanna begins to settle into life at Lissadell, but is still hostile towards Lily. Lily is amazed to see the bond Johanna has with Bridget, one of the children of Lissadell, who follows Johanna around like a shadow. After a discussion with Nellie, it becomes clear that Johanna is not just mean to Lily – she's been mean to her sister occasionally and little Bridget. It all gets a bit too much for Lily who gets very emotional while she tells her mother everything. As usual, Lily's mother is full of excellent advice and on her return to Lissadell, Lily speaks to Nellie. Between them, they come up with a plan.

After a while, it becomes clear that their plan is beginning to work as Johanna becomes more friendly with Lily. Lily gets a very exciting opportunity at the needlework school, which goes very well. Life is wonderful and for a while the girls are happy – until something happens to threaten everything.

Lady Mary's locket goes missing and is found in Johanna's room. Johanna furiously denies being a thief, but no one believes her. However, Lady Mary is prepared to give her a second chance and Johanna is allowed to stay at Lissadell. Things go back to normal for a while until another stolen item appears in Johanna's room and she is asked to leave. The girls are devastated, but even with Maeve's intervention, nothing can be done. To everyone's surprise, Lily takes matters into her own hands to try and save Johanna.

However, things take an even more surprising turn when Maeve sees one of her cousins behaving in a very secretive manner and the mystery of the Lissadell thief is solved without anyone losing their jobs.

The family say goodbye to a strange pet and

Lily gets an amazing opportunity thanks to Lady Mary and Miss Connor.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp.202-203.** Johanna is very cruel to Lily, accusing her of being arrogant because of her friendship with Maeve. Why do you think she is behaving in this way? Do you think she's really a mean person or is she feeling scared and insecure? Why do you think this? What advice would you give Lily?
- **Read pp 212-213.** What do you think of Lily's mother's advice? Do you think the girls' plan is a good one? How do you think they should behave around Johanna? Do you think this will help? Why do you think this?
- **Read p.222.** What do you think of the girls' memorial to their family? Why do you think it is so important to them? Has this changed your opinion of Johanna?
- **Read pp. 232-233.** Lily's memory of her old teacher is quite an unpleasant one. Why do you think she determines not to be like Miss O'Brien? Do you agree with her decision? What do you think of her response to Miss Connor about Mary-Kate?
- **Read pp. 245-246.** What are your impressions of the kitchen maids? What do you think of Lily's reaction? Why do you think this? How would you have reacted? Why? Do you think that gossip should be avoided? Why?
- **Read p.257.** Do you think Maeve is right to be a little embarrassed by her mother? Would you rather have Maeve's mother or Stella's mother? Why?
- **Read pp. 267-270.** What do you think of Mrs Bailey's reaction here? Do you think she is right to act in the way that she does? How do you think she should react? Why do you think this?
- **Read p. 278.** Why does Lily do this? What do you think of her idea? Do you think this is something you would have done? What do you think is going to happen next?
- **Read p. 296.** Do you think Johanna is right to ask for nothing? What would you have done in her situation?
- **Read p. 314.** What do you think of the punishments given to the children in the workhouse? What do you think life was like for the children?

ACTIVITIES

1. Johanna hot seat

In small groups, create a number of questions for Johanna. You're trying to get to the root

of her behaviour. How would she answer these questions? What is she trying to hide? In your groups, take it in turns to play the role of Johanna and answer the questions as you think she would respond.

2. Ambitions

On page 225, Lily gets very excited when she thinks she is being asked to help finish some of the needlework at the school. However, when she realises she was getting ahead of herself, she tells Lady Mary "My mam says I shouldn't get notions about myself." What do you think of this advice? What are your ambitions for the future? Be as full of notions as you want. Create a short presentation of what you'd like to do when you're older, including why you'd like to do this, how you'll get there and what sort of difficulties you think you'll face.

3. Perfect day

Nellie and her sister spend their day off walking to the village and treating themselves to a proper tea and cake. What's your idea of a perfect day? Storyboard it with illustrations – from the moment you wake to the moment you go to sleep.

4. Fashion

Lily is very good at making dresses for her sisters and puts a lot of thought into making their clothes. Imagine you are a fashion designer who can make whatever types of clothes they like. Design an outfit for yourself and write a description of why you have chosen this particular design. Be as imaginative as you like – think about all the things you wish your own clothes could have (maybe you wish dresses had more pockets or jumpers came with warming mittens for your hands?)

5. Mrs Bailey's diary

Mrs Bailey almost makes a terrible mistake and is devastated when she realises she nearly ruined Johanna or Lily's life. Imagine you are Mrs Bailey and write a diary entry on the day she discovered her mistake. In it, you should discuss your guilt, your reasons for acting as you did and your thoughts on the girls' reactions.

6. THE GORE-BOOTH LEGACY

On pages 315-319 we learn all about the lives of the Gore-Booth children. Someone is missing though – what happened to Maeve Markievicz? In small groups, create a presentation on the lives of the children of Lissadell. What were their lives like? In your presentation, you should rank them in terms

of who you think had the most interesting life – and be prepared to explain your choice.

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Judi Curtin is one of Ireland's best-loved children's authors. You can find more about her here www.obrien.ie/judi-curtin

She has written the following series:

[Alice and Megan](#)

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Lily at Lissadell

Find out more about Judi Curtin's first story about Lily here: obrien.ie/lily-at-lissadell

