



Poetry and prose for teachers

An overview of the Irish-language requirement (SCG) literature syllabus

To attain An Cháilíocht sa Ghaeilge (SCG), teachers who qualify abroad are required to read, study and analyse six prescribed Irish-language prose pieces and ten Irish-language poems. That literature syllabus has been chosen with teachers in mind and it aims to enhance the reading and writing skills of candidates, while, at the same time, providing an enjoyable introduction to the work of well-known Irish-language authors and some of their prevailing themes. It is a syllabus, therefore, which may be of interest to teachers and educators in general. This article gives a brief overview of the syllabus by classifying the texts according to theme.

A. Siollabas filíochta

Samhalíocht an pháiste

The theme of childhood imagination is particularly evident in two of the poems from the syllabus. In *Teilifís*, Gabriel Rosenstock contrasts the child's extensive, excited imagination with the adult's lack of imagination. At five o'clock in the morning, the adult sees only a blank white television screen, while the two-year-old girl sees snow and exotic animals. As a result, the little girl inspires her father to reflect on the magical wonder of the child's imagination and the reader is given an insight into his amazement and unconditional love for her:

Stánamar le hiontas ar scáileán bán ...
Ach chonaic sise sneachta
is sioráf tríd an sneachta
is ulchabhán Artach.

(Cóir Ghaoithe, 138)

An Broc: Dán do Pháistí, by Pádraig Mac Fhearghusa, is a simple poem about a badger which could be used as a classroom resource to awaken the imagination and to initiate a discussion about aspects of wildlife and nature. It would be suitable for integrating content and language learning in an SESE lesson, for example, as the speaking badger reveals many of his traits and habits during the course of the poem:

Is mise an Broc! ...
Táim beagáinín cúthaileach.
Á! Fan!
Níl do lapai
glan go leor.

(Cóir Ghaoithe, 159)

Ailleacht an ghnáthruda

Not unrelated to the theme of imagination, is the theme of beauty in the ordinary which is considered in both *Cúl an Tí* by Seán Ó Riordáin and *Ceol an Bhainne* by Bríd Dáibhís. *Cúl an Tí* speaks of the wonder that is to be found just behind the house and *Ceol an Bhainne* celebrates the ordinary beauty of a traditional way of life. Both poems are exercises in mindfulness and remind the teacher of the importance of inspiring children to look for, and focus on, beauty in the ordinary everyday things they see in the world around them.

Bás an pháiste

The premature death of a child and its impact on the child's father is the theme of *Ochón! A Dhonncha*, by Pádraig Ó hÉigeartaigh. It is a lament which explores parental grief and it is a good example of such laments for children from the Irish literary tradition. It also contains a diasporic element, and like many other Irish-language poems, it grapples with the sub-themes of emigration, exile and alienation. The following lines show that the father's grief is exacerbated by the reality that his son is buried in Springfield, Massachusetts, rather than with his relatives in Ireland:

Ochón! A Dhonncha, mo mhíle
cogarach, fén bhfód so sínte;
fód an doichill 'na luí ar do cholainn
bhig, mo loma-sceimhle!

(Cóir Ghaoithe, 163)

Luath-chaidreamh tábhachtach

Máthair by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, is of relevance to teachers as it gives an insight into the dark side of a formative childhood relationship. The poem uses symbolism to present the mother as a miserly person who lacks understanding and who

limits the freedom of her offspring. It uses questions to illustrate the depth of tension between them and the mental turmoil of the daughter. Of course, Ní Dhomhnaill's work was influenced by the work of psychologist, Carl Jung, and it can be argued, in that context, that Ní Dhomhnaill is examining the archetypal 'ugly mother' with which the psyche must wrestle:

Do thugais dom gúna
is thógais arís é ...
Cad déarfá dá stracfainn an gúna?
(Cóir Ghaoithe, 131-132)

Baile, áit agus tírghrá

Two of the poems on the syllabus deal with the universal theme of the home. *Faoiseamh a Gheobhadhsa* by Máirtín Ó Direáin juxtaposes the tranquillity of native place with the gloominess of city-life. The poet anticipates his next visit home to the Aran Islands and knows that it will bring him 'relief' from his urban loneliness:

Faoiseamh a gheobhadhsa
seal beag gairid
i measc mo dhaoine...
Ó uaigneas duairc,
ó chaint ghontach.
(Cóir Ghaoithe, 135-136)

Likewise, in *An Gleann inar Tógadh Mé*, Dubhglas de hÍde reminisces on his youth in the 'glen' in which he was brought up and creates a picture of a happy energetic independent childhood. Toward the end of the poem, he evokes an image of old age as a time when the strength, athleticism and innocence of youth are replaced with weakness, stiffness and knowledge. There is regret in the following lines, but also a desire to be home and young again:

Do chaill mé mórán 's fuair mé fios...
Mo léan, mo léan, gan mé arís
óg sa ghleann 'nar tógadh mé.
(Cóir Ghaoithe, 148)

Both *Úirchill an Chreagáin* by Art Mac Cumhaidh and *Athair* by Caoimhín ó

Conghaile deal with the themes of Irish freedom and love of country. *Úirchill an Chreagáin* is a political vision-poem which looks at the predicament of the Irish and her poets in the eighteenth century. While *Do M'athair* discusses the kind of permanent memorial the heroes of 1916 deserve. Both poems give SCG candidates a taste of Irish political poetry.

B. Siollabas próis

Insint liteartha ar an oideachas

The extract from *Fiche Blian ag Fás – Mo Thuras Abhaile Dom* – by Muiris Ó Súilleabháin is of relevance to teachers because it is an autobiographical literary narrative which presents differing perspectives on education, language-learning and tradition in the early part of the last century. It traces the journey of Muiris – a young inquisitive boy – from the orphanage-school in Dingle, where he has been staying since the death of his mother, back to the Great Blasket Island where, on his first night, he learns his first sentence of Irish by imitating his grandfather at a house gathering.

Ealaín na scéalaíochta

Aspects of the art of storytelling are celebrated in three of the prose pieces. *La Fontaine* by Breandán Ó Doibhlin is an introductory essay to the fables of *La Fontaine*. It explains that *La Fontaine* was a pioneer of the fable-form. He essentially put characters from the animal world and from nature in conversation with each other in short texts to shed light on different aspects of the human condition. The fables are full of humour but they often carry a message or a warning for readers. From their first publication, the fables of *La Fontaine* have been much sought after and they illustrate how effective the genre of the story is as a

teaching resource.

The much-loved short story, *M'asal Beag Dubh*, by Pádraic Ó Conaire is simple but eloquent. It is an account of the kindly relationship between Pádraic and his little black donkey and it gives an insight into some rural customs, particularly the customs of the travelling community. It is Ó Conaire's characteristic writing style and his skilful story-telling which make this story memorable.

The newspaper article, *Scéalta as Tír na nÓg*, by Liam Ó Muirthile also emphasises the importance of storytelling and highlights its role in child development. Ó Muirthile argues that storytelling has a particular role in enhancing relationships between fathers and sons. He contrasts the power of story to build father-child relationships with modern un-relational screen-based play. As a father, he reveals that he is trying to re-learn the art of storytelling to strengthen his own relationship with his son. Ó Muirthile articulates some strong opinions about the significant role men play in raising children and expresses his dismay about the dearth of men in the teaching profession.

Cothromaíocht inscne

There are two other stories on the syllabus which engage with the theme of gender equity in different ways. *Iníon Rí na Cathrach Deirge*, by Angela Burke, uses the style of folklore tales to examine the limitations placed on women in a patriarchal society and it celebrates how women surmount those limitations but it also laments the lack of freedom women experience especially within marriage. *Triúrmhilleadh* by Seán Mac Mathúna masterfully examines the themes of unplanned conception and abortion and encourages the reader to contemplate the issues from the perspective of both

the woman and the man. The reader is left in no doubt about the long-term pain and suffering both characters must endure because of past choices.

Tátal

In summary, then, the literature syllabus for An Cháilíocht sa Ghaeilge (SCG) aims to develop reading-skills and to support language-enrichment, but it also endeavours to awaken in teachers an appreciation for the art forms that are Irish-language poetry and prose. The syllabus is varied and draws together a wide range of age-old and contemporary themes – childhood imagination, ordinary beauty, bereavement, relationship, native place, schooling in the past, storytelling and gender equity – all of which pertain to the life of the teacher.

Tagairtí

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Mac Suibhne, A. & Whelton, M. Cóir Ghaoithe: *Cúrsa Ullmhúcháin don Scrúdú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge*, Institiúid Oideachais Marino, Baile Átha Cliath, 2006.

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