

Grade level: 10-12
Famine curriculum

Aim:

New York State standards:

Historical background: The British government's initial response to the famine was to offer relief schemes that employed the poor at a small daily wage on public works projects such as road building. Some landlords hired their tenants to make improvements on their estates. Mitchell Henry (1826-1910), a wealthy Liverpool cotton manufacturer and a Member of Parliament built a castle on his County Galway estate. Henry's wife Margaret Vaughan was from Co. Down. Their nineteenth century Gothic castle and their lavish entertaining contrasted grotesquely with the poverty around them. Today, Kylemore is a girls' boarding school run by Benedictine nuns.

Lesson:

1. Read Richard Murphy's sonnet "Kylemore Castle." Notice that his speaker is an unusual choice: Kylemore Abbey itself. What is the effect of using place as narrator?
2. Mortmain literally means dead hand but is used metaphorically to mean an impersonal owner. Is the metaphor consistent with the tone of the poem? What is the relationship between the metaphor and the macabre description of Margaret Vaughan Henry? Are there other ghosts in the poem?
3. How does Murphy use famine in the poem?

HW: Write Murphy's poem as a ballad. How does a change in form change the poem? What if Murphy had chosen the Italian rather than the Shakespearean sonnet form?