



Michael Collins Hero and Rebel

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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 text 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 that are designed to hone communication, presentation and literacy skills. This fictional biography charts the life of Michael Collins, offering insights into the man behind the legend:

- Friendship
- Courage
- War
- Conflict
- Justice
- Beliefs

SUMMARY

This book tells the story of Michael Collins, charting his life from his childhood in County Cork until his death. From the beginning, it is clear that he is an interesting character – intelligent, loyal and very firm in the pursuit of his beliefs. Life in Ireland is tough, and Michael soon has to follow his siblings and move away from home to work. Although his life in London is busy, he still misses Ireland and returns to help fight for her freedom from the British Crown.

His story takes us through the drama of the Easter Rising and the consequences for many Irishmen as we find out about the conditions prisoners faced in British jails. However, this makes his resolve even stronger and he is soon back in Ireland, using his intelligence and skills to coordinate the rebels across the country. Although they are all fighting for the same goal, there is a lot of conflict amongst the rebels and Michael

is a difficult character for many of his peers. Despite this, he makes new friends and falls in love, but life is not easy as he is forced to move constantly to avoid capture by the British forces.

Everyday life becomes more dangerous as new troops are brought over to try to crush the rebels. Many people die and Michael is appalled by the brutality of the war. However, things are beginning to look hopeful and we see inside the negotiations that eventually led to the formation of the Republic of Ireland. This too brings conflict, however, and Michael loses many of his friends as Ireland becomes divided, resulting in a bloody civil war.

APPROACH

This is a very enjoyable and entertaining read, with many opportunities for discussion on topics as diverse as war, family and justice. 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 1 Young Michael Pages 9–52

SUMMARY

We first meet Michael aged 10, living with his family in County Cork. He has been fighting at school and it is clear that even from a young age he has a very developed sense of justice. Despite his sparky nature, he is an intelligent boy and liked by his teacher and peers. Times are difficult and Michael is interested in politics, getting a lot of his information from the men who visit the local blacksmith's forge, a place where young boys can sit in the warmth and listen to the gossip as local men sit around and

discuss the issues of the day – especially the injustices suffered at the hands of the English who rule the country.

We meet Michael's family, who are well respected in the neighbourhood. As the youngest, he doesn't have many memories of his father who died when he was little, and most of his siblings have left home to find work – some in England, others in Ireland. However, young Michael is still enough of a handful for his mother as he finds himself getting in trouble through his many 'adventures'. He is a considerate boy, helping out on the family farm and he's not afraid of hard work.

Once he turns 16, Michael moves to London to work as a clerk. His sister Hannie already lives there and we see their relationship develop as they grow closer. He's still a good worker and, although he struggles at the beginning with being an Irish outsider, he soon settles in and begins to shine. He lives in London for a number of years, playing a big part in the Irish community, but he still doesn't feel like he fully fits in. He's very conscious of the role the British government are playing in Ireland and how there are still many injustices, and he feels stuck and in need of adventure.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read p. 9.** What are your first impressions of Michael? Why, do you think, is he fighting? Is it ever acceptable to use violence? What should he have done instead?
- Read p. 11.** Michael is clearly inspired by his teacher, Master O'Leary. Why, do you think, is this? Have you ever been inspired by a teacher? Why? Why, do you think, can school be so important for many people? (Think about interviews you have seen with famous people where they thank a teacher from their childhood.)

- **Read p. 14.** Michael mentions that the Irish are seen as ‘stupid, lazy and dishonest’. Why, do you think, are stereotypes like this so dangerous? Have you ever been a victim of stereotyping? What happened?
- **Read p. 30.** How, do you think, does Michael’s mammy feel now that her youngest son has left? Why, do you think, have all the children left? Do you think she knew this would happen? Why do so many Irish people emigrate to other countries?
- **Read pp 35–37.** Michael is angry that he’s called ‘Paddy’ or ‘Irish Mick’. Why do his work colleagues do this? Is he right to be angry? What do you think of Hannie’s advice?
- **Read p. 40.** Michael is a bit of a terror on the pitch and prepared to do anything to win. What do you think of this attitude? Do you think winning at any cost is a good philosophy? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp 45–46.** Do you think that Michael should go to America? What do you think will happen if he stays? What do you think his sister Hannie would advise him to do (especially if she knew about his involvement with the Volunteers)?

ACTIVITIES

1. COMMEMORATIVE POSTERS

Read through the timeline of important events in Michael’s life on pages 5 and 6. Which events do you think are the most important? Why do you think this? Choose the two or three most important events and create a poster for each. In each poster, you should include an image that represents this period in his life and pair it with a quote or slogan that illustrates why this is such an important event.

2. PAST HEROES

On pages 10 and 11, Michael lists some of his heroes, like Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet. Who are your Irish heroes? Why do you admire them? Prepare a short speech for your class on who the person is, what they achieved, and why you admire them so much. Try to use persuasive language to convince your classmates of your view.

3. FAMINE PROJECT

At the beginning of the novel, it is clear that for many people, the Famine is still a very recent memory. What do you know about the Famine? In groups of three or four, prepare a short presentation. Imagine that you are explaining the Famine to someone who has

never heard about it. Give them an outline of what happened and what the consequences were for the people of Ireland.

4. LOCAL FOLK STORIES

On pages 25 and 26, Michael shows that he is very interested in folk stories of Ireland, commenting on the very local legend of the fairy Cliona. Are there any folk stories or legends local to your area? Write a story of between 500 and 1,000 words in the style of a traditional folk story. In your story, use a narrative structure to build the plot, and try to use some advanced language. *Extension: Write a traditional folk story with a modern twist. Play around with settings – try to translate an old story into a modern setting.*

5. TOURIST GUIDE

When Michael arrives in London, Hannie is full of ideas of places they could visit – Madame Tussaud’s, the Tower of London. With a partner, create a tourist guide for a place of your choice – it could be your local area or it could be somewhere else. In your guide you should include five or six highlights of places that would be interesting to visit for young teenagers. Remember, you’re trying to ‘sell’ the place, so use persuasive language to make it sound attractive. You can write it either as a blog post or in the style of an A4 foldable leaflet.

6. LETTER FROM HANNIE

Imagine that you are Hannie. Your younger brother Michael is returning to Ireland but you are worried that he will fall into trouble. Write a letter to him that tries to persuade him to be sensible. You should try to make him see that he is important to you and the rest of the family, and that you don’t want him to waste his talent and intelligence.

Part 2 Back in Ireland Pages 53–111

SUMMARY

The second part of the novel opens at the GPO in 1916. The rebels have been under siege for almost a week, and although he is still passionate about the objectives of the Rebellion, Michael is finding it difficult to maintain his respect for the leaders. A practical man, he sees the failings of the organisation and he has become frustrated with the way things are being run. However, he has become better at taking orders he doesn’t agree with, and he keeps his anger under control.

The Easter Rising was a disaster for Michael – some of his friends have died and he and the others have to surrender, which makes them feel like they are losing their dignity. He is sent to prison, and before long he is back in England, where he is moved from jail to jail. He meets many familiar faces along the way, before being released just before Christmas. His release takes a while as some of the men are left in limbo, but he finally makes it back to Ireland where he helps try to pick up the pieces of the failed Rebellion.

Back in Ireland, Michael gets more and more involved in the Republican movement, becoming a very important figure. He brings his organisational skills and talents into building the fight for a free Ireland and, despite his stubbornness causing conflict with some of the other rebels, he is generally held in high regard. He is very much at the centre of things and entrusted with some very important, very secret missions. He reconnects with some old friends and meets some new ones, like the Kiernan family at Granard. It’s a busy time, but he is hopeful that all their plans may bring freedom from the British Crown – even if it does mean war.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p. 60.** Michael and Gearóid laugh about a soldier who came into the GPO to buy a stamp. How did Michael treat him? What does this tell us about Michael? Are you surprised that he treated the soldier in this way? Why do you think this?
- **Read p. 65.** Why, do you think, were so many people so angry with the rebels? How, do you think, would you have felt if you were a Dubliner at the time? Do you think that Michael understands their annoyance? What do you think Michael should say to them to get them on his side?
- **Read p. 67.** What do you think of Joe’s advice? Would you have done what Michael did? What do you think would have happened if he hadn’t moved sides? Was he right to do it? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp 66–69.** Why, do you think, were the prisoners moved around so much from prison to prison? Do you think it was significant that they moved them from Ireland? Why, do you think, did this happen? Why, do you think, did the people of Ireland feel more sympathy once the rebels were executed? Should the British have executed the rebels? Why do you think this?

- **Read p. 70.** Michael is surprised by how organised the prisoners are. Do you think that it was sensible of the British to allow the men to organise themselves? What should they have done differently? Why do you think this?
- **Read p. 100.** Do you agree that there can be justification for war? Why do you think this? Do you think that there has ever been justification? Does Michael's speech change your view of him? Why do you think this?

ACTIVITIES

1. REPORTING FROM THE RISING

What do you know about the Rising? Are you surprised by Michael's reaction to events from within the GPO? In small groups, create a news report 'LIVE' from the GPO. In your report, you should include some background information on what is actually going on around you. You should also interview a couple of people to get a range of opinions – perhaps one or two of the rebels, someone from the British side, and maybe some other eye-witnesses. Remember what Michael says about how there wasn't necessarily a lot of sympathy or support at the beginning. Your report should be between three and five minutes long.

2. LIFE IN PRISON

The men in prison are treated with different levels of respect by different guards. As with all human beings, prisoners are entitled to their human rights. How should prisons respect these? In small groups, research the rights of prisoners in Ireland. Is this the case in all countries? In your groups, prepare a presentation that outlines the rights of prisoners, how they are treated in other parts of the world and how you think prisons should be run to make sure that prisoners are treated with dignity and given the chance to succeed in life once they are released.

3. TO SPY OR NOT TO SPY

On page 83, Michael asks his cousin Nancy to help with the effort against British rule. However, what he is asking her to do is incredibly dangerous. Is it irresponsible of him to ask his loved ones to put themselves in danger in this way? In groups of four, draw up four reasons why Nancy should help Michael and four reasons why she shouldn't. Make sure that these are well-supported with evidence. Be prepared to debate your responses with the whole class.

4. PICTURE PERFECT

Michael's description of Granard paints a beautiful, peaceful image. What is your favourite place on Earth? Write a short description, using similes and metaphors. The best examples of descriptive writing don't focus just on sights, but refer to other sensory details – what smells, tastes, sounds etc. are there?

5. DESCRIPTION OF DEVALERA

Re-read pages 95–105. What are your impressions of De Valera? Think about how he acts and speaks. How does Michael's opinion of him affect your opinion of him? Using at least three quotes from the text, analyse how the language used helps create these opinions.

6. FREEZE FRAMES

The scene of De Valera's escape is full of tension – but a lot of humour too. How, do you think, would the different people involved have felt? How would they have shown their feelings? In small groups, create four freeze frames to highlight the strange tension of this adventure.

7. DELETED SCENES

Visiting Brunswick Street Police Station to read top secret files hidden in a safe (described on pages 108 and 109) sounds incredibly dangerous. Why, do you think, did the writer choose not to give it a full scene in the book? In small groups, write a five-minute script that really creates the sense of drama and tension – are they nearly caught? What happens? Remember that you should include stage directions to show the positions of the characters and to direct the actors on what they should be doing with facial expressions, etc. Get another group in the class to perform your script. How well did they do? What could you improve about your script to make it more dramatic?

Part 3 War or Peace? Pages 112–192

SUMMARY

We next see Michael a few months later as he tries to avoid capture by the police. Dublin and Ireland have changed, and the British troops and members of the police are being treated with contempt by many ordinary people. Ireland is a country on a knife-edge, with underground preparations for war in full flow. Despite being almost solely

responsible for the network of supplies and information working underground across the country, Michael is still able to make time for friends like Kitty Kiernan. However, politics is never far from his mind.

As the new year progresses, life in Ireland has become more violent and filled with dangers. Actions by one side lead to reprisals from the other side. The British have brought in special forces to try to crush the rebellions of the Irish Republican Army, but they are very brutal and the normal people are terrified. Their actions are so horrible that people from all over the world are disgusted by the actions of these special forces – especially when the Auxiliaries open fire on the crowd at Croke Park.

Talks with the British are beginning to show signs of progress, but there is tension within the Irish ranks as Michael continually finds himself in conflict with Éamon de Valera. Things get even worse when Michael is sent to London to negotiate with the British over the future of Ireland, and returns to Ireland with a result with which many are unhappy. The Treaty leads to a split in Parliament and plunges Ireland into a brutal Civil War.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p. 114.** Why, do you think, did many of the police leave Ireland? Do you feel any sympathy for them? Do you think that they are entitled to feel bitter about the way they have been treated? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp 115–117.** What do you think about the network of spies and supplies in Ireland? What sort of person is Michael if he can control everything? Why, do you think, does he have a sore stomach? Do you have any sympathy for him? Why?
- **Read pp 121–122.** Do you think that Michael is right about why the British won't leave? Why do you think this? Do you think that the Irish are right to carry on? Why do you think this? What do you think about Michael's insistence that they also need Unionist support? Is he right?
- **Read pp 123–124.** What do you think of the way the Black and Tans are described? Do you have any sympathy for them? Do you think that the writer wants us to find some sympathy for them? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp 128–131.** What does Michael's reaction tell us about his personality? Do you think that he is doing the right thing? What advice would you give him? Why, do you think, should he act in this way?

- **Read pp 138–139.** Why, do you think, has the army targeted Michael’s family? Do you think that he should give up for the sake of his family? Why do you think this? What, do you think, would his mother say?
- **Read pp 157–158.** Do you think that Michael achieved the best that Ireland was going to get? What do you think of the statement: ‘It’s the freedom to get freedom.’ Is this true? Do you think that he should have done something else? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp 162–164.** What do you think of the behaviour of the people in the Dáil? How does Michael react? What does this tell us about him? Do you think that they were right to walk out of the Dáil? Why do you think this?
- **Read pp 169–172.** What are your impressions of Michael at this point? Do you think that he is trying to do the right thing? What would you say to those who are angry with him?
- **Read pp 177–179.** What do you think of the ending? Do you think that it fits with the rest of the book? How did it make you feel? Why, do you think, did the writer choose to include such beautiful descriptions of the countryside?

ACTIVITIES

1. DRAMA

The third section opens with Michael trying to evade capture by the police by clambering around on a roof. It’s a very tense and dangerous situation. In small groups, create three or four freeze frames to capture the drama and tension of the scene.

2. LOVE STORY

Who do you think Kitty should marry? Based on what Michael tells us about her, what sort of woman is she? In small groups, create a hot-seating scenario, where one person plays the role of Kitty. The rest of the group should ask her questions and give advice on who they think would bring her the most

happiness.

3. POLITICAL RALLIES

Why, do you think, has De Valera gone to America? Do you think that the people there will give him support? In small groups, research his visit and find some extracts from his speeches. Use these quotes to write your own persuasive speech in the style of De Valera asking the Americans for help. Remember to use as many persuasive techniques as you can – and to try hard to capture his personality.

4. DEBATE

Re-read the chapter titled ‘War.’ On page 124, we read the following statement: ‘The IRA, as the Dáil army was now known, committed many terrible deeds also.’ Do you agree with the idea that there are no winners in war? In small groups, create a list of four or five points in support of and four or five against this statement. Make sure you give examples (not just from this book – think about the wider world and history) to support your ideas. Be prepared to debate these with the whole class.

5. NEWS REPORT

In groups, imagine that you are a news team from another part of the world and you are covering the story at Croke Park. What has happened? What sorts of eye-witnesses will you interview? To understand fully what has happened, what background information does your audience need about the conflict and history of Ireland? Your report should be between 90 seconds and 3 minutes. Be prepared to present to the rest of the group. *Extension: You are an English news team. Will your audience be expecting to hear that the soldiers were in the right? How should you present the facts without causing too much controversy?*

6. FREEZE FRAME

On pages 135–137, Michael comes across a young boy being bullied by a group of

Auxies. Why, do you think, are they behaving in this way? In groups of four, create three freeze frames of the scene. In each frame, be prepared to explain what your character’s thoughts and feelings are and what their motivation is for their behaviour.

7. TENSION

As the novel progresses, the tension between Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera grows, building to breaking point in the chapter ‘Truce!’ What makes a good leader? As a class, decide on a list of criteria. Which of these men would make the better leader? Why do you think this? Write a speech to deliver to the rest of the class, outlining your choice and giving strong examples from the text (and from your own research). Remember to use persuasive techniques like short sentences, facts, rhetorical questions, etc.

8. VLOG

Imagine that you are a vlogger who has been given the opportunity to go back in time to the arrival of Michael Collins in London. Write a short two-minute script that explains who Michael is and why his arrival in London had people so excited. Include in it some interviews with key people in his life. Try to capture the excitement of the time.

9. LEGACY

Some people call Michael Collins Ireland’s ‘lost leader’. What do you think of the fact that De Valera took the oath after all? Do you think that Ireland would have been a different place if Michael Collins had been the leader? In small groups, research the rule of De Valera and then, using what you have learned about Michael Collins from this book, create a presentation that outlines what would have happened if Michael Collins had not been assassinated. Would Ireland have been much different?

Some other O’Brien Press Historical fiction covering Ireland’s revolutionary period: see www.obrien.ie/childrens/history-through-fiction for more

