



Exploring Senior Cycle Texts *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell

Please note: *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell is on the Prescribed Material for the Leaving Certificate English Examination in 2026 and 2027.

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons or as part of a unit of learning
- Students may wish to complete some tasks individually or in pairs/groups
- Tasks might be completed orally and/or in written format
- Students may also wish to engage in a think, pair, share activity for some tasks.

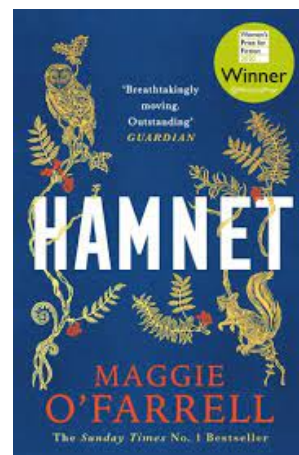


Image courtesy of The Irish Times

Pre-reading discussion:



1. In pairs discuss the title of the novel. What does it infer? Does it remind you of something?
2. Maggie O'Farrell chose not to include chapter titles for *Hamnet*. Do you think titles add to the structure of a novel or are they unnecessary?

Pre-reading collaborative activity:



- As a class listen to the following introduction to an interview with Maggie O'Farrell. Take note of the style of the introduction (music, tone, detailed descriptions, background etc.)

[Click here to access extract from podcast Desert Island Discs](#)

- In pairs, discuss what engaged you in the extract. Collaboratively make a list of the important elements to include in an introduction for a podcast.



Read the following extract, you may like to read individually, in pairs or as a class.

Extract from Hamnet



A boy is coming down a flight of stairs. The passage is narrow and twists back on itself. He takes each step slowly, sliding himself along the wall, his boots meeting each tread with a thud.

Near the bottom, he pauses for a moment, looking back the way he has come. Then, suddenly resolute, he leaps the final three stairs, as is his habit. He stumbles as he lands, falling to his knees on the flagstone floor.

It is a close, windless day in late summer, and the downstairs room is slashed by long strips of light. The sun glowers at him from outside, the windows latticed slabs of yellow, set into the plaster.

He gets up, rubbing his legs. He looks one way, up the stairs; he looks the other, unable to decide which way he should turn.

The room is empty, the fire ruminating in its grate, orange embers below soft, spiralling smoke. His injured kneecaps throb in time with his heartbeat. He stands with one hand resting on the latch of the door to the stairs, the scuffed leather tip of his boot raised, poised for motion, for flight. His hair, light-coloured, almost gold, rises up from his brow in tufts.

There is no one here.

He sighs, drawing in the warm, dusty air and moves through the room, out of the front door and on to the street. The noise of barrows, horses, vendors, people calling to each other, a man hurling a sack from an upper window doesn't reach him. He wanders along the front of the house and into the neighbouring doorway.

The smell of his grandparents' home is always the same: a mix of woodsmoke, polish, leather, wool. It is similar yet indefinably different from the adjoining two-roomed apartment, built by his grandfather in a narrow gap next to the larger house, where he lives with his mother and sisters. Sometimes he cannot understand why this might be. The two dwellings are, after all, separated by only a thin wattled wall but the air in each place is of a different ilk, a different scent, a different temperature.



Written Activities



You may like to complete these questions individually or as a pair. Remember the importance of oral discussion if doing the work collaboratively.

1. Characters are developed in different ways, here the boy's characters is developed through the narrator's description. What is inferred about the boy's personality based on his actions and decisions in the passage.
2. What could the scuffed leather tip of the boy's boot symbolize? Write a short paragraph on the boy's background based on this assumption.
3. Atmosphere is a key part to creating a setting. How does the description of the downstairs room contribute to the overall mood of the passage?
4. Writers cleverly use contrasts or comparisons to highlight a certain aspect of importance. Here the writer contrasts the boy's home to that of his grandparents. What affect does this have on the reader's experience?
5. What features of this passage make for good storytelling? Explain your answer with reference to the text.

Extended Writing Activity



Task: You are interviewing the writer/playwright of your single text for a podcast. Write the text of podcast in which you:

- reflect on the writer/playwright's background,
- defining moments of their family and professional life,
- a piece of advice they would offer to young people today.