

## Unit One SECTION A: THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AND VALUES

### PART TWO: THE RESPONSE TO THE QUEST

#### TOPIC 2.1 THE LANGUAGE OF SYMBOL

##### Procedure

##### *forms of symbolic language*

##### Research Assignment:

“When we feel something deeply, we have to express that feeling. For instance, ... if we care a lot about some people, we may hug them, kiss them, or give them gifts. If we feel angry, we may scream and pound the wall. All these actions are natural attempts to express inward feelings in outward ways.”

(T. Zanzig-B. Allaire, *Understanding Catholic Christianity*)

Distribute a selection of newspapers/ magazines/ photographs and ask them to identify an object, gesture or action that helps people to express feelings or ideas that are difficult to put into words. Give students time to complete the assignment and take feedback noting student responses on the chalkboard.

Discuss: How did the chosen object, gesture or action help people to express feelings or ideas that are difficult to put into words?

Distribute three sets of cards carrying the following words to a selection of students in the class:

INDIVIDUAL

GROUP

SOCIETIES

Ask the students to place cards on the symbols that carry meaning for the people named on the card.

Discuss: Do some symbols carry meaning for all three i.e. individuals, groups and societies?  
Why? Why not?  
What impact does this have on the individuals, groups and societies?

Study pictures in *Student Work*: SYMBOLIC ACTION & GESTURES or THE GROUP (JCRE Section D Part 4)  
And give students time to complete the assignment.

Take feedback from the students' assignment.

Discuss: Describe the feelings or attitudes being expressed by each of the people in the sketch?  
Does each sketch communicate the same feelings or attitudes to everyone in the class?  
Why? Why not?

Take feedback from the students and conclude identifying the way in which a symbol can have more than one meaning.

##### *the importance of symbol in the formulation of responses to the question of life and the meaning of life & the power of symbolic language and its impact on individuals, groups and societies*

Research Assignment: Pick a rite of passage birth, death etc.  
Describe two symbolic objects, actions or gestures that are used to mark this rite of passage and explain the meaning of each.

Give students time to complete the research assignment and take feedback.

Discuss: Why do people use symbols to mark such a moment in life?

Read *Student Work*: DEATH - RITES ASSOCIATED WITH THE FOLLOWING WORLD RELIGION

Brainstorm: What symbols do people in these world religions use to mark a death?

Take feedback from the students and note points on the chalkboard.

Discuss: What does the use of these symbols show about the meaning of death in their tradition?

Read *Student Work: The Epic of Gilgamesh* - one of the earliest accounts of a struggle to find meaning in the face of death.

Discuss: What does this story show about the author attitude to death?

Take feedback from the students and conclude by explaining that the symbol of “ascent” is used in many civilizations to mark a breakthrough to a different level of existence. Death, for example, is about transcending the human state and passing to the beyond. Typically, the journey to some ‘higher sphere’ is depicted or understood as an upward journey, a trudge up a mountain path, a grappling.

- Ø In Indian myth, the first person to die, Yama, leads others through the mountain passes.
- Ø In Egypt, Ra uses a ladder to climb from earth to heaven.
- Ø Australian aborigines spoke about a great tree which souls climbed to get to heaven. Reaching heaven, then, is an ascent:
- Ø In religious texts this symbol of ascent appears frequently - Jacob’s ladder, Mohammad seeing a ladder rising from the temple, St. John of the Cross depicts mystical perfection as the ascent of Mount Carmel.

(*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* - Mircea Eliade)

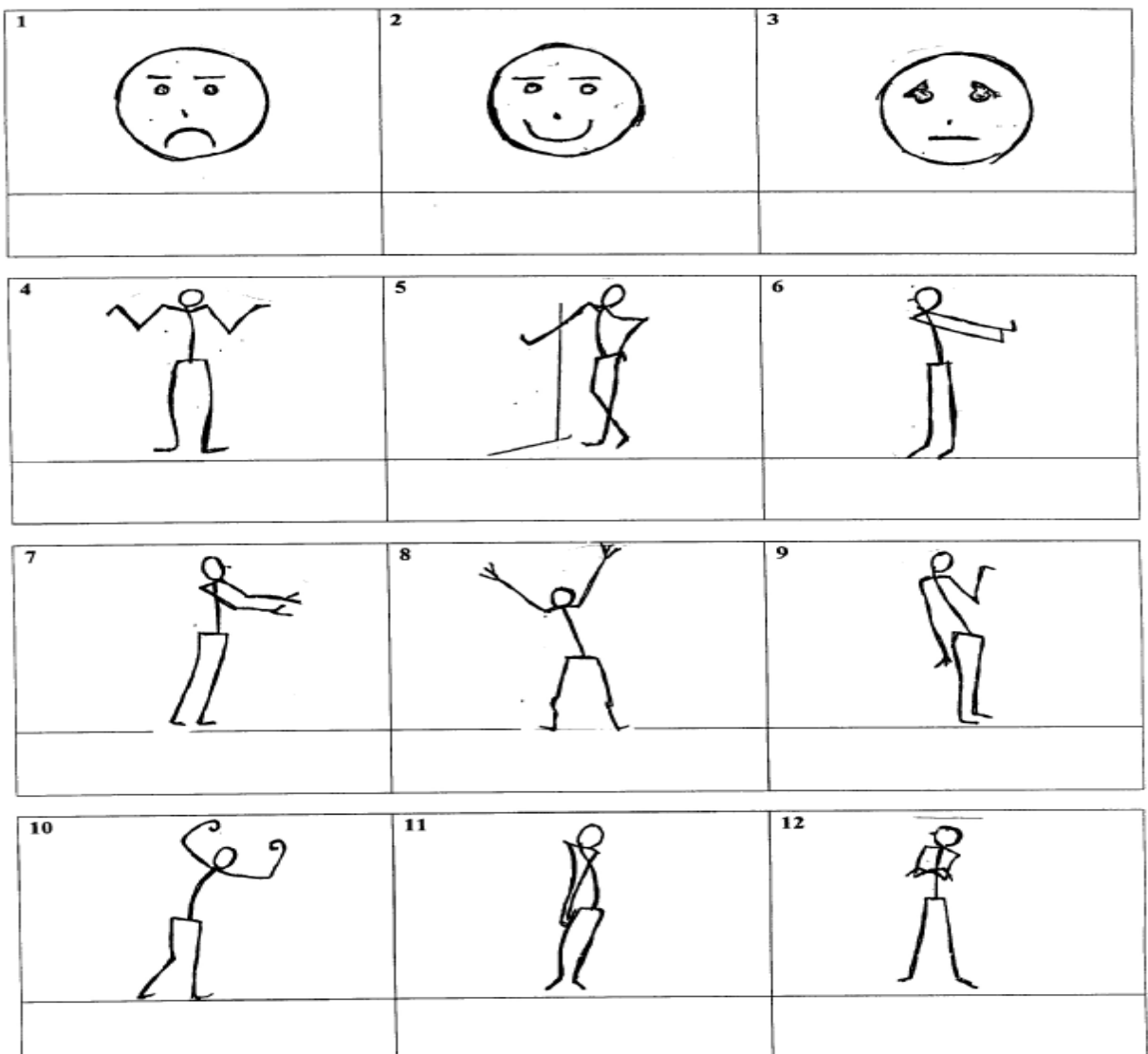
Resources which teachers have suggested include:

*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* - Eliade, M. (1976) London: Fontana Library, Collins, 5<sup>th</sup> Impression.

*Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* Frankfurt, H. (1974) London: Penguin Books - chapters 1, 2 and 7.

*Student Work: SYMBOLIC ACTION & GESTURES*

Describe the feelings or attitudes being expressed by each of the people in the sketch?



Student Work: DEATH - RITES ASSOCIATED WITH THE FOLLOWING WORLD RELIGIONS

**Buddhism**

According to the teachings of Buddhism, death is not to be feared, as it is only a stepping-stone in the journey towards Nirvana. When someone dies in the Buddhist community, the body is washed carefully. It is laid in a wooden coffin and adorned with flowers. The coffin is carried in a procession to the local Sangha or temple shrine. Gifts of food are taken for the monks and nuns and offerings of flowers are prepared for puja at the shrine. In some communities, the coffin is set down in a prominent position and surrounded by all the flowers and gifts brought by family and friends. The monks and nuns lead the gathering in puja and there may be a sermon on the teachings of the Buddha on death and rebirth. Then the family prepare food and offer it to the monks and nuns. Family and friends share a meal together. The ceremony may give the impression of being more like a festival than a funeral. Friends and relatives greet each other and signs of grief are not displayed. The bereaved hope that the deceased will be reborn in a better life and progress on their journey to Nirvana. The body is later cremated and the ashes collected. Usually they are scattered into the waters of a lake or river or into the sea.

**Hinduism**

Hindus cremate their dead. The body returns to the elements in the form of ashes and the cremation fire ensures the release of the spirit. Sometimes the funeral pyre is built in the open air. When a Hindu dies the body is washed, anointed with sandalwood paste and dressed in clean clothes. One of the sons of the family, often the eldest, is responsible for the arrangements of the cremation. Offerings, too, are prepared including sandalwood, sweet smelling incense and ghee. The body is carried to the pyre and friends and relatives gather round. The priest may be present to recite mantras or prayers. The fire is lit and ghee is poured over the wood to ensure that it burns vigorously. Later the ashes are gathered up and scattered on the waters of the local river. Many Hindus try to take the ashes to the sacred River Ganges. It is said these holy waters can wash away bad karma and help the soul attain moksha.

**Islam**

In the Islamic tradition the body is buried as soon as possible after death. Muslims believe that everyone will be raised from the dead. It is for this reason that the body is not destroyed by cremation but is shown great respect. The body is washed three times as if for prayer and then all over with soap and water. It is anointed with perfume and wrapped in three pieces of white cloth. The body is then laid in a coffin on its left side. The coffin is carried to the mosque and is placed so that the body faces Makkah. Prayers are said and the first chapter of the Qur'an is repeated. The coffin is taken to the cemetery for burial. Excessive grief is discouraged as it is presumed that someone who dies as an observant Muslim will go to Paradise. To overdo mourning seems to show mistrust in God's love and mercy. Muslims believe that it is important for sons and daughters to pray for their parents after they have died, and to remember them and to visit their graves.

**Judaism**

When some Jews first hear of the death of a close relative they make a tear in their clothes as a sign of grief. Friends and family light a special candle in a glass holder and place it beside the dead person as a sign of respect. They stay with the body until burial. Burial of the dead is required by the orthodox tradition. Some liberal and reform communities allow cremation. The burial usually takes place within twenty-four hours of death. The body is washed and wrapped in a white shroud and put into a plain wooden coffin. There are no flowers or wreaths. Family and friends attend the service at the grave. Often women do not attend the funeral service and in Orthodox communities, women are encouraged not to. The burial ends with a prayer recited by members of the close family in praise of God and his goodness. The burial is followed by a week of solemn mourning for the close family. They stay away from work and are visited by friends and relatives bringing food so that they do not have to shop or cook. The mirrors in the house are covered. Soft shoes are worn about the house and a candle of remembrance is lit. On the anniversary of the death the family lights a candle in the synagogue and recites prayers that bless and praise the name of God.

*Student Work: The Epic of Gilgamesh*

The barmaid said to him, to Gilgamesh:  
Gilgamesh, where are you wandering to?  
You will not find the life you seek.  
When the gods made mankind,  
They set death aside of men,  
But they kept life in their own hands.

So, Gilgamesh, do you fill your belly,  
Be happy day and night,  
Take pleasure every day,  
Day and night dance and play-  
Wear clean clothes,  
Wash your head, bathe in water,  
Attend to the child who holds your hand,  
Let your wife be happy with you.  
This is what man's lot is.

**TOPIC 2.2 THE TRADITION OF RESPONSE**

**Procedure**

*myth and early cosmologies*

Brainstorm: What is a myth?

Take feedback and note answers / examples given by the students on the chalkboard.

Read *Student Work*: The Dream of Oenghus or the story of “Children of Lir”

Or describe a myth students are familiar with e.g. Santa Claus; Lord of the Rings; Cúchulainn etc.

Describe the framework of the chosen myth.

Discuss: What is the message in the chosen myth? Is the message true?

Are the details or framework of the chosen myth true?

If someone asked you is the chosen myth totally false / untrue, what would you say?

Present students with the following quotation:

“A myth is a story that may contain historical fact or may be entirely fictitious. Even when it is entirely fiction however a myth is never a falsehood. The reason is that a myth’s purpose is to report revelation- not history or scientific fact – in a way that listeners can understand.... Myths then are accepted, effective ways of expressing truth.”

(Great Religions of the world – Sr. L. Pastva St. Mary’s Press)

Discuss: How is this definition true of the myth you referred to earlier?

*Written Assignment*: Outline three myths from ancient cultures and explain how they attempt to answer key questions about the meaning of life. e.g.

Read *Student work*: The Epic of Gilgamesh – Tells of King Gilgamesh’s failed search for immortality. It summarizes the basic view of the Babylonians that life on earth was more important than concern about the afterlife.

Other e.g.

Ø The Genesis creation account – Speaks about the creation of the world and relationship between God and mankind.

Ø Etc.

### *evidence of religious and spiritual behaviour in ancient societies*

View video: e.g. *In Search of Ancient Ireland – A Little Bird, Café Production and WNET 2001*

Assignment: Describe evidence from ancient Ireland of religious behaviour associated with any of the following:

Ø the burial of the dead

Ø sacred art and artefacts

Ø rites of passage and initiation

Research Assignment: Investigate what evidence Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth - passage graves reveal of religious and spiritual behaviour in ancient Ireland.

Refer students to: ‘In Search of Newgrange: Long Night’s Journey into Day’, - Purcell, B. (1985) in Kearney, R. ed. *The Irish Mind* Dublin: Wolfhound Press 39 – 55 and 319 – 323.

Give Students time to complete the research and present their findings to the whole class.

Take feedback and conclude referring to the following points:

Among the symbols uncovered at Newgrange are those of place and time, the symbols of partnership or marriage, the symbols of belonging to a cosmic oneness, and the symbol of passing through death to the heart of being. The notion of passage from one form of being to another seems to be a constant in world mythologies and religions. It gives expression to a complex set of experiences such as the passage from darkness to light, from the womb to the world, from life to death, to a new existence after death. In particular, myths associated with the symbol of passage are linked to a journey to the centre, where the centre is seen as paradise, the place where heaven and earth meet.

### *the sense of the sacred & spirituality in contemporary culture*

Read extracts from current research on religious belief and practice e.g. Time magazine article 16/06/03: O Father Where Art Thou? Etc.

Discuss: What evidence is there from this article of the sense of the sacred and spirituality in Europe 2003?

Why do people think it important to have religious ceremonies at births, marriages and death?

Take feedback from the students and conclude that recent statistics shows evidence of a marked reluctance on the part of secular Europe to ignore the sacred character of key events in life e.g. the very high percentage of

adults who think it important to have religious ceremonies at births, marriages and death (European Values Study 1999).

### *key people in the humanist tradition*

Read article *Secular Humanism* (e.g. Kairos Mar/Apr'81 etc.)

- Questions:
- What does humanism want for all mankind?
  - What is the only authority that humanists accept?
  - What is the humanist's view of the world?
  - What is the humanist's view on God and the afterlife?

Read / look up *one* of the following:

- *Student Work*: KEY PEOPLE IN THE HUMANIST TRADITION
- Humanism in the Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy at [www.rep.routledge.com](http://www.rep.routledge.com)
- Article on CAMUS – (Kairos Nov'80 etc.)

- Discuss:
- What effect did the war have on Camus' thinking?
  - What conclusion is to be drawn from his story of "The Plague"?
  - For Camus what is the meaning of authentic living?

*Individual / Group Research Assignment:*

Select one of the following: Erasmus (1466 – 1536); Karl Marx (1818 – 1883); Albert Camus (1913 – 1960)

Prepare a presentation on their life story and briefly outline one key idea of their teaching.

Give students time to complete their research assignment and make their presentation to the whole class.

Take feedback and conclude with reference to how the differences between these three philosophers remind us of the broad character of the Humanist tradition.

### *the meaning of atheism and agnosticism*

Read *Student Work*: ATHEIST AND AGNOSTICISM

Give students time to complete the written assignment.

Take feedback from the students and conclude by noting a definition on the chalkboard:

Atheist: someone who believes there is no God

Agnostic: someone who is not sure if there is a God. There may be a God but there is not convincing evidence for or against the existence of God.

Or refer to definitions on the LOGOS web site [www.materdei.ie/logos](http://www.materdei.ie/logos). in section D, part five under the heading of 'The Challenges to Faith'.

- Discuss:
- Atheists believe there is no God -  
How might this affect the way an atheist looks at birth, serious illness and death?
  - Agnostic are not sure if there is a God -  
How might this affect the way an agnostic looks at birth, serious illness and death?

### *Assessment Questions*

1. The building of the pyramids in Egypt is an example of religious behaviour in an ancient society. Give two more examples that provide evidence of religious behaviour in ancient society.
2. Give an example from contemporary culture of a song that shows the sense of the sacred? In answering this question you should quote some lines from the song to illustrate your answer.

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*Resources which teachers have suggested include:*

Meeting the living God – W. J. O'Malley Paulist Press

Great Religions of the world – Sr. L. Pastva St. Mary's Press

How to Understand God – D. Morin pages 98

The Mystery of God – D. Forristal

Teachers' guidelines and resource materials - The Mystery of God – Brid Greville

'In Search of Newgrange: Long Night's Journey into Day', - Purcell, B. (1985) in Kearney, R. ed. The Irish Mind Dublin: Wolfhound Press 39 – 55 and 319 – 323.

'Is Atheism Increasing? Ireland and Europe Compared', - Fahey, T. Cassidy. E. ed. (2002) Measuring Ireland: Discerning Values and Beliefs Dublin: Veritas p.46–66.

<http://www.question.com/Index.jsp> CRD=cosmology&OFFID=se1

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmology-theology/>

<http://www.aquinasonline.com/Topics/5ways.html>

<http://www.secularhumanism.org/>

<http://www.humanism.org.uk/>

<http://answers.org/apologetics/atheism2.html>

### *Student Work: The Dream of Oenghus*

Oenghus was asleep one night, when he saw a girl coming towards him as he lay on his bed. She was the loveliest that had ever been in Ireland. Oenghus went to take her hand, to bring her to him in his bed. As he looked, she sprang suddenly away from him; he could not tell where she had gone. He stayed there till morning and he was sick at heart. The apparition which he had seen, and had not talked with, made him fall ill. No food passed his lips. She was there again the next night. He saw a lute in her hand, the sweetest that ever was; she played a tune to him, and he fell asleep at it. He remained there till morning, and that day he was unable to eat. He passed a whole year while she visited him in this way, so that he fell into a wasting sickness. He spoke of it to no one. So he fell into wasting sickness, and no one knew what was wrong with him. The physicians of Ireland were brought together; they did not know what was wrong with him in the end. They went to Fínghen, Conchobhar's physician, and he came to him. He would tell from a man's face what his illness was, and would tell from the smoke which came from the house how many people were ill in it.

He spoke to him aside. 'Ah, unhappy plight!' said Fínghen, 'you have fallen in love in absence.' 'You have diagnosed my illness,' said Oenghus. 'You have fallen into a wretched state, and have not dared to tell it to anyone,' said Fínghen. 'You are right,' said Oenghus; 'A beautiful girl came to me, of the loveliest figure in Ireland, and of surpassing form. She had a lute in her hand, and played it to me every night.' 'No matter,' said Fínghen, 'It is fated for you to make a match with her. Send someone to Boann (Goddess of the river Boyne) your mother, that she should come to speak with you.'

They went to her, and Boann came then. 'I am attending this man,' said Fínghen, 'a serious illness has fallen upon him.' They told his story to Boann. 'Let his mother take care of him,' said Fínghen; 'a serious illness has fallen on him. Have the whole of Ireland scoured to see if you find a girl of this figure which your son has seen.'

They spent a year at this. Nothing like her was found. Then Fínghen was called to them again. 'No help has been found in this matter,' said Boann. Said Fínghen, 'Send to the Daghdhae, that he should come to speak with his son.' They went to the Daghdhae, and he came back with them. 'Why have I been summoned?' 'To advise your son,' said Boann; 'it is as well for you to help him, for it is sad that he is perishing. He is wasting away. He has fallen in love in absence, and no help is to be found for him.' 'What is the use of talking to me?' said the Daghdhae, 'I know no more than you do.' 'More indeed,' said Fínghen, 'you are the king of the fairy folk of Ireland. Send someone to Bodhbh, king of the fairies of Munster; his knowledge is noised throughout Ireland.'

They went to him. He welcomed them. 'Welcome to you, men of the Daghdhae,' said Bodhbh. 'That is what we have come for,' 'Have you news?' said Bodhbh. We have; Oenghus the son of the Daghdhae has been wasting away for two years.' 'What is the matter with him?' said Bodhbh. 'He has seen a girl in his sleep. We do not know where in Ireland is the girl whom he has seen and loved. The Daghdhae bids you seek throughout Ireland for a girl of that figure and form.' 'She shall be sought' said Bodhbh, 'and let me have a year's delay to find out the facts of the case.'

They came back at the end of the year to Bodhbh's house at the Fairy Hill beyond Feimhen. 'I went round the whole of Ireland until I found the girl at Loch Béal Dragon, at Crotta Cliach, (The Galtee mountains) said Bodhbh. They went to the Daghdhae, and they were made welcome. 'Have you news?' said the Daghdhae. 'Good news; the girl of that figure which you described has been found. Bodhbh bids you let Oenghus come away with us to him, to know whether he recognises the girl when he sees her.' Oenghus was taken in a chariot to the Fairy Hill beyond Feimhen. The king had a great feast ready for them, and he was made welcome. They were three days and three nights at the feast. 'Come away now,' said Bodhbh, 'to know whether you recognise the girl when you see her. Even if you do recognise her, I have no power to give her to you, and you may only see her.'

They came then to the lake. They saw three times fifty grown girls, and the girl herself among them. The girls did not reach above her shoulder. There was a chain of silver between each couple; and a neck let of silver round her own throat, and a chain of refined gold. Then Bodhbh said, 'Do you recognise that girl?' 'I do indeed,' said Oenghus. 'I can do no more for you,' said Bodhbh. 'That is no matter, then,' said Oenghus, 'since it is she that I saw. I cannot take her this time. Who is this girl, Bodhbh?.' said Oenghus, 'I know, truly,' said Bodhbh, 'she is Caer Ibhornheith, daughter of Ethal Anbhuaíl from the fairy hill of Uamhan in the land of Connaught.'

Then Oenghus and his people set off for their own country. Bodhbh went with him, and talked with the Daghdhae and Boann at Bruigh Maic ind Óaig. They told them their news, and told how she seemed, in figure and form, just as they had seen; and they told her name and the name of her father and grandfather. 'We feel it to be discourteous that we cannot content you,' said the Daghdhae. 'What you should do, Daghdhae,' said Bodhbh, 'is to go to Ailill and Medhbh, for they have the girl in their province.'

The Daghdhae went till he reached the lands of Connaught, with three score chariots in his company. The king and queen made them welcome. They spent a full week banqueting round the ale after that. 'What has brought you?' said the king 'You have a girl in your country,' said the Daghdhae, 'and my son has fallen in love with her, and has become sick. I have come to you to find out whether you would give her to the lad.' 'Who?' said Ailill. 'The daughter of Ethal Anbhuaíl.' 'We have no power over her,' said Ailill and Medhbh, 'if we had she should be given him.' 'This would be good-let the king of the fairy hill be summoned to you,' said the Daghdhae. Ailill's steward went to him. 'You have been ordered by Ailill and

Medhbh to go to speak with them.' 'I will not go,' said he, 'I will not give my daughter to the son of the Daghdhae.' That is told to Ailill; 'He cannot be made to come, but he knows why he is summoned.' 'No matter,' said Ailill, 'he shall come, and the heads of his warriors shall be brought with him.' At that, Ailill's household troops and the men of the Daghdhae rose up against the fairy hill, and overran the whole hill. They brought out three score heads, and the king, so that he was in captivity at Cruachu. Then Ailill said to Ethal Anbhuaile, 'Give your daughter to the son of the Daghdhae.' 'I cannot,' said he, 'her magic power is greater than mine.' 'What is this great magic power she has?' said Ailill. 'Easily told; she is in the shape of a bird every other year, and in human shape the other years.' 'What year is she in the shape of a bird?' said Ailill. 'It is not for me to betray her,' said her father. 'Off with your head, unless you tell us!' said Ailill. 'I will not hold out any longer,' said he. 'I will tell you,' said he, 'since you are so persistent about her. Next All Hallows she will be at Loch Béal Dragon in the shape of a bird, and wonderful birds will be seen with her there, there will be three times fifty swans around her; and I have made preparations for them.' 'I do not care, then,' said the Daghdhae; 'since you know her nature, do you bring her.'

Then a treaty was made between them, between Ailill and Ethal and the Daghdhae, and Ethal was let go. The Daghdhae bade them farewell and came to his house and told his news to his son. 'Go next All Hallows to Loch Béal Dragon, and call her to you from the lake.' Oenghus went to Loch Béal Dragon. He saw three times fifty white birds with their silver chains, and curls of gold about their heads. Oenghus was in human shape on the brink of the lake. He called the girl to him. 'Come to speak to me, Caer!' 'Who calls me?' said Caer. 'Oenghus calls you.' 'I will go, if you will undertake on your honour that I may come back to the lake again.' 'I pledge your protection,' said he.

She went to him. He cast his arms about her. They fell asleep in the form of two swans, and went round the lake three times, so that his promise might not be broken. They went away in the form of two white birds till they came to Bruigh Maic ind Óaig, and sang a choral song so that they put the people to sleep for three days and three nights. The girl stayed with him after that.

*(Translated by Kenneth Jackson)*

#### *Student Work: The story of "Children of Lir"*

Once upon a time there lived a king called Lir who had four children; a daughter named Fionnuala and three sons called Aodh, Fiacra and Conn. Their mother the queen was dead, and the children were sad because they missed her terribly. They missed the stories she used to tell them, the games she used to play, and the songs she sang at bedtime as she hugged them to sleep. The king saw that his children were sad and needed a mother, so he decided to marry again. His new bride was called Aoife. She was beautiful, but she was not the kind-hearted person the king thought she was.

Aoife grew jealous of the four children because their father loved them so much. She wanted the king all to herself, so she planned to get rid of the children. She asked a druid to help her, and together they thought up a terrible spell. In the castle grounds there was a lovely lake which the children spent most of their time playing beside. One day Aoife went with the children to the lakeside. As they played in the water, she suddenly pulled out a magic wand and waved it over them. There was a flash of light and the children vanished. In their place were four beautiful white swans. One of the swans opened its beak and spoke with Fionnuala's voice: "Oh, what have you done to us? She asked, in a frightened voice." "I have put a spell on you." Replied Aoife. "Now everything you have will be mine. You will be swans for nine hundred years. You will spend three hundred years on this lake, three hundred years on the Sea of Moyle and three hundred years on the Isle of Glora. Only the sound of a church bell can break the spell."

When the children did not come home that evening, the king went to look for them by the lake. As he came near, four swans swam up to him. He was amazed when they began to call out. "Father, father" they cried, "we are your children. Aoifa has placed a terrible magic spell on us." The king ran back to the castle and pleaded with Aoife to change the swans back into children, but she refused. Now he saw how selfish she was and banished her from the kingdom. Lir promised a reward to anyone who could break the spell, but nobody knew how. Lir spent the rest of his life beside the lake, talking to his children, until he grew old and died. The swans were heartbroken. They no longer talked or sang, and nobody came to see them.

Three hundred years passed and it was time for the swans to move to the cold and stormy Sea of Moyle between Ireland and Scotland. The poor swans were tossed about by the wild waves and dashed against sharp rocks. It was a harsh life with little food and the years passed slowly. When the time came for them to fly to the Isle of Glora, the swans were old and tired. Although it was warmer on the island and there was lots of food, they were still very lonely. Then one day they heard the sound they had waited nine hundred years for. It was the sound of a church bell. The bell was ringing in the tower of a little church. An old man, called Caomhóg, stood outside. He was amazed to hear swans talking and listened to their sad story in astonishment. Then he went inside his church and brought out some holy water, which he sprinkled on the swans while he prayed. As soon as the water touched them, the swans miraculously began to change into an old, old woman and three old, old men. Lir's children were frightened. Caomhóg told them about God and his love for all people. They no

longer felt scared. Fionnuala put her arms around her brothers and all four old people fell to the ground, dead. Caomhóg buried them in one grave. That night he dreamed he saw four swans flying up through the clouds and he knew that the children of Lir were at last on their way to Heaven to be with their mother and father again.

*Questions:*

In what sense can the story of the “Children of Lir” be described as a myth?

If someone asked you is the “Children of Lir” totally false / untrue, what would you say?

Besides the framework is there a meaning or message to the story of the “Children of Lir”? Explain your answer.

*Student Work:* KEY PEOPLE IN THE HUMANIST TRADITION

*Karl Marx* was born at Trier on 5th May 1818. His father and mother were of Jewish origin, but in 1824 the family became Protestant. Later on Marx totally rejected all forms of religion. Marx held the view that there have always been two opposing classes in society, the smaller class (the wealthy people), who exploit; and the larger class (the poor people), who are exploited. This leads to conflict between the two classes. The exploiting class want to hold on to their privileged and domineering position, and so they refuse to allow the exploited class to share their wealth. However, the exploited class want to change things, so that they can have a fairer share of wealth. In the end, the exploited class will have to revolt violently against the dominant class, to get a fairer share of wealth. But the exploited are reluctant to do this. Marx suggested the exploiting class invented God to help them maintain their domineering position. If they could claim that God gave them the right to be wealthy, then the poor might remain poor. And this ruse of the wealthy was successful. The exploited class were willing to believe in God and his love. This belief helped them. They could put up with misery and exploitation in this life if they believed that, after death, they would enjoy happiness in heaven, and the exploiters would go to hell and suffer. Marx thought the poor should have challenged the rich people; that the poor should have tried to get a better life now on earth. Instead, the poor willingly believed in God, and they accepted the help of priests to worship God. They thought that God wanted them to suffer in this life. So God was a consolation to them in their misery. He was their 'opium'. The goal of Marxism is the elimination of the problem of evil from human history. The classless state is saviour and judge. All man's suffering will be justified by the eventual arrival of the classless paradise.

*Albert Camus* (1913-1960) was a man preoccupied with the contrast between life's undeniable beauty and hopefulness and death's inevitable negation of both. Should we let the beauty tempt us to hope for a divine immortality, or should we recognize that death allows us only despair? Camus' basic insight is that of the tragedy of existence, which is expressed most painfully through the suffering of children, the most atrocious image of evil. That is his proof that God does not exist. To Camus of all the evils of mankind hope is "the most dreadful evil of all." And the cruellest burden man has to carry is his own intelligence. The intelligence, by its very nature, demands meaning in a world where there is no meaning. It is a world "in which the impossibility of knowledge is established, in which everlasting nothingness seems the only reality, and irremediable despair seems the only attitude." Faced with evil, without ever being discouraged, men and women can only revolt and constantly renew their efforts to reduce the injustice and sufferings around them. They must be like Sisyphus, the legendary figure in Greek mythology who was condemned by the gods constantly to push an enormous boulder up to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back again as soon as he arrived at the summit. Camus wrote a book entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus* that outlines the core of this absurdist doctrine. Sisyphus is Camus' metaphor for man: ceaselessly struggling to succeed, only to fail and fail and finally to die. Sisyphus is also the metaphor for lucidity within man. The realization of his revolt against the facts makes him take each day with utter lucidity, with total and full consciousness. By "lucidity" Camus means that man must be aware of everything going on around him. If every man is condemned to death at birth, each new day when he awakes alive is a reprieve from death. So he develops a passion for earthly life, no matter how ugly fate might make it. Lucidity requires living fully in each passing moment, a passionate commitment to fight the irresistible "plague" which is death. It is an indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything "given." In the end, however, man is still really only pretending. What good is it all? "The whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing." Camus knows this, and so he calls his philosophy absurdist. Man acts "as if" he attempts to create a meaningful life out of nothing by his courageous revolt against meaninglessness and his lucidity, wringing every bit of living out of the present moment. Camus recognized that even if human beings succeeded in eliminating all the evils which they caused, there would always be suffering because of their limited and mortal condition. So despite the prodigious progress of medicine, human beings will never be



totally invulnerable physically and psychologically. Human beings will always inevitably be confronted with sickness and death. That having been said, he maintained people must never give up this fight against suffering and evil.

(Adapted from How to Understand God – D. Morin pages 98)

*Student Work: ATHEIST AND AGNOSTICISM*

Read the following quotation from Macbeth:

*“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creep in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time.*

*And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death.  
Out, out, brief candle!  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more.*

*It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.”*

- Macbeth by William Shakespeare



Identify *one* of the arrows pictured above that you think would reflect the response of an atheist to this quotation from Macbeth. Give reasons for your choice.

Identify *one* of the arrows pictured above that you think would reflect the response of an agnostic to this quotation from Macbeth. Give reasons for your choice.

(Adapted from Meeting the living God – W. J. O’Malley Paulist Press)