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Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), a French artist, created this oil-on-canvas painting, circa 1861. Millet, who believed that potato planting is dignified work, asked this question: "Why should the work of a potato planter be less interesting or less noble than any other activity?" The painting is now owned by the Museum of Fine Arts (in Boston) via a gift (in 1917) from Quincy Adams Shaw through Quincy Adams Shaw, Jr., and Mrs. Marian Shaw Haughton. Click on the image for a better view.

Potatoes are not endemic to Ireland. Historians generally agree the Lake Titicaca region of South America was the place where the world's 4th most popular food was first grown.

Archeologists have found evidence that potato crops failed in ancient times just like they fail today. What made the Irish potato blight different? Why was the failure of one crop such a disaster?

To Irish potato-growing land renters, the potato was everything. It was both food and cash. Part of the crop was sold to pay the rent and buy what the family needed. The rest of the crop fed the family. There was very little, if any, crop diversity.

An Irish potato crop failure in 1845 would not merely harm a family's financial well-being. It would jeopardize that family's ability to provide for basic physical needs. And if the reason for the failure was a potato blight that affected the whole country, the negative impact could have national proportions.

That's just what happened to the Irish people between the years of 1845-1849.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/IRISH-POTATOES-Great-Hunger-Irish-Potato-Famine)

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Questions 2 Ponder

Is the Work of a Potato Planter Less Noble than Other Activities?

The French artist, Millet, poses an important - still relevant - question via one of his famous paintings: "Why should the work of a potato planter be less interesting or less noble than any other activity?"

In other words...who can say that the work of a potato-planting farmer is less-important or less-interesting than the work of anyone else?

Do you think Millet has a point? Explain your answer.

How important is the work of a potato-planter - or any other crop-planter - in today's world?

Could the rest of us live well without the work of people who plant, tend and harvest crops? Explain your answer.

Is There a Danger to Lack of Diversity?

When we use the word "diversity," we often think about people, but in 19th-century Ireland, the potato was

everything to Irish potato-growing families.

The Irish potato, to a potato-growing family, was both food and cash. Part of the crop was sold to pay the rent and buy what the family needed. The rest of the crop fed the family. There was very little, if any, crop diversity.

An Irish potato crop failure in 1845 would not merely harm a family's financial well-being. It would jeopardize that family's ability to provide for basic physical needs.

If the reason for the crop failure was a potato blight which affected the whole country, what impact would that have on Ireland?

What impact would it have on the Irish people?

Would there be a difference in impact between the potato-growing families and the rest of Ireland's people? Explain your answer.

Media Stream



Map Depicting the Lake Titicaca Region

image online, courtesy the apsnet.org website.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Map-Depicting-the-Lake-Titicaca-Region>



Potato Crop Failure in Ancient Times

Image online, courtesy the apsnet.org website.

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A Potato-Eating Family in County Kerry

Image online, courtesy Steve Taylor and the Vassar College website.

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