

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Objectives and Methodology.....	5
1. Irish History: The Great Famine.....	6
2. Irish Poetry.....	11
3. Great Famine Poems.....	13
3.1. “The Scar” (John Hewitt).....	13
3.2. “Famine, a Sequence” (Desmond Egan).....	17
3.3. “Give me Three Grains of Corn, Mother” (Amelia Blanford Edwards).....	21
3.4. “Skibbereen” (Traditional Poem).....	29
3.5. “Fields of Athenry” (Pete St. John).....	35
3.6. “Quarantine” (Eavan Boland).....	39
Conclusion.....	45
Primary sources.....	48
Works cited.....	49

Abstract

This paper analyses the importance that Irish history has in relation to Irish Literature, specifically in this case, a thorough investigation of the Great Famine and its impact upon Irish poetry. Moreover, I will scrutinise and explore my favourite poems of famous Irish poets who were inspired by the events of the Great famine, so as to further examine exactly how they paid a poignant tribute to this horrible chapter of Irish history. In regards to the layout and structure of this investigation, the paper is divided into two main parts: a theoretical one which will be used as a conceptual framework to compliment a practical part that will be carried out and performed afterwards. The main objective of the second part of this investigation is the exploration and appraisal of certain poems using the historical and literary features which have been highlighted in the first section, consequently garnering a greater understanding of the meaning the poems have, in accordance to their authors.

KEYWORDS: Irish Literature / Irish Poetry/ Irish History / The Great Famine / Ireland

Introduction

To begin to explore the issue of this assessment, which is “The Impact of the Great Famine upon Irish Poetry”, it is important to emphasise the link between the history and the literature of Ireland. Firstly, Irish history and Irish literature are thoroughly related; therefore, to fully comprehend the meaning of the literature in question, in this case Irish poetry, it is necessary to understand the history and its background that it draws its inspiration from. Ireland has considerable links between its history and its poetry; mostly this took the form of nationalistic themes aimed towards the oppressive foreign rule of The British Empire. However, these were not the only themes present in Irish poetry; the darkest periods of Irish history also gave fruit to some of the more beautiful and poignant tributes to the struggles and pain of its people. In terms of devastation, no period in Irish history was more harrowing than the Great Famine, of which the influences can still be seen in Irish poetry to this day.

The aim of this assessment is to investigate the links and correlations between the events of The Great Famine and its reflection that can be found in subsequent poetry. This will be done through the summarising of the events of the Great Famine, before analysing and dissecting certain poems by famous poets to showcase the impact the Great Famine left on their writings and to learn what conclusions can be drawn.

In regards to the structure and layout of the development of this assessment, it is divided into three main segments and a conclusion. The first segment is a summary of the historical events of the Great Famine in Ireland in order to provide a context and set a foundation for this research to be based upon. Next, the second part of this assessment is an investigation into the characteristics of Irish poetry influenced by the Great Famine, which can be seen to be present in the selected poetry of this research. In continuation, the third segment of this assessment

will be a total analysis of the following poems: “The Scar” written by John Hewitt, “Famine a Sequence” written by Desmond Egan, “Give me Three Grains of Corn, Mother” written by Amelia Blanford Edwards, “Skibbereen” which is a traditional Irish poem, “Field of Athenry” written by Pete St. John and “Quarantine” written by Eavan Boland. Lastly, a conclusion with my closing remarks and overall summing up will be written following this investigation.

Finally to conclude this introduction, I would also like to take the possibility to thank the “Universidade da Coruña” for giving me the opportunity to study this degree. Furthermore, I would like to thank my teachers and all the staff of the English Philology faculty who advised and assisted me, where I spent a period of four enjoyable years studying and learning from them. Last but not least, I would like to express my sincere gratitude towards my tutor Miguel Alonso Giráldez, who was there to help me every step of the way during the entire process of this project with his encouragement, his patience, his attention and advice, without his help and guidance none of this would have been possible.

Objectives and Methodology

The aims and objectives of this assessment are as follows:

- To investigate and obtain a greater knowledge of the history of The Great Famine in Ireland by researching the events that took place during this time.
- To examine and explore the characteristics and themes of Irish poetry that has been influenced by the events of The Great Famine.
- The conduction of an in-depth analysis of certain Irish poetry so as to acquire further knowledge of poetry inspired by The Great Famine.
- To connect both the history and literature in question in regards to the authors poems, whilst investigating and examining the meaning and the experiences that the poets depict to us through them.
- To showcase the impact of The Great Famine upon Irish poetry.

In accordance with the methodology that will be used to undertake and complete this essay, the majority of the research will be done through online web pages containing information relevant to this issue. In addition to this, several books from the university library from A Coruña and Santiago de Compostela will be utilised in regards to the investigation of this issue. During my year abroad as an Erasmus student in the academic year 2013/2014, I studied a module on Irish History which introduced me to this interesting field of study. Furthermore, I have continued to return to Ireland since the end of my Erasmus year which has been useful in the undertaking of this investigation.

1. Irish History: The Great Famine

The Great Irish Famine (An Gorta Mór) was a period of mass starvation, disease and emigration in Ireland taking place between the years 1845 and 1852 which came as a direct result of a devastating potato blight and an oppressive foreign force in Ireland. This dark period in Irish history would forever change the country by impacting profoundly upon its population, its political landscape and its cultural identity. Furthermore, it was a huge source of inspiration in Irish literature, one that can still be felt to this day.

By 1845, most people in Ireland no longer owned their land. The Irish countryside, with its green pastures and wonderful farmland, had been turned into English plantations. The native people of Ireland were subjected to legislative prejudice and discrimination through the enactment of the Penal Laws earlier in the 17th Century, which were designed to isolate and diminish the Irish people from all power in society with the aim of them remaining an inferior class of people living in poverty within the British Empire. One of the most vicious aspects of the Penal laws was the prevention and outlaw of Irish people to receive an education in any form whatsoever, or even for an Irish person to become a teacher. Consequently, illegal hidden schools protecting Irish education and culture were set up throughout the country by wandering unofficial teachers; these schools were given the name “Hedge Schools” and were extremely important in preserving the Irish culture. All of these mentioned aspects resulted in a population of people who had very little rights or social status, very little protection and who above all were downtrodden and oppressed with no hope of prosperity or identity. Fundamentally, this created the perfect conditions for the Great Famine to rampage throughout Ireland and decimate a nation of people.

The poverty stricken Irish people's diet consisted nearly completely of potatoes, with it also being the main and staple crop of the country. The potato blight is believed to have originated in North or South America; it later spread to Europe after being transported across the Atlantic in contaminated crops prior to the year 1845. Subsequently, the potato blight swept throughout the countries of Europe before finally reaching the mainland of Ireland in September 1845, when according to records the first signs of the disease were reported. When it reached Irish shores it devastated the potato crops, and put a nation on the brink of starvation. The potato crop failed year after year between the years 1845-1852 which meant there was no respite in the on-going mass starvation that occurred as a result. Furthermore, this increased the rampant spread of disease and infection due to nutrition deficiencies and the appalling conditions that were created as a result, such as overcrowding in search of food and work and hugely unsanitary and disease riddled environments of poverty and squalor where the people lived and travelled through.

This terrible situation was further compounded and severely worsened by the actions, or some would say the in actions of the British government, who at the time predominately adopted a laissez faire economical view when dealing with policy in Ireland. In the year 1846 the British government decided to repeal the Corn Laws of 1815 in the hope of providing a relief to the food shortage; however this proposition was ultimately scrapped in parliament as the British cared more for their business interests than the plight of Ireland. Instead, corn was imported from India to Ireland, not with the intention to provide free food to the masses suffering from starvation, but to control and stabilise the market price of food. Primarily to begin with, the importing of corn was successful in the sense that it helped to limit the destruction of the Famine, and lower the mortality rate in Ireland during the year 1846. However, this small effort of British aid was soon relinquished and ended after the changing of government in the

summer of 1846, the new government decided to suspend the previous policy of importing corn and opted to allow market forces to dictate the food situation in Ireland. Following the change in government, the inadequate relief effort was headed by the 38 year old Charles Trevelyan, who would become infamous in Irish history and more importantly in this context, in Irish poetry. Trevelyan embodied the British idea of Laissez faire, and held little pity for the plight of the Irish who he deemed inferior and a drain on the resources of the Empire, he believed that a hands off approach was necessary and that all the difficulties of the Famine would be resolved through natural market factors. It comes with little surprise then that during the whole duration of the Famine there was never any real food aid provided, as the British did not want to harm the business interests of its rich landlords and private companies that existed in Ireland. Throughout the years of the famine, food produced in Ireland would continue to be exported to the financial gain of the British Empire, while the population of Ireland continued to suffer through the mass food shortages and resulting starvation. In fact, the situation of the people of Ireland was so dire that they began to survive off the eating of nettles, roots, seaweed and even green grass, to name but a few.

This harrowing period of Irish history during the famine continued and subsequently the conditions and pain of the Irish people worsened. By the beginning of 1847 two crops of potatoes had now failed, this meant that for two years running the majority of Irish people were without the main crop they grew to sustain and feed themselves, and also that their farmland, which was their only source of livelihood was not producing any income. The land that Irish tenants rented from their British landlords was not yielding any profit, as a result a huge amount of people and families could not afford to pay their rent and were evicted unceremoniously and in some cases violently, from their lands. Unfortunately the weather of Ireland was extremely wet and cold, especially in winter. Furthermore, the majority of the

population had no warm clothes or shelter to protect them from the vicious elements, which only plummeted the situation into even worse levels of danger. Briefly in the summer of 1847, the British government set up soup kitchens to provide hot soup to the starving people of Ireland, over 3 million people per day were taking advantage of this charity by August 1847. However, again this compassion by the British Government was short lived as they ceded all production of the soup kitchens as they believed the potato crop of 1847 was about to be a successful one, even though no evidence whatsoever pointed to this assumption as being true. The people of Ireland living in squalor and deprivation were instead advised to look for work in the previously established “Workhouses of Ireland”, which were notorious for their cruel and inhumane conditions. The idea of the workhouses was a simple one, to provide food in return for labour. However, with Ireland now in the full depths of the Famine people now flocked to the workhouses in a frenzy which resulted in overcrowding and terribly unsanitary conditions where disease was rampant. At the beginning of the Famine there were a total of 128 workhouses in Ireland by the end of the Famine in 1852 this number was at almost 163. The issue of the Irish workhouses is dealt with in more detail in the poem “Quarantine” by Eavan Boland. The only other viable solution for survival in a lot of cases for the people of Ireland was emigration. Furthermore, the most common destinations were England, Canada, Australia and America. However, this path to salvation was not without its risks as the Irish emigrants escaping the horrific Famine had to jump headlong into a fresh horror, the notorious “coffin ships” which would deliver them to a new country and a new start. The boats that transported the masses of people who emigrated from Ireland were dubbed “coffin ships” because of the high mortality rate and death that accompanied the journeys that they chartered. In particular, the transatlantic journeys of the “coffin ships” to America were infamous for their overcrowding of poor desperate Irish people with little food, travelling in inhumane cramped conditions where death and disease were rampant. Those who were lucky

enough to survive the ordeal of the Famine's "coffin ships" would rarely ever make the journey twice, therefore never returning to their homeland or relatives that remained behind. It is estimated that during the period of the Famine over 1 million and half Irish people emigrated from Ireland, showcasing that it was not only death that decimated the population. The theme of emigration would go on to become a recurring theme in Irish literature.

During the horrific events of the Famine the Irish population fell by 20-25% with over 2 million inhabitants disappearing through either death or emigration. Although, some historians estimate the numbers to be much higher, due to the inaccurate nature of population figures recorded around that time. The most affected regions of Ireland by the Famine were the Western province of Connaught and the Southern province of Munster, where the town Skibbereen can be found. Even during the famine, Ireland continued to export nearly all its crops and livestock produce to the financial benefit of the British Empire; this exported food was more than enough to sustain the downtrodden population which had cultivated it.

The consequences of the Famine meant that Ireland was permanently changed forever. Its population was decimated and its language began to disappear as a lot of its native Gaeilge speakers had either died or emigrated as a result of the Famine. Politically it was seen as motivation for the establishment of many nationalistic groups and politicians such as the Fenians, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Home Rule League led by Charles Parnell. Freedom fighters such as Arthur Griffith, Padraig Pearse, Michael Collins, James Connolly and Eamon De Valera who was descended from Irish emigrants, all were heavily influenced by the events of the Great Famine. These individuals would one day play a pivotal role in the struggle for Irish independence, along with many other Irish people whose ancestors endured the darkest and most torturous period to ever take place in Irish history.

2. The characteristics of Irish Poetry influenced by the Great Famine

In this second section of the development I will be showcasing the characteristics of Irish poetry inspired by the harrowing events of the Great Famine. The characteristics I have chosen to concentrate on are: oppression, tribute, pride, anger, the loss of culture, and sorrow. All of the before mentioned characteristics are distinctly obvious when reading the poems that I have selected analyse in this investigation.

- Oppression: The people of Ireland have suffered from oppression as far back as their history dates dealings with the British Empire. The whole events of the Famine go hand in hand with the feelings of oppression felt by the Irish inhabitants initially caused by the Penal Laws, before manifesting in the ill treatment they received from the British over the centuries. The oppression is symbolised in the years of the Famine through the lack of food, starvation, poverty, and social class to name but a few. Overall, it is huge theme which is prevalent throughout all the poetry dedicated to the Famine and is of paramount importance when taking into account the motivation and feelings of the poets have behind their writings.
- Tribute: Another characteristic of the poetry of the Famine is the tribute that each poem represents for the struggles of the Irish people during this time. The writers of the poetry of the Famine are paying their respects and homage to the staunch nature of their ancestors in regards to the torturous pain they endured during this harrowing period of Irish history. The theme of tribute and homage can be seen especially in the poetry I have chosen for this assessment, where the writers talk of the sacrifices that the characters in these poems make and the pain they endure in fighting to survive and maintain their identity. Through these poems which are the ultimate tributes, these experiences will always be remembered and commemorated.

- Pride: Pride is a characteristic which epitomises the very nature of the poetry inspired by the Famine. Always when reading poetry of the famine, you can feel the fondness and pride the Irish people have for their country, their family and their culture. Furthermore, the writers of the poems are clearly proud of the actions of their ancestors who lived and died during the Great Famine, which is ultimately why it is such an important source of inspiration in their writings.
- Anger: A much darker characteristic of the poetry of the Famine, but one that cannot be ignored. The people of Ireland since the beginning of rule under the British Empire have expressed nothing but rage and anger towards their predicament. In regards to the Great Famine, there is huge anger felt towards the British Government and the Crown for allowing the horrific events that occurred to spiral out of control unchecked. In light of this, the anger that drips from every word composed in this poetry showcases that the poets feel and relate to this in a similar way.
- The loss of culture: Following the decimation and destruction of the Irish population during the Great Famine there was an unfortunate loss of the culture of Ireland. Primarily this took the form of the diminishing of the Irish language “Gaeilge” as a lot of the fluent speakers either died or emigrated during the events. Also, there was a loss felt in regards to music, literature and all the arts in general as so much of what was treasured by the people disappeared. This is lamented in numerous poems by the authors, however through their writings they in fact preserve and add to the glorious and enjoyable literature wealth that can be found in regards to Ireland.
- Sorrow: Finally, perhaps the most obvious characteristic of Irish poetry is sorrow, which ultimately cannot be escaped when discussing the Great Famine. The people of Ireland during the Famine suffered unprecedented grief and sorrow during a period of

extreme pain and loss. Traditional and contemporary poets alike completely embody and embrace this sorrow in all their writings whilst paying homage to the Famine.

3. Great Famine Poems

3.1. “The Scar” (John Hewitt)

There’s not a chance now that I might recover
one syllable of what that sick man said,
tapping upon my great-grandmother’s shutter,
and begging, I was told, a piece of bread;
for on his tainted breath there hung infection
rank from the cabins of the stricken west,
the spores from black potato-stalks, the spittle
mottled with poison in his rattling chest;
but she who, by her nature, quickly answered,
accepted in return the famine-fever;
and that chance meeting, that brief confrontation,
conscripted me of the Irishry forever.

Though much I cherish lies outside their vision,
and much they prize I have no claim to share,
yet in that woman’s death I found my nation;
the old wound aches and shews its fellow scar.

The title of this poem has a metaphorical sense, because the word “scar” represents the impact that The Great Famine left on the Irish population. Also, in the poem the author uses some keywords in relation to the suffering of the inhabitants of Ireland; some examples in the poem such as: sick, begging, a piece of bread, hung infection, stricken west, black potato-stalks, poison, rattling chest, famine-fever and confrontation.

The man who narrates this poem begins by saying “There’s not a chance now that I might recover”, which upon first glance signifies that he is already resigned to his inevitable fate. This can also symbolise the effects that The Great Famine left on him and the rest of the population of Ireland, and how it condemned a nation. However, we soon realise that he is in fact referring to a conversation that a plague riddled old man had, upon arriving at his great-grandmother’s house “There’s not a chance now that I might recover one syllable of what that sick man said, tapping upon my great-grandmother’s shutter,”. It is important to note the use of the words “recover” and “sick” as they set the scene for the plighted health of the Irish people during this time, interestingly “recover” is skilfully used by the poet to showcase the act of remembering whilst also correlating with sickness.

The poem continues with the description of how the “sick man” is begging and in search of food, due to the mass starvation currently occurring in Ireland “and begging, I was told, a piece of bread”. We then imagine a very dark and striking image in reference to the infection and plague that was rampant in Ireland at the time “for on his tainted breath there hung infection”. Furthermore, this image also paints a morbid picture of how the plague spread on the “tainted breath” of its people where “there hung infection”.

Next, we are given an insight through the poem of the most affected region of Ireland during the Famine, which is the western province of Connaught “from the cabins of the stricken west”. In the following line a vivid and dark image of the devastating potato blight that swept across Ireland can be seen in the reading of “the spores from black potato-stalks”. The aforementioned quote completely illustrates the impact the blight had on Ireland and the resulting crop failure of the country's staple food. The writer continues in this vein of using extremely dark and distressing imagery, to showcase the dangers Irish people faced from the

spread of disease and infection and how easily it was transmitted “the spittle mottled with poison in his rattling chest;”.

The poem now takes an even more tragic turn as we realise the real message and symbolism behind the poet's writing. The writer now portrays the hospitality and helpfulness that still remained in Irish culture even in the face of the most testing and agonizing of times. Whilst referring to the character of Irish people in general, the narrator also pays homage to his great-grandmother, by remarking “but she who, by her nature, quickly answered,”. Meaning that she quickly answered to the needs of the terribly sick old man who was begging at her house, and who he himself had probably all but given up hope for any help or salvation.

We now read of the heartbreaking loss of the writer's great-grandmother who selflessly sacrificed herself, so that she may help another who was more than likely already condemned to death, like so many other unfortunate souls during the famine. The woman was aware of the risks and fearlessly “accepted in return the famine-fever;” and all that came with it. Finally at the end of this stanza we see a hint of pride that the writer has in relation to his great-grandmother's actions and how this moment perhaps defined to him what the meaning to be Irish really stands for. The quote “and that chance meeting, that brief confrontation,” eloquently illustrates how random and unfortunate the writer feels that the events that contributed to the loss of his great-grandmother were. However, we also witness how this ingrained the feeling of being Irish to the author and how he embraced his identity “conscripted me of the Irishry for ever”.

As we come towards the end of this beautiful poem we see how the author has grieved and come to terms with the death of his great-grandmother. First, we learn that most of what the

author values and appreciates in his life is not noticed by the rest of the Irish population “Though much I cherish lies outside their vision,” or that perhaps it signifies that each individual has specific things that are only important and cherished by them, such as family. The second hypothesis is probably the more likely due to the nature of the next sentence “and much they prize I have no claim to share”. With this quote, the poet describes how he has no claim to feel sadness for what other people may have lost during the famine, even though in reality he does feel this suffering as it is an universal one shared by all of those who were affected during this dark period of Irish history.

Finally, we observe how the poet came to terms and found solace in the death and terrible loss of his great-grandmother. A theme of patriotism now enters the writing of the author as he draws to a close, this chilling yet breathtaking poem of loss and pain. The author now explains how from the shattering loss of his great-grandmother he embraced what it is to be Irish and now truly recognised and found comfort in his nationality and homeland “yet in that woman’s death I found my nation;”. However, the poem ends on a note of respect and tribute to his great-grandmother describing how he will forever carry the mark of her death, never forgetting her as years pass by “the old wound aches and shews its fellow scar”.

In conclusion, this poem is a prime example of the loss that the average Irish person felt and experienced during the Famine. It eloquently summarises the pain that will always be associated with this harrowing period of Irish history whilst also vividly describing how disease and infection rampaged throughout a country. Furthermore, to sum up, this wonderful piece of literature fully illustrates the marks or “scars” that were left on the surviving population following this excruciating and agonizing famine and the suffering that came with it.

3.2. “Famine, a sequence” (Desmond Egan)

1.

the stink of famine
hangs in the bushes still
in the sad celtic hedges

you can catch it
down the line of our landscape
get its taste on every meal

listen
there is famine in our music

famine behind our faces

it is only a field away
has made us all immigrants
guilty for having survived

has separated us from language
cut us from our culture
built blocks around belief

left us on our own
ashamed to be seen
walking out beauty so

honoured by our ancestors

but fostered now to peasants
the drivers of motorway diggers
unearthing bones by accident
under the disappearing hills

In this poem, the Irish contemporary poet Desmond Egan instantaneously sets the theme and setting of his writing: The Irish famine and its lingering consequences that will never truly go away or leave a scarred nation of people. Titled as simply the “Famine, a sequence” the poem deals with how the impact of the Famine is still affecting the people of Ireland, causing the survivors to feel guilty for having survived, whilst also showcasing the reflection of the Famine in Irish culture and in particular, literature.

The poem begins with the description of the terrible stench that the famine left everywhere in Ireland and how it lingers on throughout the country and landscape “the stink of famine hangs in the bushes still”. Next we are introduced to a very Irish concept and an idea of importance known as a “hedge school” (19th century). These were rural unofficial schools taught in by travelling Irish teachers in the countryside next to a hedge or a ditch because they had to be hidden from the English due to the fact that they prevented the Irish from studying their own language and culture. It is with great despair that the author writes of the impact the famine had “in the sad Celtic hedges”, in all probability these important centres of Irish learning that remained to promote a country’s endangered and threatened culture were decimated with teachers and pupils alike lost due to the disaster of the potato failure.

Next, we can see the poet describing how easy it was to succumb to the illness and disease all around the country “you can catch it, down the line of our landscape”. This portrays the fact

that people throughout Ireland were dying from disease induced by malnutrition and unsanitary conditions caused by the events of the Great Famine. Furthermore, the poet discusses the guilt of the people who were still alive and the stress they felt with the ordeal of searching for food in the hope of nourishment “get its taste on every meal”. Even when eating the people of Ireland are still reminded of the terrible plight they find themselves in.

As the poem progresses the poet Desmond Egan now begins to artfully discuss the how the Great famine has influenced Irish culture and literature. The Great Famine is present in Irish history, literature, and even in its music “listen there is famine in our music”. Nowadays, it can be seen that a huge amount of authors and musicians have written about this terrible period of their peoples history. The poem continues with the thought provoking and blunt image that the famine is “behind our faces”. Meaning that the emotional scars and effects of the famine still remain on the people of Ireland, who suffered so much at the expense of this callous and unforgiving period in Irish history. Furthermore it shows that they still remember the pain of the famine.

In the next stanza, the poet begins to talk about the worries of the survivors of the famine that it could possibly occur again and that there is not much to prevent that terrible idea from happening “it is only a field away”. The author than speaks of the mass emigration that then occurred as a result of the harrowing famine “has made us all immigrants”. Finally he speaks of the guilt the emigrants feel in abandoning Ireland in the search of salvation, and that they feel for those who passed away in their homeland “guilty for having survived”.

In the following stanza, the poet now discusses the spiritual and cultural loss as a result of the famine. He first describes how, due to events of the famine the Irish language was decimated and to this day has not truly recovered “has separated us from language”. This loss of the Irish language occurred due to the mass deaths of people as a result of starvation and disease and

also because of emigration. Furthermore, the author speaks of the loss of Irish culture and how they have been separated from it for the same reasons “cut us from our culture”. Finally, we see the writer speak of how the Irish people lost faith in their religion and their beliefs as they just couldn’t comprehend as to why they were experiencing this atrocious nightmare of events “built blocks around belief”. A very important sentence to note in this poem is “left us on our own”. This depressing line once again stresses that the Irish population were separated from their language and their culture. Also, it implies and hints towards the fact that Ireland was isolated with little aid and support during the events of the Great Famine, this is even more notable when considering the appalling British Governmental policy utilised to combat the problem of the Great Famine.

As the poem continues the poet keeps with this angry and sad tone of writing by speaking once again of the shame and guilt of the Irish people who survived the ordeal of the Famine, in particular the emigrants who he maybe feels abandoned Ireland during her time of need “ashamed to be seen”. He then describes how they walked away and left the incredibly stunning land of Ireland which was valued so much by their ancestors who came before them “walking out beauty so honoured by our ancestors”.

In the final stanza the author now depressingly and despairingly speaks of present day Ireland, which is home to people who are no longer connected to their culture, whom he refers to as peasants “but fostered now to peasants”. As the poem draws to an end he now graphically describes in a dark manner how the construction work in Ireland can lead to the discovery of the mass graves which were dug during the terrible events of the famine “the drivers of motorway diggers unearthing bones by accident”. The mass graves were the only solution to the never ending mountain of rotten plague riddled bodies of the Famine that were strewn all over the country of Ireland. The poem ends on a hopeless note by saying “under the

disappearing hills”. This is perhaps referring to the poet’s belief that Ireland continues to lose its identity today, just as it did during the dark years of the Famine.

3.3. “Give me three grains of corn, Mother” (Amelia Blanford Edwards)

Give me three grains of corn, Mother,

Only three grains of corn;

It will keep the little life I have

Till the coming of the morn

I am dying of hunger and cold, Mother,

Dying of hunger and cold;

And half the agony of such a death

My lips have never told

It has gnawed like a wolf at my heart, Mother,

A wolf that is fierce for blood;

All the livelong day, and the night beside,

Gnawing for lack of food

I dreamed of bread in my sleep, Mother,

And the sight was heaven to see;

I awoke with an eager, famishing lip,

But you had no bread for me

How could I look to you, Mother,

How could I look to you

For bread to give to your starving boy,

When you were starving too?

For I read the famine in your cheek,

And in your eyes so wild,
And I felt it in your bony hand,
As you laid it on your child

The Queen has lands and gold, Mother,
The Queen has lands and gold,
While you are forced to your empty breast
A skeleton babe to hold

A babe that is dying of want, Mother,
As I am dying now,
With a ghastly look in its sunken eye,
And famine upon its brow

There is many a brave heart here, Mother,
Dying of want and cold,
While only across the Channel, Mother,
Are many that roll in gold;

There are rich and proud men there, Mother,
With wondrous wealth to view,
And the bread they fling to their dogs tonight
Would give life to me and you.

What has poor Ireland done, Mother,
What has poor Ireland done,
That the world looks on, and sees us starve,
Perishing one by one?

Do the men of England care not, Mother,

The great men and the high,
For the suffering sons of Erin's Isle,
Whether they live or die?

Come nearer to my side, Mother,
Come nearer to my side,
And hold me fondly, as you held
My father when he died;

Quick, for I cannot see you, Mother,
My breath is almost gone;
Mother! Dear Mother! Ere I die,
Give me three grains of corn.

The title of this poem "Give me three grains of corn, mother" is symbolic in the fact that it refers not only to the hunger of a child, but also to the corn laws that were put in place by the British Empire during the 19th Century. In terms of the narration of this poem, it's written from the point of view of a child, quite possibly the poet, who is pleading with his/her mother for some food and nourishment.

In the opening line we see the child begin his anguished pleas for food from his mother "Give me three grains of corn, Mother, Only three grains of corn". The child is clearly very distressed and in a great deal of suffering and pain due to the mass starvation of Ireland during the Famine. This can be seen by the fact that he claims he needs food just to live long enough to see the next day "It will keep the little life I have Till the coming of the morn". This harrowing and dark image impresses upon the reader just how dire the situation that the child, along with the rest of the Irish population, find themselves in. They frantically search everyday for enough food to survive, yet there is simply not enough for this to happen.

The child continues the narrative by explaining to his mother the reality that he faces due to the famine, that he is dying as a result of a lack of food and the cold “I am dying of hunger and cold, Mother, Dying of hunger and cold;”. It should also be noted, that the child and his mother in all probability had no shelter from the weather due to the fact that most families who were unable to afford the money for food, likewise, could not afford the cost of rent from the English landlords and landowners. Next, we see how the child proclaims, in relation to death by starvation and exposure to the coldness of Irish weather, that “half the agony of such a death My lips have never told”. This could be interpreted in a couple of ways, firstly the child is referring to the fact that he never experienced such pain and suffering before, therefore he has never had to express this to anyone in his life up until now and does possess the words to do so. In contrast, this could also be the poet’s way of paying homage to the staunch and stoic Irish people who lived during the Famine and did not complain nearly as much as they should of the torture they were enduring.

In the third stanza the poet vividly describes the hunger that the child is feeling and compares it to that of a wolf which is hunting for blood “It has gnawed like a wolf at my heart, Mother, A wolf that is fierce for blood;”. This portrays in the readers mind exactly how much the child is craving for food due to starvation; it is strikingly eerie as it uses the symbol of the wolf to describe how great his hunger is in this dark situation. The child compares his growing and ever remaining hunger to that of the wolf gnawing at his heart all day, and every night “All the livelong day, and the night beside, Gnawing for lack of food”. Next, the child describes his dreams to his mother and how he is relieved from his pain as he imagines food to sedate his hunger and suffering “I dreamed of bread in my sleep, Mother, And the sight was heaven to see”. He describes the sight of food as that of “heaven” which clearly depicts to us how

much he and the rest of Ireland are longing for basic nourishment. However, depressingly this respite the child has from his pain does not last for long as he soon awakes to the realisation that there is no food for his mother to give him “I awoke with an eager, famishing lip, But you had no bread for me”. If anything, this event only furthers the pain of the child as he is given false hope of salvation before it is quickly dashed and taken from him.

As the poem progresses along with the sorrowful tale of the child, we witness the guilt he feels for even expecting food from his mother when she is in fact starving herself “How could I look to you, Mother, How could I look to you”. The poet uses repetition to highlight and reinforce the child’s feelings of guilt and remorsefulness “For bread to give to your starving boy, When you were starving too?”.

In the next stanza the child describes now in chilling detail how you can see the effects of the famine on his mother and in her appearance. Firstly, he states how you can see the consequences the famine has had and the effects of starvation on his mother’s face “For I read the famine in your cheek,”. It’s quite easy to imagine after reading this heart moving description, the sunken and hollow cheeks of his mother along with the Irish population in general as they continue to starve during these dark and terrible years. Continuing in this fashion, the poet writes about the eyes of the child’s mother and how there is now a wildness in them due to her extreme hunger and “And in your eyes so wild”. Finally, the child speaks of physical contact with his mother and how he can feel the effects of the famine on her through her malnourished and starving body “And I felt it in your bony hand, As you laid it on your child”.

The tone and message of the poem now changes slightly in the next stanza, as the child begins to talk of the British Empire and its wealth all be it, in a very simplistic way of a child. We see the child speak of the Queen of England and of all the wealth that the British monarchy holds “The Queen has lands and gold, Mother, The Queen has lands and gold,”. Once again, we can see how the poet uses the tool of repetition to great effect so as to drive home a more powerful message.

The child now chillingly describes a dark image of what the effects of the famine are having on the children of Ireland and how they completely deprived of strength and nourishment “While you are forced to your empty breast A skeleton babe to hold”. This could also be interpreted that the mothers in Ireland did not receive the required nutrition to sustain breast milk for their infants “While you are forced to your empty breast”.

Next we can see how the child admits his knowledge of the fact that he is dying, he is completely aware of the terrible scenario he finds himself in. He speaks of his wants “A babe that is dying of want, Mother,”. This clearly resonates with the readers for his previous pleas for food and shelter, the child wants nourishment, the child wants warmth, the child wants to live. However, he is conscious to the fact and resigned to the idea that he is dying by stating “As I am dying now,”. The child vividly describes and again paints the horrendous picture in readers mind of what the face of a famine suffer in Ireland looked like at this time “With a ghastly look in its sunken eye, And famine upon its brow”. The powerful use of the adjective ghastly and reference to the “famine upon its brow” goes even further to highlight this issue.

As the poem continues we again see the theme of the poet referencing and paying homage to bravely staunch and stoic Irish people who suffered endlessly during this cripplingly dark period of Irish history “There is many a brave heart here, Mother,”. However, the poet also

laments the loss of these brave people who resisted under the oppression of the British Empire for so long, before finally succumbing to their fate of death by starvation and cold “Dying of want and cold”. The poet through the voice of the child also speaks of the riches that remained in England, whilst in contrast the people of Ireland starved in a state of poverty, impoverishment and scarcity. “While only across the Channel, Mother, Are many that roll in gold;”. Through the use of the words “Channel” in relation to a sea of water and “gold”, one could easily imagine the treasure and funds that truly were present at that time in Britain amongst the Monarchy and the rich. However, it should also be pointed out that this is the overly simplistic view to fixing the problems that faced Ireland and that all it required was the British Empire to invest in the country’s well being.

The child continues to talk about the wealth of Britain in the next stanza and how proud the people are who live there “There are rich and proud men there, Mother, With wondrous wealth to view;”. Although, he also criticises and laments the fact that the rich of British care more for their animals than they do of the people of Ireland, this would not have been too far from the point of truth as it was acknowledged that they held the Irish with contempt and callousness. The poet showcases this by stating that “And the bread they fling to their dogs tonight Would give life to me and you”.

The child now asks and begs the question of what Ireland has done to deserve this tortuous and painstaking ordeal. The poet again uses repetition to highlight and reinforce this with powerful effect “What has poor Ireland done, Mother, What has poor Ireland done;”. With a childlike view of the world the narrator innocently asks why does no one else in the world help save Ireland from their terrible plight and lend assistance and aid against the rampant Famine, the child notes “That the world looks on, and sees us starve, Perishing one by one?”.

Once again the child begs the question of whether or not the English people care in the slightest of the plight that Irish in as a result a the great Famine “Do the men of England care not, Mother;”. This continues the theme of the child begging for some source of help or salvation and asking why it does not arrive. He describes the people of England as being rich and of important standing “The great men and the high;”. Whilst, also despairingly asking do they not feel any emotion or remorse for the pain and torture the people of Ireland find themselves in “For the suffering sons of Erin's Isle Whether they live or die?”. Above all the child wonders, do the English even care if the Irish people are to live or die and possibly in fact resigns himself to the fact that no salvation will come.

As we draw to the conclusion of this heart breaking poem which truly personifies the individual pain and suffering that was present in Ireland during the famine, we see a dramatic turn in the child's narration. The child desperately tells his mother to come closer to him “Come nearer to my side, Mother, Come nearer to my side;”. He wishes for her to hold him close and with love “And hold me fondly;”. As we read the final line of the penultimate stanza, the suffering in this poem takes yet another tragic twist as we learn of the loss of the child's father, who the child's mother also held tightly in her arms as he passed away “as you held My father when he died;”.

The final stanza is one which is defined by only distress, pain and despair as the child experiences his final moments of life in this harrowing and dark period of Irish history. The child cries out “Quick, for I cannot see you, Mother, My breath is almost gone;” this braces the reader for the inevitable outcome that is to come by using gripping and heart wrenching imagery to portrays the child's final moments. The child shouts “Mother! Dear Mother! Ere I die” before finally asking just one last time for her to “Give me three grains of corn.”

3.4. “Skibbereen” (Traditional poem)

O, father dear, i oft times heard you talk of erin's isle,
Her lofty scene, her valleys green, her mountains rude and wild
They say it is a pretty place where in a prince might dwell,
Oh why did you abandon it, the reason to me tell?

Oh son i loved my native land with energy and pride
'til a blight came over on my crops, my sheep and cattle died,
The rent and taxes were so high, i could not them redeem,
And that's the cruel reason why i left old skibbereen.

Oh, it's well i do remember that bleak december day,
The landlord and the sheriff came to drive us all away
They set my roof on fire with their demon yellow spleen
And that's another reason why i left old skibbereen.

Your mother too, god rest her soul, fell on the snowy ground,
She fainted in her anguish seeing the desolation round.
She never rose but passed away from life to mortal dream,
She found a quiet grave, my boy, in dear old skibbereen.

And you were only two years old and feeble was your frame,
I could not leave you with your friends, you bore your father's name,
I wrapped you in my cóta mór in the dead of night unseen
I heaved a sigh and said goodbye to dear old skibbereen

The name of this famous poem is given as “Skibbereen”, referring to a very old and extremely popular town found in West Cork. The town Skibbereen suffered an incredible amount of

hardship and loss during “An Gorta Mór” and is one of the most commemorated areas in Ireland when remembering the famine.

This awe inspiring poem was written as a conversation between a child and his father, the poet artfully depicts to the reader the affects that the Famine and the British government’s policy at this time had on Ireland. The whole story of the poem is based about the question the child had for his father, as to why he left Skibbereen. The child begins by telling us of the things he has heard about Ireland, which he refers to as “erin’s isle”, the poem begins with a great rhythm and flow which continues throughout “O, father dear, i oft times heard you talk of erin's isle,”. Specifically the child is referring to the things he heard said from his father about Ireland, and more importantly showcases that the child and his father Emigrated from Ireland, possibly to escape the Famine. The child reminisces of stories he heard about the wondrous, beautiful green nature that can be found in Irelands landscape “Her lofty scene, her valleys green, her mountains rude and wild”. As the opening stanza continues the child remarks that he has been told that Ireland is such a stunningly beautiful place that it is fit for even a prince to live in “They say it is a pretty place where in a prince might dwell,”. These opening three lines immediately paint an attractive picture in the mind of the reader of what a picturesque place Ireland is and that it lives up to the title of the “Emerald Isle”. In light of this appraisal and flattering descriptions he has heard, the child asks the question of his father as to why he left Skibbereen “Oh why did you abandon it, the reason to me tell?”.

As the second stanza begins, the narration now switches to the point of view of the father who begins to explain the reasoning behind his departure from Skibbereen. He starts by telling of his love for Ireland and his home town and how patriotic and fond he was of them “Oh son i loved my native land with energy and pride”. This showcases that in most likelihood he did

not have a happy or willing leave from his home. The Father then explains that like most inhabitants of Ireland at this time he worked the land as a farmer. Furthermore, he reveals to his son that when the potato blight arrived in Ireland it resulted in the failure of his crops and the death of his livestock “‘til a blight came over on my crops, my sheep and cattle died”. This was a common theme and occurrence throughout Ireland during the great Famine and was the main reason behind the mass starvation that ravaged the country and decimated the population. In continuation, the father complains of the British policy active in Ireland during the Famine, in particular he refers to the taxation and rent levels “The rent and taxes were so high, i could not them redeem,”. A common theme in quite a lot of Irish poems, the British policy is lambasted as a reason behind why the Famine had lasted for so long and caused so much destruction and despair in Ireland. Also, the reaction of the British Government in dealing with the crisis of the famine was neither sufficient nor prompt enough to help in anyway whatsoever, the plight of the Irish people. The Father then states that these are motivating factors as to why he abandoned Skibbereen “And that's the cruel reason why i left old skibbereen”.

The poem now takes a further dark and tragic twist as we enter the third stanza, the father describes further reasoning and causes behind why he left Skibbereen. The poet deftly displays and sets the setting for the reader of a dark and miserable day that the father can remember “Oh, it's well i do remember that bleak December day,”. This dark scene of impending doom is leading up to another typical happening in Ireland that occurred during the years of the Famine, from the sympathetic and tender hearted British landlords of the plantations and land of Ireland. The father tells his son of how the landlord, who they could no longer pay, rent their probably obscene rent to. More than likely this was due to the fact that taxation was too high and that there means of income were decimated, the landlord had

even come with the assistance of the sheriff to remove the family from the land “The landlord and the sheriff came to drive us all away”. The poet now showcases in graphic detail the aggressive nature of that of the landlords who were motivated beyond remorse to remove the native Irish population from their homeland by whatever means necessary “They set my roof on fire with their demon yellow spleen”. Referring to himself, his son and possibly a larger family as “us” the family is now deprived of their home and the father states that this is yet another reason why he left Skibbereen “And that's another reason why i left old skibbereen.”

The flow of the poem continues into the fourth stanza as does the ever darkening nature of tragedy in the unfolding tale that is being told. The father now begins to tell his son about his mother, who was not mentioned up until this point, furthermore, you can feel the vibrant emotion in his words as he tells of her fate. There is three things worth paying attention to in the first line of this stanza which is as follows “Your mother too, god rest her soul, fell on the snowy ground,”. Firstly, the acknowledgement that the child’s mother was present along with the father and their son when they were violently evicted from their ancestral home. Secondly, the poet pays homage to the religious nature of the Irish people who were all predominantly Catholics with the blessing “god rest her soul”. It’s very important to note that the Irish and British conflict has deeply rooted ties with the tradition and practice of religion. The British, who were either Protestants or of Presbyterian beliefs, were in fact the minority in terms of the population of Ireland, whereas in contrast the native Irish were the majority as devout Catholics. As a result, the social, political and economic power all lay with the Protestant minority due to the fact that they were British. Furthermore, they would use this power to successfully oppress and persecute the downtrodden Irish population by removing their identity through the repression of their culture, and religion. Finally, it is also essential to note that the common mention of the cold harsh Irish weather is present in this poem “fell on the

snowy ground”. As we continue to read the stanza we now learn that the Mother of the child fainted due to the horrific ordeal of being evicted from her home, seeing it burnt to the ground and witnessing the destruction that remained “She fainted in her anguish seeing the desolation round”. Depressingly we soon realise that this is all too much for the woman who has suffered like so many other inhabitants of Ireland through torturous hunger and the pain of losing everything, including their family homes “She never rose but passed away from life to mortal dream”. This terribly dark image paints a vivid picture in the mind of the reader, yet at the same time it is a very poignant and beautiful description of the passing of the woman to her eternal rest. As we reach the end of this stanza, the father now tells the child in a moving and respectful tone that he laid his wife to rest to be buried in Skibbereen “She found a quiet grave, my boy, in dear old skibbereen”. This is not only an individual case and can also be interpreted to be referring to the general loss of population in Skibbereen where mass graves and famine burial pits were dug to deal with the huge number of deaths during the haunting years of the Famine.

In the final stanza, the father at last tells the exact circumstances of his actual physical abandonment of Skibbereen. He begins by describing to his son the details of the difficult and desolate situation he found himself in, which ultimately resulted in him having to make an extremely difficult and unwelcome decision “And you were only two years old and feeble was your frame,”. This line impresses upon us that his son was very young, having only two years of age, and that he was also very malnourished due to the lack of food and starvation prevalent during the famine “feeble was your frame”. Consequently, the father not only had to think of his own wellbeing, his main priority instead was that of his child and whether or not Skibbereen in the height of the Great Hunger was suitable for a child, especially in light of the suffering and loss his family had experienced there. The father was resolute in the fact that he

would not leave the child in Skibbereen with his friends, as they both shared the same blood and he could not bear to leave his son “I could not leave you with your friends, you bore your father's name,”. This may seem like a very easy to decision to make, as the question surely arises as to who would leave a vulnerable young child of two years of age alone in a plight riddled town, during the great famine? Yet, it is not such a straightforward and easy conclusion to arrive to, as it must also be taken into account the fact that if a family were to emigrate from Ireland, the most likely destination to escape the Famine in search of salvation and opportunity, was to America. However, the passage to America was not a safe, or by any means pleasant one. It was plagued with life endangering threats, and was a journey that was seldom made twice as most were lucky just to survive the crossing. The passengers of these transatlantic journeys were placed in inhumane conditions where disease was rampant; subsequently the transport vessels were given the name “coffin ships”. As the before mentioned analysis of the first line of the poem proves, the family did in fact emigrate whether or not their destination was America is unknown, yet it is a distinct possibility. In the penultimate line we witness a great play of words in the Irish language by the poet as he describes how the father wrapped his son in his great big coat and left Skibbereen in the darkness of the night away from the prying eyes in secrecy “I wrapped you in my cóta mór in the dead of night unseen”. In the Irish language “cóta mór” translates to a “great overcoat” which is used as a rhyme in reference to “An Gorta Mór” which translates to “The Great Hunger” another name in Ireland for the famine. In the final line, the father with great sadness describes to his son his final goodbye to his dear old Skibbereen “I heaved a sigh and said goodbye to dear old skibbereen”.

In conclusion, this is a beautifully written poem and one of the most famous in regards to poetry paying homage to the Famine. Furthermore, the poem artfully depicts the great trauma

that people who emigrated from Ireland went through when abandoning their homeland. In summary, this poem tells the story of a terrible experience a father went through, however, it was one he had to burden and complete which ultimately saved the life of he and his son.

3.5. “Fields of Athenry” (Pete St. John)

By a lonely prison wall, I heard a young girl calling

"Michael, they have taken you away,

For you stole Trevelyan's corn,

So the young might see the morn.

Now a prison snip lies waiting in the bay."

Low lie the fields of Athenry

Where once we watched the small free birds fly

Our love was on the wing

We had dreams and songs to sing

It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry.

By a lonely prison wall, I heard a young man calling

"Nothing matters, Mary, when you're free

Against the famine and the crown,

I rebelled they cut me down.

Now you must raise our child with dignity."

By a lonely harbor wall, we watched the last star fall

As the prison ship sailed out against the sky

For she lived to hope and pray for her love in Botany Bay

It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry.

The Fields of Athenry is an Irish Ballad written by Pete St. John in the 1970s and is set in the Irish town of Athenry found in Galway, during the Famine. Pete St. John's beautiful ballad portrays the story of the fictional "Michael" an Irishman who has been imprisoned by the British authorities for stealing food during the Famine in the hopes of feeding his starving

family. The song is immortalised in Irish culture and is widely known, whilst also being extremely popular with the Irish people, most notably at sporting events.

The ballad begins in a morose and whimsical tone by describing an imprisoned man who is standing beside a wall in the prison in which he is held captive, when he all of a sudden hears the calls of a young girl “By a lonely prison wall, I heard a young girl calling”. The young girl now commences to tell us the story of Michael who was arrested by the British authorities and placed in prison ““Michael, they have taken you away,”. We quickly learn that Michael was arrested due to the fact that he stole corn belonging to a certain “Trevelyan” “For you stole Trevelyan's corn,”. However, the ownership of the corn in question was in fact metaphorical, as it did not truly belong to Trevelyan, it instead symbolises the corn owned by the British Authorities. The corn was sent to Ireland in the guise of an alternative crop to ease widespread food shortage and tackle the hunger epidemic. However, the idea was fundamentally flawed as the farming population had little or no experience with the cultivation of corn and also it was very expensive for the peasant Irish population. Furthermore, Trevelyan is none other than Sir Charles Trevelyan who was charged with and headed the majority of the relief effort of the British government in Ireland during the Great Famine. The young girl now explains the motivation behind Michael’s criminal act, which was, to feed his young children who could not survive the pain of the Famine for much longer “So the young might see the morn.” Next, the young girl allows the reader to know that Michael is not facing a jail sentence in Ireland, he will in fact be transferred by a prison ship to another unknown destination “Now a prison snip lies waiting in the bay.””

The Ballad now moves to a very moving chorus which is repeated throughout the ballad. The chorus presumably describes Michael and the young girl’s memories together in the town of Athenry “Low lie the fields of Athenry”. As the song writer Pete St. John mentions on his

website, the beautiful low lying fields of Athenry can be seen as you approach the town, and it is here that Michael and the young girl imagine and reminisce of. They now describe how when they were there they would watch the small free birds fly, perhaps jealous of the freedom that these birds had in comparison to themselves under the oppressive British Crown “Where once we watched the small free birds fly”. In the next line there is the beautiful image of “Our love was on the wing” which perhaps compares their love as something free and graceful as that of a wing of a bird. We now see them tell us that they many “dreams” together and that that they sang “songs” in blissful happiness “We had dreams and songs to sing”. However, unfortunately the chorus ends on a sad and forlorn note as the girl states that she is now alone in the fields of Athenry without Michael “It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry”.

As we move into the second verse of the ballad the perspective now changes to that of the young girl, who can now hear Michael calling from the other side of the prison wall “By a lonely prison wall, I heard a young man calling”. The repetition of “lonely prison wall” is used to impress upon the reader of the loss and sorrow that this couple is suffering due to their separation. We now learn the name of the young girl to be Mary, after Michael begins to call to her ““Nothing matters, Mary, when you're free”. Michael explains to Mary that there is nothing to worry about if you are in a position a freedom. In addition to this, Michael states that he fought “Against the famine and the crown,” however, his rebellion and attempt to steal the food was ultimately short lived as the British authorities quickly apprehended him “I rebelled they cut me down.”. The use of the words “cut me down” would indicate that it was a violent arrest of Michael, although, it would not have been particularly difficult for the British forces to subdue him as none of the Irish population would possess any weapons or artillery that could pose a significant risk to them, other than any normal day tool found during that

time. Moreover, it would not be for another seventy years until the Irish were organised or armed well enough to truly rebel and fight for Independence. As the verse concludes, Michael now consoles Mary and tells her that she must remain strong and rear their child with decency “Now you must raise our child with dignity.”. Unfortunately, a lot of parents in Ireland during this time would have been forced to raise a family as a single parent, due to the high mortality rate that was present. Therefore, Michael and Mary’s heart breaking situation was not an isolated case.

In the final verse we at long last learn of Michael’s terrible and earth shattering punishment. The setting of the ballad changes, as the eloquent lyrics paint a picture of a harbour by the Sea at night “By a lonely harbor wall, we watched the last star fall”. The continued use of the adjective “lonely” and the mention of the “last star” falling gives us the impression of a desolate and mournful scene. Irrefutably, this is proven to be true as we learn that the prison ship holding Michel prisoner for a pretty minor crime is now leaving the coast of Ireland “As the prison ship sailed out against the sky”. The songwriter now reveals to us Michael’s destination of captivity to be that Botany Bay in Australia and that he “For she lived to hope and pray for her love in Botany Bay”. This changes the whole significance of this Famine inspired ballad, as it not only pays homage to the suffering and despair of the Irish people during the Potato bight, it also pays tribute to the human tragedy that was the deportation of Irish lawbreakers to Australia. In the final line of this iconic and incredible ballad we are one again reminded of Mary and her sorrowful loss after the cruelly extreme extradition of her husband to Australia “It’s so lonely round the fields of Atherry”.

To summarise and conclude, this incredibly moving ballad may have been written about a fictional family and talk about events that did not occur. Yet, it should be noted that it in

unquestionably influenced by the harrowing events of the Great Irish Famine. Furthermore, it is wholly believable that this story did occur in some way or form, when people were at their most desperate and in need of food during that famine-time horror that existed in Ireland during these terribly dark years.

3.6 “Quarantine” (Eavan Boland)

In the worst hour of the worst season
of the worst year of a whole people
a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.
He was walking — they were both walking — north.
She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.
He lifted her and put her on his back.
He walked like that west and west and north.
Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.
In the morning they were both found dead.
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.
But her feet were held against his breastbone.
The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.
Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.
There is no place here for the inexact
praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.
There is only time for this merciless inventory:
Their death together in the winter of 1847.
Also what they suffered. How they lived.
And what there is between a man and woman.
And in which darkness it can best be proved

The poem “Quarantine” written by Eavan Boland tells the thought provoking and soul searching story of a man and woman who are forced to abandon their home due to the

ongoing effects of the Great Famine in Ireland. The contemporary poet Eavan Boland is renowned for her work, where the influence of Irish history as a theme can be found frequently, moreover she often uses the Potato Famine as a prominent source of inspiration in her writings. The poem “Quarantine” is a particularly relevant literary work in regards to this investigation as it not only represents the Famine in its story, because in essence this is also poem of love, showcasing that there is more to poetry inspired by the famine than tribute and poignant, yet, mournful homage.

The title of the poem is written as “Quarantine” which upon reading, immediately gives the impression that perhaps illness or a disease is present in the tale told in this poem. The poem opens on a very dark and pessimistic note, by setting the scene of the famine through the use of the repetition of the word “worst”, this word is repeated three times in the first two lines of the opening stanza “In the worst hour of the worst season”. By beginning the poem with this line, the poet indicates to us that the story of poem takes place in the coldest hour of the day in the middle of the Irish winter, emphasising just how harsh the weather conditions faced by the people were. However, this is further compounded by the fact that we are additionally told that it is also the worse year for a total group of people, which now confirms to us that it is placed during the Great Famine as it is undoubtedly the worst and most devastating period of time in Irish history “of the worst year of a whole people”. This line showcases that the famine affected all the population of Ireland and that none of its people were immune to the suffering that occurred. We now learn that a married couple have left a workhouse to begin a journey together “a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.”. Workhouses were buildings established in Ireland in order to feed and house the very poorest of Ireland in exchange for labour, on paper it sounds like an admirable and charitable idea, however the reality was the complete opposite. The workhouses were infamous in terms of their

unhygienic and cruel conditions, families were forced into separation and housed in disease riddled and overcrowded living quarters. As the first stanza ends, the poet now reveals the direction and general destination of the couple to be in northerly trajectory from where they currently are “He was walking — they were both walking — north.”.

We now move onto the second stanza of the poem, where upon we quickly discover the reason why the couple are travelling away from the workhouse “She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.” This explains to the reader that the woman had contracted the famine fever, in all probability from her time living in the workhouse where disease and illness would spread like wildfire. The opening line of the second stanza is also significant because it points toward the meaning behind the title of the poem which is “quarantine”, perhaps the husband wishes to leave their home in search of a disease free place in isolation, where his wife would have a stronger chance to recover. In contrast, their motivation could be to protect other people from exposure to her infection by leaving to find a place of quarantine. We are also told through the first line that the woman is feeling the effects of the fever already and is struggling to match the pace of her husband and falls behind, in response to this he gallantly picks her up and carries her on his back “He lifted her and put her on his back”. The couple continued travelling in this way with the husband carrying his wife, first of all in a westerly direction before turning north “He walked like that west and west and north.”. Finally they stopped traveling for the night and took shelter from the sub-zero temperatures “Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.”. The destination where the couple have decided to take their rest however is a mystery. The only thing that is conveyed to us in the final line of the stanza is that it was tremendously cold outside in the elements when the couple were journeying. The poet conveys this wonderfully through the marvellous image of “nightfall under the freezing stars”. Combating the fearful cold in Ireland during the Famine

was a very real threat to survival for the Irish people, as a frighteningly amount of people who were unable to pay rent would be evicted by unsympathetic landlords throughout this period, which is discussed in greater detail in the analysis of the poem “Skibbereen”. Consequently, not only did the inhabitants of Ireland during the great hunger have to contend with the threat of starvation or succumbing to disease in a state of poverty, they also to fight against exposure to the uncontrollable weather with no secure shelter.

The poem now takes a harrowing turn as the poet discloses to us that the couple have tragically died during the night and were found by an unknown person in the morning following the terribly cold night “In the morning they were both found dead.”. The causes of death are now explained to us through the words the new speaker “Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.” It’s important to note that the causes of death are not just the obvious ones that are described in the lines of this poem, there is more being implied behind the words. The speaker mentions that the couple died due to exposure from the terrible cold and as result of starvation, however this person also swiftly observes that they died as a consequence “of the toxins of a whole history”. This final cause can be interoperated as the toxic affect that the British Empire had upon Ireland since it’s conquering and invasion of the country, furthermore it also symbolises the disregard and indifference that the British government and its society had towards Ireland during the Famine. Therefore, if the British government had opted for a more efficient and rapid response when dealing with the huge problems that arose in Ireland during the famine years, it is hypothesised that a percentage of the Irish population that were decimated through death and emigration could have been saved. As we reach the mid-way point of the third stanza of this thought provoking poem we discover the position that the couple died in and we can see a silver lining of tenderness in this otherwise sorrowful scenario “But her feet were held against his breastbone.” The couple

passed away with the woman's feet pressed against the chest of her husband, with the reasoning being that he attempted to give his wife some comfort of warmth in a caring and loving gesture even if it was one that proved to be futile "The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her". Once again, the poet uses the tool of repetition to highlight the word "last" in showing that the man's attempt to offer his wife a respite from the cold, was ultimately one in vein.

The tone of the poem now completely changes in the fourth and fifth stanza, the theme changing from that of paying homage to the loss felt during the famine to instead being a tribute of the dedication and love between two people, even in the face of the most dire of situations. The fourth stanza begins with the line "Let no love poem ever come to this threshold" which is almost as if to say that the poet wishes that such acts of love should not have to be felt when facing horrifying and harrowing events like those of the Great Famine, they should instead be experienced organically and without pain, free of the threat of death. The poet continues by stating that "There is no place here for the inexact praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body". In the case of the Great Famine, the poet possibly believes that there is no place for the typical loving actions that we all know exist between a couple. Instead the embodiment of a couple's true love is found in their sacrifices for one another in the context of the torturous and depressing events that would have been unfolding around them during this dark period of Irish history. The fourth stanza ends with the words "There is only time for this merciless inventory:". This gives a very emotionless and detached feel as we prepare for the final stanza in which perhaps an inventory will be given.

The ultimate stanza begins with us discovering the exact year and season that the married couple passed away in “Their death together in the winter of 1847”. In the first two lines of the poem, the poet gives us clues to these answers before finally revealing them to us. The stanza continues in the same detached tone describing in vague terms that they suffered together and shared their lives together “Also what they suffered. How they lived”. However all detachment is left behind, with the poet embracing a spectacularly dark and loving feel of emotion in the final two lines of the stanza. In a tribute to the love between the married couple she first writes “And what there is between a man and woman”. Before finally finishing the poem with the words “And in which darkness it can best be proved” which showcases that even in the midst of traumatic and life threatening events, love can still stand strong epitomising itself in the sacrifices that one makes for another.

Conclusion

Through the conduction of this investigation for my final assessment, I concentrated on six poems which I hold dear to me in regards to evaluating the impact of The Great Famine upon Irish poetry. Through the analysis of these poems I have reached the following conclusions in correlation with the overall aims and objectives I set myself when undertaking this investigation.

Firstly, my primary aim was to achieve and obtain a greater knowledge and understanding of the events of The Great Famine, and the overall conditions that stimulated it to occur. I can confidently say that following my assessment of the event of The Great Famine, I now have a much clearer understanding and comprehension of how the Great Famine occurred and the events that followed during this dark period of Irish history. Through the study of this period of Irish history I was able to comprehend more about what motivated and shaped the future of the Ireland we see today. It was truly without a doubt an absolutely appalling and horrific time of pain and misery for a group of downtrodden people who teetered on the brink of destruction. This foundation of information was of paramount importance when dealing with the more complex aims of my assessment, which I utilised throughout the rest of my investigation into the impact of The Great Famine upon Irish poetry.

Furthermore, I aimed to explore and examine the characteristics that can be found throughout the poetry that has been influenced by The Great Famine. In this part of my investigation I went in with the preconceived thoughts and judgement that the poetry inspired by the Famine would just be characterised by depressing accounts of history, however I was surprised to find that this does not do justice to the real motivations that lie behind the poetry. The poetry is characterised not only by the obvious theme of sorrow, it also showcases the incredible

oppression that the people of Ireland had to suffer over the centuries and how they admirably overcame these obstacles. There is also the presence of great pride and respect from the authors for their ancestors who faced such arduous times, which is symbolised in the tributes the poets dedicate to them through their beautiful poetry. Moreover, it was quite saddening to learn through the studying of the poetry and the history of Ireland, just how much their culture has been threatened and damaged over the centuries. Which as a native Galician is something I can sympathise with, when taking into account the struggles we had to keep our own culture alive. However in contrast, it is true that I expected certain characteristics to be present such as the feeling of anger and sorrow which ultimately go hand in hand when reflecting upon the darker nature of history and its impact.

In continuation, through the conducting of the in-depth analysis of the poems, I was able to achieve my aim of learning more about the fundamentals of Irish poetry in relation the Great Famine. Consequently as a result, I also began to understand the personal experiences and meanings the writers depict through their literary work. It was interesting to see just how personal the contemporary writers, such as Eavan Boland and Pete St. John for example, were when writing about the events of the Famine. It was incredibly emotional as well to read the accounts of the traditional poetry, such as Skibbereen, which was almost like entering through a door to experience the Great Famine.

Subsequently, this detailed analysis of the poems that were influenced by the Great Famine helped in proving the overall aim of this investigation, which is to showcase the impact of the Great Famine upon Irish poetry and its influence. It is very important to note that the links between the history of the famine and the poetry it inspired are extremely strong. Furthermore, this proves that the events of the Great Famine were a huge influence in regards

to inspiring subsequent writers to express their feelings on this dark subject, which resulted in so many beautiful and tributes poignant.

Finally to sum up and conclude, the overall aim of this assessment was to investigate whether or not the events of Great Famine are reflected in Irish poetry. From my study of this issue, I believe that this aim has been met and it can be conclusively seen that the Great Famine was a great source of inspiration for poetry following the terrible events that took place, proving that it impacted upon the poetry. However dark and harrowing this traumatic period Irish history may be, it undoubtedly led to the emergence of some light and joy at the end of it, at least in a literary and poetic sense.

Primary sources

Boland, E. (1944). *Quarantine*. Accessed date: May, 20, 2016. From <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/quarantine>

Egan, D. (1997). *Famine*. Goldsmith.

Gross, O. R. (1848). *Give Me Three Grains of Corn, Mother*. Accessed date: April, 15, 2016.

Historic Sheet Music Collection. Paper 705. From

<http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/sheetmusic/705>

McCullagh, J. (2012). *The scar*. Accessed date: April, 02, 2016. From <http://www.newryjournal.co.uk/2005/08/15/the-scar/>

Moloney, P. (2016). *Skibbereen*. Accessed date: May, 08, 2016. From <http://www.lyreka.com/song/sinead-oconnor-skibbereen-lyrics/>

St. John, Pete. (2007). *The Fields of Athenry*. Accessed date: April, 30, 2016. Pete St. John/Saint Music. From <http://petestjohn.com/works/the-fields-of-athenry/>

Works cited

- Adsockham: (2012). *La Gran Hambruna irlandesa de 1845-1851: patatas, muerte y emigración*. Accessed date: March, 11, 2016. From <http://tigresdp.blogspot.com.es/2012/05/la-gran-hambruna-irlandesa-de-1845-1851.html>
- Bourke, A.: (1993). *The visitation of God?: the potato and the great Irish famine*. Dublin: The Lilliput Press.
- Donnelly, J.: (2011). *The Irish Famine*. Accessed date: March, 9, 2016. From http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/famine_01.shtml
- O'Connor, J.. *The Workhouse Story*. Accessed date: March, 19, 2016. From <http://irishworkhousecentre.ie/the-workhouse-story/>
- Ó Gráda, C.: (1989). *The Great Irish Famine*. Cambridge: The Macmillan Press Limited.
- Ó Murchadha, C.: (2011). *The great famine: Ireland's agony, 1845-1852*. London: Continuum International Pub..
- Rothney, S.: (2011). *The Presbyterian response to the famine years 1845 to 1855 within Ireland and in the Highlands of Scotland*. Accessed date: March, 9, 2016. From <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/3311/1/2011StephenMLitt.pdf>
- St. John, P.: (2007). *The Fields of Athenry*. Accessed date: April, 22, 2016. From <http://petestjohn.com/works/the-fields-of-athenry/>