

The Great Irish Potato Famine and its Representations in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

The topic of this thesis is the Great Irish Potato Famine and its representations in contemporary literature, with an emphasis on three themes: hunger, class relations, and imperialism. The themes will be contextualised by historical accounts and short stories written during, and shortly after the famine era. The question is how these accounts from completely different eras compare to each other, and how the always changing Irish cultural memory has influence the literary representations of the famine. Have the 170 years since the famine changed its visualisation of the devastating era in novels, or have they stayed the same for the most part? The topic and the answers to the questions will be studied through analyses of both contemporary and historical short stories of the famine. The former being novels published in the last decade, *The Killing Snows* by Charles Egan (2008), *Grace* by Paul Lynch (2017), and *The Flight of the Wren* by Orla McAlinden (2018), and the latter being published during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Keywords: The Great Irish Potato Famine, hunger, imperialism, class relations, memory theory, contemporary famine literature.

Introduction

The Great Irish Famine of the nineteenth century, it is an episode in Irish society that can still be felt and seen in the country. The famine continues to affect the national identities of the Irish people, as the loss that the country had to face was immense. Emily Mark-Fitzgerald writes in her book that “the impact of the famine devastated Irish culture, language, and social demographics, and formed the basis for the massive Irish diaspora.”¹ Literature is used as a vehicle for the pain and suffering that people faced during the famine, as it was well documented in short stories and passed on through generations of Irish people. Although it has been approximately 170 years since the famine happened, it is still written about in today’s society. Three of the recurring themes in famine literature are hunger, class relations, and imperialism. This thesis will explore the three themes and their representations in contemporary famine literature, first by establishing their origins in historical short stories written in the nineteenth century, and then by analysing them in the context of the contemporary novels. This will give an insight into the differences in the representations of the themes, as well as how they have changed throughout the years.

The Irish potato famine of the 1840s, often called the Great Famine in Ireland, was a disaster on multiple fronts, affecting the Irish national identity for at least the coming two centuries. James S. Donnelly writes that it was caused by “a raging epidemic of the fungal disease “*phytophthora infestans*”, commonly known as potato blight.”² The potato had become a staple crop in Ireland because it was nutritious, contained quite a lot of calories and was relatively easy to grow in the Irish soil. Almost half of the Irish population, mainly the poor people who lived on the countryside, were forced to become dependent on the potato only. The Irish became vulnerable for a famine because they relied heavily on one or two types of potato. Failing crops were thus not unusual for the farmers, however, instead of being an isolated event, the crops would fail for the next four years, from 1845 until 1849.³ The British Prime Minister at the time, Lord John Russel, did not offer much relief for Ireland, instead the government exported food out of Ireland and into Great Britain, which often were products that were too

¹ Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013): 12.

² James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007): 41.

³ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 15.

expensive for the poor Irish people. During the rest of the decade, the government provided funding for workhouses, soup kitchens, as well as road building and other public works. The Irish were forced to make use of these relief measures, as they were too poor and often too emaciated to provide for themselves. The decisions made by the British government caused great resentment among the Irish, mainly because of their ineffective attempts at providing relief for the starving people. Out of the eight million people that lived in Ireland at the time, one million died from either starvation or famine related diseases, while another million emigrated, causing the total population to decrease dramatically.

Famine literature that was published around the 1840s has become of interest again since the 1990s, after having disappeared from prominent research for a long time. There have been publications of articles analysing the old poems, travel narratives and stories written by people who were directly affected by the famine and its consequences. The previous research that has been conducted on famine literature includes literary analyses of popular novels, Irish travel writing from the nineteenth century, as well as Irish memory studies. Melissa Fegan wrote a book called *Literature and the Irish Famine*, in which she explores the famine's legacy in literature, tracing it in the work of famine writers and their successors from 1845 up until 1919. She examines both fiction and non-fiction, which includes journalism, travel-narratives and Irish novels written by authors such as Anthony Trollope. She states that the Great Famine was a defining moment in Irish history, which she does not want to be forgotten by the Irish people. A way to make sure that this does not happen is by keeping the famine memory alive in both literature and public discourse.⁴ Margaret Kelleher's work is closely related to this. In her book on Irish literary culture and its crisis of representation between 1800 and 1890, she writes that the field of Irish famine literature has become the subject of investigation again over the last few decades. Moreover, she states that a full integration of literary and cultural source material into the famine historiography has not yet been achieved, and that the diverse aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of literary representations have not yet been fully explored.⁵ What both of the authors in the field of Irish studies have in common is that they conclude that it is important to keep the famine in recent memory, so that it will not be forgotten by the Irish.

⁴ Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845-1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 52.

⁵ Margaret Kelleher, "Irish Literary Culture," In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 75.

Famine literature of the nineteenth century includes short stories that were written by people during and shortly after the famine, to visualise the experiences of people directly affected by it. Writers like Mrs Hoare and Mrs Meredith published stories like “The Black Potatoes” (1851) and “Ellen Harrington” (1865), which give insight into the struggles that the Irish had to face during the famine. The stories incorporate themes that were on everybody’s minds during the period, namely how hunger was dealt with, how the different social classes interacted with one another, and how British imperialism played a role in the everyday lives of the Irish. Up until today, novels about the era are still being published, testifying to its longue duree memory. *The Killing Snows* (2008) by Charles Egan, *Grace* (2017) by Paul Lynch, and *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) by Orla McAlinden are all contemporary historical novels that are set during the famine. This thesis will primarily focus on the contemporary novels to give a view of how the famine is represented roughly 170 years after it happened. Ireland saw a revival in famine memory during the 2000s, because the public sphere surrounding the collapse of the Celtic Tiger triggered this. The Celtic Tiger was an Irish economic model which prevailed between 1993 and 2007 and was widely heralded as a beacon of what a small open economy might deliver. It saw a transformation in the Irish social and economic lives, which had previously been in a relatively poor and peripheral state.⁶ Rob Kitchin writes in his paper on the economic situation that since 2008, “the Celtic Tiger model unraveled and the domino effect of the global financial crisis unearthed the fragility, overextension, and tenuous alignments of the international financial markets.”⁷ This brought Ireland to the point of bankruptcy, which caused a rise in migration from Ireland to other parts of the world. These numbers reached what Bonner and Slaby call “famine levels”⁸ and saw large groups of Irish people emigrate to Canada. Another event that triggered famine memory was the start of a commemoration programme for famine victims, which was made official in 2006. Events marking the famine were initially incorporated into the National Day of Commemoration, but the Irish Times reported in 2006 that the committee wanted a separate commemoration for famine victims, as they were mostly

⁶ Rob Kitchin, “Placing neoliberalism: the rise and fall of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger,” *Environment and Planning* 44, no. 1 (2012): 1303.

⁷ Rob Kitchin, “Placing neoliberalism: the rise and fall of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger,” *Environment and Planning* 44, no. 1 (2012): 1305.

⁸ Kieran Bonner and Alexandra Slaby, “An Introductory Essay on Culture in Post Celtic Tiger Ireland: A Floating Anchorage of Identities,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 37, no. 1/2 (2011): 31.

civilians and not Irish soldiers.⁹ The publication of these novels can thus be tied to the revival of famine memory that was already present in Ireland.

Memory theory can be found at the base of these acts of commemorations and cultural memories of the famine. Barbara A. Misztal writes in her chapter on memory and history how discourse in the field has been intensified over the last few decades.¹⁰ She writes that “memory involves topics such as public commemoration, collective identities, as well as the focus on heritage in museums.”¹¹ Collective memory can be seen as the representation of the past in the present, they are memories that are commonly shared and collectively commemorated.¹² Generational memories are an example of such memories, as they supply ways of understanding the world and provide groups of people with beliefs that can guide them in life. Memory theory is therefore closely related to the field of famine literature, as the famine is an event that not only lives on in people’s memory, but is also connected to Ireland’s national history. Emily Mark-Fitzgerald wrote a book about memory theory in direct relation to the famine called *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and Monument*, in which she explains how the famine is visualised in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. She states that after the 1990s there was boom in famine research, meaning that there was a revival in the analysis of famine literature written during the nineteenth century. Moreover, there was a massive rise in public commemoration and sentiment which was described in the media as ‘famine fever’.¹³ Niall O Ciosáin writes in an article that “commemoration is seen as producing changes in attitudes by breaking the silence,”¹⁴ further stating that the recovery of famine memories will be of benefit to the Irish public culture. A large aspect of these memories includes literature and folk tales that were written and spread during the era.

Throughout the years, books like Christopher Morash’s *Writing the Irish Famine* (1995) and Marguérite Corporaal’s *Relocated Memories: The Great Famine in Irish and Diaspora*

⁹ “Famine victims will be remembered officially - Minister,” *The Irish Times*, last modified May 31, 2006, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/famine-victims-will-be-remembered-officially-minister-1.785023>

¹⁰ Barbara A. Misztal, “Memory and History.” In *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 3.

¹¹ Barbara A. Misztal, “Memory and History.” In *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 7.

¹² Barbara A. Misztal, “Memory and History.” In *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011): 5.

¹³ Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, “Introduction,” in *Commemorating the Irish Famine*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013): 5.

¹⁴ Niall O Ciosáin, “Was there ‘silence’ about the famine?” *Irish Studies Review* 4, no. 13 (1995): 8.

Fiction, 1846-1870 (2017) mainly contain research on famine literature of the nineteenth century, which means that there is a lacuna relating to contemporary famine literature. Examining three novels, *The Killing Snows* (2008), *Grace* (2017), and *The Flight of the Wren* (2018), that are set in the era of the famine but were written during the twenty-first century, gives us an idea of how memories of the famine have changed.

In this thesis I will focus on three main themes that are related to the famine: imperialism, hunger, and class relations and I will analyse them through a close reading of all three novels. Examining three different themes that exist in the literature of the era, as well as contemporary work finds its relevance in its insight into the cultural impact of the famine and how collective memory has existed and changed over the years. Memory is a phenomenon that can change along with the context and time it exists in, and people's perception of an era changes through gaining knowledge about it.

Chapter one focuses on the theoretical framework of memory theory, which is needed to establish a base that is used throughout the thesis. The chapter explains how cultural memory and literature are connected to one another, which is different from the other chapters, as it does not contain literary analyses. Each of the three upcoming chapter have a focus on one of the three themes. Chapter two explains how hunger is depicted in all three of the contemporary novels, starting with the historical context and the short stories from the nineteenth century, it also contains a few subthemes: landscapes, faces of hunger, desperation, and the fever. Chapter three deals with the theme of class relations, with the same structure as the previous chapter, and three subthemes: class relations between the rich and the poor, evictions, and the workhouses. The last chapter focuses on imperialism and how the British government dealt with the situation in Ireland, there are two subthemes: government relief and the English versus the Irish.

Theoretical framework

The act of remembering is usually associated with individual lives: personal memories of family, friends, as well as experiences in an individual's life. We remember events that we witnessed and actions that we performed throughout our lives. Ross Poole states in his article, that an individual memory "places someone in the past: they performed an act, or suffered from it, or perhaps merely witnessed it."¹⁵ Jan Assman calls these shared pasts "communicative memories" which live in everyday interaction and communication, and they have a limited time depth.¹⁶ There is a social component involved in this process as well, which comes from surrounding family and friends that have a recollection of the event too. Poole explains that memories that are not recollected by them often tend to lapse and disappear after a short while.¹⁷ Memories like these have the ability to establish a family history and can be passed on through generations, for example. However, while it is in fact the individual who remembers, recollection also takes place on a collective level. Historical events of a country can also be remembered in the present, or passed on through for example education in schools, national holidays, and days of remembrance. In her chapter on how memory and history are related to one another, Barbara A. Misztal explains that "memory exists through its relationship with what has been shared with others, though language, symbols, events, and social and cultural contexts."¹⁸ The collective memories of, for example, a country can be seen as a representation of the past in the present day. What Misztal means by this statement is that the memories that are embedded into a country's history, from events like the Second World War, to national holidays, to its line of monarchs, can be found in literature, films, and other cultural expressions of a country or a community.¹⁹ Past events are therefore brought into the present through art, written text, and etcetera. These memories are often commonly shared and collectively commemorated by people,

¹⁵ Ross Poole, "Memory, History and the Claims of the Past," *Memory Studies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 153.

¹⁶ Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 3, no. 65 (1995): 126.

¹⁷ Ross Poole, "Memory, History and the Claims of the Past," *Memory Studies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 152.

¹⁸ Barbara A. Misztal, "Memory and History," In *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity*, 3–17. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 5.

¹⁹ Barbara A. Misztal, "Memory and History," In *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity*, 3–17. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 12.

and they provide them with beliefs and opinions that can act as guidance in their everyday actions.²⁰

The characteristics of an individual's personal memory and that of a collective, cultural memory are closely related to one another, mainly due to memory's structure. Jan Assman states that "a group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge and derives formative and normative impulses from it, which allows the group to reproduce its identity."²¹ This means that groups of people can establish the part of their identity that has ties to their nationality on the memories that are most prominent in their country's collective memory. The question of how human beings maintain their specific nature through generations has found its answer in collective memory, for it establishes a framework of a society that is based on repeated societal practice and initiation.²² Misztal's text elaborates on this when she says that continuity is created through the preservation of the past as well as the transformation of it to fit present-day concerns.²³ These memories and the framework that they have provided then enable people to make sense of the world.

Nowadays, memories of events that happened in the past are most often shared through different forms of media. The umbrella term for such shared memories is what scholars like Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney call 'cultural memory,'²⁴ examples of which are representations of significant events in film, books, and television. Literature plays an interesting role in the production of cultural memory as its influence has been prominent for many generations. Erll and Rigney analyse literature as a medium of remembrance, an object of remembrance, as well as a medium for observing the production of cultural memory.²⁵ The historical novel especially plays a significant role in shaping our views of the past, because it has a special authority in this field. Literary works that conform to this genre construct versions of the past that are affirmative

²⁰ Barbara A. Misztal, "Memory and History," In *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity*, 3–17. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 6.

²¹ Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 3, no. 65 (1995): 128.

²² Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 3, no. 65 (1995): 131.

²³ Barbara A. Misztal, "Memory and History," In *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity*, 3–17. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011): 8.

²⁴ Astrid Erll, "Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory," In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 150.

²⁵ Astrid Erll, "Introduction," In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 112-113.

and subversive, as well as traditional and new.²⁶ At the same time, they make this exact process observable, which allows for criticism. This so-called “reflexive mode”²⁷ gives the reader a first- and second-order observation regarding the literature. Erll writes that the historical novel “gives the reader the illusion of glimpsing the past with the knowledge of the present, while simultaneously being a major medium of critical reflection upon such processes of representation.”²⁸ The processes involved are related to the workings of memory, and with the contrast of different versions of the past that can be found in the literature.

Historical novels differ from other ways of memory-making because of their ability to inject “new and distinct elements into memory culture,” which they do through what philosopher Paul Ricoeur called mimesis. He defines this term as the “imitative representation of the real world in art and literature.”²⁹ There are three levels of mimesis that showcase the different forms of representation of cultural memory. The first one is the prefiguration of a literary text, meaning its reference to the extra-textual world. What happens here is that a literary work uses its ability to shed light onto aspects of the past that were previously seen as painful, were repressed, or simply forgotten or went unnoticed for a long period of time. The Irish Famine fits into this concept of mimesis due to the suffering that the Irish people went through, and because the event was, and still is, an element that is accompanied with a lot of pain in the social sphere.³⁰ The second level of mimesis creates a fictional world, otherwise known as the textual configuration. The elements of reality that were chosen in the first level of mimesis are ordered in what is often a causal way, which creates a new version of reality, with added fictional narratives that enable the memories to become a full story. The transition into a literary text separates the elements of cultural memory from the contexts that they originally existed in and combines them into new narratives that have reshaped the memories. The structure that is given to them, add an extra

²⁶ Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 151.

²⁷ Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 159.

²⁸ Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 159.

²⁹ Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 152.

³⁰ James S. Donnelly Jr., “The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850–1900,” *Éire-Ireland* 31, no. 1&2(1996): 14.

dimension of meaning too.³¹ The third, and final, level of mimesis is the refiguration of the text by the reader. Ricoeur describes this as the “intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader,”³² which essentially means that the meanings that the readers add to the text are of value to it. When literature is handed down to new generations, the configuration of the text is transformed into what Ricoeur calls ‘refiguration’³³, as literary works can change the perceptions of reality, along with the cultural memories that they are based on. Literature’s influence on memory culture thus finds itself in historical representations, myths, and characters that the work depicts. The impact that these representations can have on the reader vary per person, but the third aspect of mimesis can re-enter a particular historical event into the public’s minds. What this entails is that the specific event can become the topic of public discourse and knowledge, as well as serve a political function.³⁴ Erll and Rigney state that literature can produce a “memory of its own”³⁵ because of mimesis, due to the intertextual relations that give new cultural insights into memories of the past.

The Great Irish Famine of the nineteenth century is an example of how mimesis and cultural memory work together and exist in Irish society. Scholar Emily Mark-Fitzgerald writes in her book on the visualisation of the famine that monument and memory have combined to create a contemporary visual culture of the famine that is rooted in the representations of nineteenth-century practices, yet finds itself in the space of current political, social, and academic discourses.³⁶ The famine remains accessible through texts that were written during and shortly after the period, as people wrote about their experiences and the suffering that they witnessed in their country. Christopher Morash states that “for those of us born after the event, the representation has become the reality.”³⁷ What people ‘remember’ about the famine is largely based on what they have read in (contemporary) famine literature, folklore, as well as

³¹ Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 154.

³² Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 155.

³³ Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 155.

³⁴ Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 160.

³⁵ Astrid Erll, “Introduction,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 113.

³⁶ Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, “Visualizing the Famine: Nineteenth-Century Image, Reception and Legacy,” in *Commemorating the Irish Famine*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013): 2.

³⁷ Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995): 2-3.

travelogues, so their memories consist of representations that are mediated. Famine memory in Ireland has experienced an evolutionary revival due to the developments in memory studies, with the 1990s being an important decade for academic discourse. Scholar Donald Akenson characterises famine memory as a popular and emotionally charged phenomenon that has a complex relationship with history, due to it being intertwined with issues presented in narration, representation and identity.³⁸ The study of famine memory can therefore only ever be a partial, subjective, an exploratory one, due to the nature of nineteenth-century texts. The revival in famine literature shows the continuing interest in keeping the famine memory alive and shedding light onto new perspectives and stories that can be told in the framework of a historical narrative. Due to the famine being a culturally cataclysmic event that was experienced across all segments of Irish society, Niall Ó Ciosáin writes that “its memory will continue to exist in local, as well as global communities.”³⁹ Due to the historical novel being heavily embedded with cultural and collective memories, memory theory provides an interesting framework for the analysis of the three contemporary novels that are part of this thesis. Each of the upcoming chapters start with a historical contextualisation of the three themes: hunger, class relations, and imperialism. Combining the historical facts with a few short stories written during, and shortly after the era will provide an insight into the earliest memories of the famine. The analysis of the contemporary literature guided by the themes mentioned earlier will therefore be based on memory theory, which historical novels, contemporary or not, cannot exist without. It is expected that, due to the always changing nature of cultural memory, the representations of the themes in the contemporary novels have changed significantly compared to the stories written during and after the famine. Historical research has managed to explain the famine era and this will have impacted the way the contemporary authors tell their stories.

³⁸ Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Toronto: P.D. Meany Company, 1993), 16.

³⁹ Niall Ó Ciosáin, “Approaching a folklore archive: the Irish Folklore Commission and the memory of the Great Famine,” *Folklore* 115, no. 2 (2004): 225.

2. Hunger

2.1 Landscapes

The first signs of failing potato crops began to show in 1845, with the first appearance of the potato blight leading to scarcity that spread over the whole country. The fungoid disease was rapidly attacking all the crops in Ireland and, in combination with the extremely wet weather during the time, there were reports that at least half of the potato crop had been ruined.⁴⁰ Rosa Mulholland describes this occurrence in her story called “The Hungry Death” (1891), however, what should be mentioned about this particular story beforehand, is that there have been critical debates about whether the story is actually about the famine of the 1840s, or if it refers to the eras of Irish famine that happened before, between 1740 and 1741, as well as after, in the year 1879. Thus, for the purpose of this thesis the story will be interpreted as referring to the famine of the 1840s. That being said, Mulholland describes a man saying “if the spring doesn’t mend, half my pratees was washed dane out o’ the ground last night,” to which another man replies “pick them up an’ put them in again [...] I tell ye last night was the last o’ the rain.”⁴¹ This indicates that the blight had not yet reached its peak, and people assumed that it would get better again. The failure of the crops in 1845 proved not to be enough for starvation, as people were able to live off of the grain that was imported from the United States by Prime Minister Robert Peel.⁴² However, August of 1846 saw the return of the potato blight in full force, with a total failure of the potato crops which Terence Jenkins writes “was bound to have devastating consequences in a country where there were large numbers of subsistence farmers entirely dependent on the fortunes of the potato harvest.”⁴³ The first of these consequences is well documented in short stories written during, and shortly after the famine, as Rosa Mulholland writes in “The Hungry Death” (1891) that “all through that summer the rain fell, and, when Autumn came in Bofin, there was no harvest either of fuel or of food. Those [potatoes] that remained in the ground were nearly all rotted by a loathsome disease, the smiling little fields that

⁴⁰ T.A. Jenkins, “Prime Minister 1841-6,” in *Sir Robert Peel*, (London: Palgrave, 1999), 96-134, 123.

⁴¹ Rosa Mulholland, “The Hungry Death,” in W.B. Yeats, ed., *Representative Irish Tales*. (London and New York: Putnam, 1891), 367.

⁴² T.A. Jenkins, “Prime Minister 1841-6,” in *Sir Robert Peel*, (London: Palgrave, 1999), 96-134, 123.

⁴³ T.A. Jenkins, “Prime Minister 1841-6,” in *Sir Robert Peel*, (London: Palgrave, 1999), 96-134, 124.

grew the food were turned into blackened pits, giving forth a horrid stench.”⁴⁴ The fields that were full of blooming potato flowers the previous years, had now been replaced by rotting potatoes that had started to smell, and the Irish people barely had anything to fall back on.

Paul Lynch’s contemporary historical novel *Grace* (2017), contains similar mentions of the weather as well, with titular character Grace being told that “it rained in Glásan and what have you and that’s what done it for the lumper potatoes,” and then continues by saying “what a strange year it’s been, the rain and the storms that upturned summer into winter and the heat of September and then that bilgewater stench that came from the field. Now, this flood October. The rains like something biblical and everything dead.”⁴⁵ The images of ruined, blackened fields appear throughout the novel, as well as mentions of the failing crops, as in “every field and lazybed the lumper stalks have become slippery with rot, the crops become scrawny old legs withering to their last moment.”⁴⁶ Yet there remains a certain sense of hopefulness about the harvest sorting itself out eventually, as Grace recalls a memory of her mother when she hears that the potato has failed again, “that endless month after the old crop ran out and then the wait for August’s harvest. This year the wait is thirteen months long. Soon the crop will come and everything will be right again.”⁴⁷ Similar to “The Hungry Death” (1891), there is a feeling that the crop will come back and relieve the Irish population of the hunger. These images of rotting fields are present throughout Charles Egan’s novel *The Killing Snows* (2008) as well, when one of the main characters Luke says that “for some days, he had been watching the stalks blackening, [...] he noticed the sickly sweet smell, but it was stronger now. [...] He could not find a single potato that was anything but rotten.”⁴⁸ The particular smell of rotten potatoes and the changing of the landscapes from blossoms to “death and starvation”⁴⁹ are both significant aspects that define the way the famine is represented.

⁴⁴ Rosa Mulholland, “The Hungry Death,” in W.B. Yeats, ed., *Representative Irish Tales*. (London and New York: Putnam, 1891), 372.

⁴⁵ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017), 9.

⁴⁶ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017), 232.

⁴⁷ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017), 217.

⁴⁸ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008), 92.

⁴⁹ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018), 22.

2.2 Faces of hunger

The consequences of these failing crops were unimaginable and started to show quickly, as Margaret Kelleher writes that the first deaths from starvation were reported in October of the same year and that the death rates rose in the months that followed.⁵⁰ Hunger and starvation presented itself in devastating ways, and sketches in the *Illustrated London News* portray hooded women with children in their arms, with captions such as “Woman begging at Clonakilty” (fig. 1). Women were seen on the streets begging for food, a little money, or anything they could get, often with an (infant) child in their arms. Other images like “Boy and Girl at Cahera” (fig. 2) show children that almost resemble animals. They are portrayed with sunken eyes, very little clothing that is ripped to shreds, and look like, what could be called, the living dead. Images of starving children and women were the most commonly used in both texts and images that were found in newspapers and stories. David Lloyd writes in his article on the spectres of Irish hunger, that it is the female or the child victim that is most frequently invoked because they are “figures that already occupy an ambiguous boundary between culture and nature which furnish easier objects for compassion and pity.”⁵¹ Images of the famine are therefore feminised in these representations. Margaret Kelleher’s work adds to this as she argues that the image of the emaciated, semi-naked woman with an infant at her breast is particularly powerful because it shows an inversion of motherhood. She writes that a mother and mother’s milk are symbols of birth, life and renewal, however, “the shrivelled up breast, the starving infant now represent horror, death, and hopelessness and the mother becomes the giver of death instead of the giver of life.”⁵²

Hunger and its effects on the Irish people were not sugar coated in the stories from the nineteenth century, as writers Rosa Mulholland and Mrs Hoare describe what the emaciated bodies of women and children looked like in full detail. Mulholland’s “The Hungry Death” (1891) follows a young woman named Brigid who witnesses the people around her die of starvation, and she describes the way they look, behave, and sometimes also how they eventually pass away. Children’s faces are described to look “hollow and punched, the cheekbones’ cutting

⁵⁰ Margaret Kelleher, “The Irish Famine: History and Representation,” in *Palgrave Advances in Irish History*, ed. Mary McAuliffe, (London: Palgrave, 2009), 84-99, 85.

⁵¹ David Lloyd, “The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger,” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 163.

⁵² Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997): 143.

through the skin, her sweet blue eyes sunken and dim, her pretty mouth purple and strained.”⁵³ They have lost all of the features that characterise happy, young, and healthy children. She continues this comparison between the then and now by saying that “troops of children that a few months ago were rosy and sturdy, now stretched their emaciated limbs by the fireless hearths, and wasted to death before their maddened mothers’ eyes.”⁵⁴ Mrs. Hoare continues this narrative in her story “The Black Potatoes” (1851), in which the narrator speaks of the horrors that they see happening around them, again with a specific focus on what is happening to the children who “presented a lamentable picture of premature decay.”⁵⁵ These depictions show the terror and the reality of the famine, because women and children were seen as the vulnerable people of society already, so seeing them walking around looking like skeletal versions of themselves delivers the extra punch.

Paul Lynch’s novel *Grace* (2017), describes the physical effects of starvation in the same graphic way as texts published during the nineteenth century, but there is also a distinct focus on the psychological effects that it has on the main character, who is also the narrator. Grace encounters many starving people, especially children who are begging for food and money. About the children she says “raggedy little shapes that follow you, walk alongside you, say a prayer for you, ask you your name, hold a cupped palm out. One boy walks silently alongside her for an hour or more, his eyes on her like a dog.”⁵⁶ She feels guilt during and after the encounters with children, because she has nothing to give them, and she knows that the begging children are often used by adults to trap the wanderers and rob them. As she keeps walking the descriptions of how hunger is affecting people get worse, as she sees mud cabins with people emerging from them, when she feels “the ghost weight of an old man pulling at her elbow.”⁵⁷ The sight of him shocks her because she had not seen hunger like this before, and describing his touch as ‘ghost weight’ must mean that he is severely thin. Perhaps the most striking sight is that of a boy that is covered with “the fur of hunger,”⁵⁸ a small child that has grown hair on his face due to being

⁵³ Rosa Mulholland, “The Hungry Death,” in W.B. Yeats, ed., *Representative Irish Tales*. (London and New York: Putnam, 1891), 370.

⁵⁴ Rosa Mulholland, “The Hungry Death,” in W.B. Yeats, ed., *Representative Irish Tales*. (London and New York: Putnam, 1891), 375.

⁵⁵ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’ Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 45.

⁵⁶ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017), 47.

⁵⁷ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017), 81.

⁵⁸ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017), 86.

emaciated. In his historical account of the famine, John Kelly writes that a long silky growth of hair will cover the face in the later stages of starvation, which is what happened to the children that Grace comes across.⁵⁹ Grace's character shows more of a conscience about what is happening around her, while in the stories from the nineteenth century there seems to be a passivity about the situations the characters find themselves in. What the encounters also clarify is exactly how close Grace is to the hunger, as she is physically touched by it, and it is also written from her perspective. Grace feels guilt, shame, and anger about what she sees on the road and in the places she stays in, and these emotions are described by the author. The nineteenth century stories, however, present a clear distance from it. The narrator in, for example, "The Hungry Death" (1891) is a third person omniscient one and describes what the characters are doing, seeing, as well as feeling. However, because this is done by someone that is not present in the narrative, it creates a distance between the characters and their experiences with the famine and presents more of a matter of fact storyline.

Charles Egan's novel *The Killing Snows* (2008) shows a perspective that differs from the one in *Grace* (2017). The narrator is not first person, but a third person omniscient, much like the narrators in nineteenth century stories. The main character in this narrative, Luke, takes on a job for the government, working as one of the leaders of the relief works. He suffers from the consequences of the famine as well, but there is a certain distance between him and the people that need a job on the relief works. He has the ability to observe the Irish people most affected by the famine from a distance, as he is, because of his job, one stage removed from the worst suffering. Luke often thinks about what he has seen while at work, because he has to travel between different relief projects, or is just walking around his town. The suffering he witnesses stays on his mind for a while, as he thinks about "the haggard women at the well. The ragged appearance of the two lean men begging for shelter. He thought about Pat's comments about the fever and lice and remembered the pitiful families on the road and in the long lines outside the Workhouses in the towns."⁶⁰ The faces of hunger continue to haunt him as Luke and his family have to queue for the Soup Kitchen in their town, and they are confronted with "the gaunt figures carrying their bowls, shuffling forward towards the giant pots."⁶¹ There are feelings of shame that come with this, not for the people that they join in the queue, but rather it is Luke's father

⁵⁹ John Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, (London: Picador, 2012), 94.

⁶⁰ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows* (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008), 42.

⁶¹ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows* (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008), 47.

Michael that struggles with the fact that he cannot provide for the family. The “look in his father’s eyes, the look of humiliation and broken pride,”⁶² is something that he finds harder to deal with than the physical suffering he faces in the queue. The male characters’ feelings of shame about the ability to provide for the family is not present in the nineteenth century texts as often as they are in the contemporary texts. While at his job at the relief works, Luke is confronted with the severity of the late stages of hunger, as an extremely emaciated child wants to register himself for the job. Charles Egan describes the looks of the child in full detail: “There was another child, ten years old perhaps. His bare arms were like sticks, thin ribbons of wasted muscle showing through. Much of the hair on the top of his head was missing, bald patches showing through where it had fallen out. But on his forehead, on his cheeks and on the rest of his face, there was a light covering of hair, the face of a fox.”⁶³ The “fox children” disgust Luke and he can barely stand to look at them, however, he once again has to face what starvation does to human beings. As previously mentioned, the fox children are present in *Grace* (2017) as well, and in both narratives they invoke feelings of horror, disgust, and sadness. Children are, after all, one of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Orla McAlinden’s *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) follows the story of a young girl called Sally, whose parents have just died from the fever and has thus become an orphan. She is left to her own devices and is forced to find a way to survive on her own. The first mention of Sally, at the start of the novel, is that “her barely breathing body might have been mistaken for a pile of discarded rags tossed on the lightly tamped grave in which both of her parents lay.”⁶⁴ This image immediately sets the tone for the rest of the novel, as the reader meets Sally in the most vulnerable state: starving and grieving. The story contains similar feelings of male pride towards hunger. Sally recalls a memory of her father regarding the potato harvest when he says to her, “never eat the seed potatoes, never, it’s the laziest act of the laziest fool.”⁶⁵ After a while, however, the hunger gets so bad that her father is forced to get over his pride and eat the seed potatoes, as there is nothing else left to eat for them. Sally wants to go to another city in order to find work, and comes across many people who tell her stories of starvation, a man says to her

⁶² Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows* (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008), 47.

⁶³ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows* (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008), 156.

⁶⁴ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018), 13.

⁶⁵ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018), 17.

that “babies are dead by the score too, from want of mother’s milk.”⁶⁶ There, again, is the feminisation of the famine, as the death of children and mothers are used to paint the shocking image of starvation.

2.3 Desperation

The hunger often went paired with desperation, as people would do anything to get some kind of food into their stomachs. Mrs. Hoare’s main character in “The Black Potatoes” (1851) says that she will take “any donation of meal, bread, or black potatoes,”⁶⁷ the latter being actual rotten potatoes, which shows the level of hunger that she was going through. In Mrs. Meredith’s “Ellen Harrington” (1865), the narrator describes how people would jump on the food and says that it was “a savage scene; all hands seized on what they could get; many ate the uncooked substances with ravenousness.”⁶⁸ Other forms of desperation are how people are willing to sell everything they owned in order to get something to eat, drink, or buy medicine in case they had fallen ill. In “The Black Potatoes”, (1851) it is stated that “one by one their scanty articles of furniture, and then their goats and sheep were sold, to procure food for their starving children” and “everything, even to the griddle on which she had baked their meal cakes, had been sold,”⁶⁹ which left the starving family with very little possessions.

Paul Lynch’s *Grace* (2017) depict the majority of the wandering people on the roads, the children that ambush Grace, and the groups of people in the cities all have things that they want to sell in order to procure food for themselves and their children. The desperation that hunger is accompanied by is something that Paul Lynch mentions when he writes that “everything is for sale, it seems - chairs and creepies, dressers, tables, bed ticks, straw, rag items of clothing, a mottled iron crucifix.”⁷⁰ The people are willing to sell anything that someone even shows the slightest interest in, and as Grace observes a man trying to sell a morsel of clothing that he is still wearing on his thin body, she thinks “this is what people are doing now, they are pawning one sleeve at a time; soon there will be people walking about naked but for one leg of their breeches

⁶⁶ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018), 51.

⁶⁷ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes” in *The Shamrock Leaves* page 45

⁶⁸ Mrs Meredith, “Ellen Harrington”, in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 63-64.

⁶⁹ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’ Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851),

⁷⁰ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017), 81.

or just a single sleeve.”⁷¹ Orla McAlinden’s *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) shows a different side of desperation than *Grace* (2017) does, when “Molly and Sally had been set to whin the stones from the grains, and oftentimes they were so hungry they had slipped a few hard, raw grains into their mouth and chewed them until they were nothing but pulp.”⁷² The two girls have opted to secretly eat raw grains because they are too hungry and their family does not have enough grain to feed the whole family for a longer period of time. In *The Killing Snows* (2008), Luke encounters a woman “who was holding out her apron to hold the potatoes that the man was passing to her, Luke could see that every one was rotten, yet she was hoarding them in to herself.”⁷³ The man and woman were so desperate for food that they were going to eat the rotten potatoes out of the fields. The depiction of the Irish people’s desperation for food and money seems to not have changed between the nineteenth century and these particular twenty-first century narratives.

2.4 The fever

Another consequence of the hunger was the typhus epidemic that killed groups of Irish people before the hunger could, and it was the worst that had ever visited the country. The Irish themselves called the disease “road fever” because it was most often caught by people who wandered around the streets, but was also prevalent in overcrowded places like workhouses, as it could easily spread there.⁷⁴ The factors that were present in the majority of fever victims are, summed up by Frank Neal: “poverty, poor diet, damp conditions, lack of clothing and low income.”⁷⁵ Most of the people living in workhouses were exposed to such conditions, as well as some families still living in their homes, as they had either lost or sold most of their possessions to get food. Some people could overcome the fever, but most people who caught it passed away due to its complications, as the majority of people were so poor that they could not afford to buy medicine of any kind to combat the disease. Mrs. Meredith writes in her story called “Ellen Harrington” (1865) about the conditions that the fever left people in, especially families that still

⁷¹ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017), 119.

⁷² Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018), 68.

⁷³ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows* (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008), 174.

⁷⁴ M.R. King, “The Epidemiology of Typhus Fever in Ireland,” *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)* 42, no. 43 (1927): 2644.

⁷⁵ Frank Neal, “Liverpool and the Irish Fever,” in *Black ‘47: Britain and the Famine Irish* (London: Palgrave, 1998): 125.

lived in their cabin homes: “they entered one of the best looking cabins, and they saw in one corner of the wretched apartment, a man lying on his back, almost naked, and evidently dying; two children were dead at her side, and one, in the delirium of fever, lay tossing and moaning on her lap.”⁷⁶ The people suffering from fever were either depicted in an extremely vulnerable way, for example laying on the roads without any form of protection against the elements, hidden behind the closed doors of their cabins, or in the workhouses. David Lloyd states that “so many of the representations of the Famine take place at the threshold, at a cabin door beyond which a starving family is dying,”⁷⁷ which hides the terrifying sights that the fever caused from anyone who passes the cabins. Lloyd further explains that the thresholds are the “remnants of a dissolving boundary, the eroding sills of a sense of proper distance and distinction” and they can instill absolute terror into the spectator.⁷⁸ Mrs. Meredith portrays the fear of catching the fever in her story as well, when one of the men in the narrative steps into a crowded workhouse and says to himself “it was fever, perhaps death, to breathe it; and even to a man who had dared cannon-balls, it was an unwelcome risk.”⁷⁹ Crossing the barrier of the thresholds means risking one’s health and safety.

The fever is not often described in detail in Charles Egan’s *The Killing Snows* (2008), but there are critical mentions of it. An example is when Pat and Murtybeg travel to Liverpool for work, and the fear of people potentially having fever is depicted as the group of workers distance themselves from the hungry families on the boat. They express their fears to each other, which enforces the belief that starving people carried the fever around with them. Luke is most often confronted with starvation and fever through his job, which becomes evident when Charles Egan writes: “what struck him most forcibly though was how invisible hunger and fever had been. The hungry and sick lived and died at home, it was not talked about. But the relief works had brought all the suffering together and it could not be ignored.”⁸⁰ The worst of the fever and hunger could only be seen if a certain boundary was crossed, namely that of a workhouse or the cabins of families that still lived on their farms, because most of the suffering was hidden behind closed

⁷⁶ Mrs Meredith, “Ellen Harrington”, in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 63-64.

⁷⁷ David Lloyd, “The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger,” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 164.

⁷⁸ David Lloyd, “The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger,” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 164.

⁷⁹ Mrs Meredith, “Ellen Harrington”, in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 73.

⁸⁰ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows* (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008), 132.

doors in an attempt to contain the illness. In both the contemporary and the nineteenth century texts, the sentiment remains that the fever is most often visible behind closed doors, and that the contact with fever can have severe consequences: contamination and the terror that the sight gives to people.

3. Social class

3.1 Class relations between rich and poor people

The potato famine's massive and destructive consequences were largely due to Ireland's social structure. Dean Braa writes in his article on Irish society that, in 1841, "out of a population of slightly over eight million, five and a half million people were dependent on agriculture."⁸¹ The holdings they possessed were often of small size, for Braa states that "20% of the individual holdings were less than one acre."⁸² The owners of these small plots of land were often called the cottiers, also known as the lower class in Irish society. Michael Beames explains that the distinction between cottiers and labourers lies in the fact that cottiers "paid their rent in money, and not in labour."⁸³ The consequences for the cottiers and the landless labourers were the most devastating, as they already had very little to lose.⁸⁴ The gap between the lower and the higher classes within the Irish population started to increase. The nineteenth-century stories portray the relations between the lower and higher classes as a difficult one, as the richer people are willing to share their wealth within strict boundaries, whereas the poor people are seen sharing everything they have with others.

Mrs Hoare depicts the poorest people's willingness to share whatever scraps of food they have left with people that are suffering the same fate in her story "The Black Potatoes" (1851). In this story, she writes that "the next day a kind neighbour, almost as poor as themselves, brought a little milk, and another a handful of meal, to make a bit stirabout for the crathurs of childher."⁸⁵ These acts of kindness often occur between neighbours, and the sense of community is highly emphasised. Patricia Lysaght's article on the representations of sharing in Irish oral tradition during the famine explains that there was always "an emphasis on the generosity of people that

⁸¹ Dean M. Braa, "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society," *Science & Society* 61, no. 2 (1997): 193-215. 198.

⁸² Dean M. Braa, "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society," *Science & Society* 61, no. 2 (1997): 193-215. 199.

⁸³ Michael Beames, "Cottiers and Conacre in pre-famine Ireland," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 2, no. 3 (1975): 352-354. 352.

⁸⁴ Theodore Hoppen, "Landlords, Society and Electoral Politics in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Ireland," *Past & Present* no. 75 (1977): 62-93. 63.

⁸⁵ Mrs. Hoare, "The Black Potatoes", in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M' Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 32-50.

were of limited circumstances, yet gave their own share of food to others.”⁸⁶ In “Ellen Harrington” (1865), Mrs Meredith writes about Mr and Mrs Longwood, who have recently passed away. Shortly before they died, she writes that they “had exhausted not only their stores, but their energies and strength, in ministering to the wants of the neighbouring poor.”⁸⁷ Again there is this distinct focus on the community sharing their food among the people they live with, which in this instance even means that they sacrifice themselves for the people around them. These acts of kindness are not limited to neighbours, as the mother and her three children in “The Black Potatoes” (1851) are seen “wandering about the country, calling at every house they passed, and subsisting on the charity which is never withheld from the beggar, by those who are themselves but a few degrees better off.”⁸⁸ The narrator suggests that they were dependent on the generosity of the people that were in the same class. The quote also implies that people from the higher classes were not involved at all, as the only help they could get was from people that had little to spare themselves.

If people from higher classes were involved, the sight of how poor people were forced to live was written about with a sense of disgust and horror. Anthony Trollope exemplifies how some of the rich treated the hungry people in his novel *Castle Richmond* (1860), which shows an interaction between Herbert, who is part of the elite, and a starving mother and her dead child. Herbert is unsure of what to do when he sees the body of the child, so “he took from his pocket his silk handkerchief, and, returning to the corner of the cabin, spread it as a covering over the corpse. At first he did not like to touch the small naked dwindled remains of humanity from which life had fled; but gradually he overcame his disgust, and kneeling down, he straightened the limbs and closed the eyes, and folded the handkerchief round the slender body.”⁸⁹ The sight of the dying mother and child first elicits feelings of disgust in Herbert, and there seems to be little to no room for pity or empathy. Herbert “then took from his pocket a silver coin or two, and tendered them to her. These she did take, muttering some word of thanks, but they caused in her

⁸⁶ Patricia Lysaght, “Perspectives on Women during the Great Irish Famine,” *Béaloides* 64, no. 65 (1996): 63-130. 84.

⁸⁷ Mrs Meredith “Ellen Harrington”, in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 67.

⁸⁸ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’ Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 42.

⁸⁹ Anthony Trollope, *Castle Richmond* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860): 110.

no emotion of joy.”⁹⁰ The coins he gives the mother are completely useless to her, as she has barely any energy left in her to go exchange them for food, but Herbert seems to think that they will help her. This interaction shows that he does not know what to do when in contact with people who have nothing left.

The main difference between the two classes is that the people of higher status expect to receive some form of gratitude from the people they have helped, whereas the kindness from people within the lower class seems to be self-evident. Lieutenant Hartley, in Mrs Meredith’s “Ellen Harrington” (1865), is confronted with a young orphan girl who lives in extreme poverty and he says that “the girl’s statement of poverty oppressed him, he longed to open his purse to his new found friend, as he would have done to a brother; and he resolved to find a way to serve him against his will. He placed a bank-note in the little girl’s hand, using almost the words as well as the action of a Good Samaritan.”⁹¹ There is rather a bitter tone used by the narrator as he or she states that the little girl is later taken in by her uncle, to which Hartley says that he is disappointed at the abrupt ending of his connection to her, and especially “the absence of any recognition of his services. The brother, he thought, might have written him a line; and even the little girl ought not to have forgotten his interest in the troubles of the household.”⁹² Hartley clearly expects something in return for his kindness.

The contemporary novels show the dehumanisation of lower class people, which is especially done by the people of a higher status. Relations between significantly richer and poorer people are less romanticised, as people do not offer to help their fellow human beings in any way they can. In *The Flight of the Wren* (2018), Sally Mahon visits the bakery of the Crampton brothers, who own half the businesses in the village and presumably are quite rich. She asks Thomas Crampton: “could you spare me a farl, or a heel, for the love of God?” To this he replies with an action: “with an audible hiss of indrawn breath, he quickly made the sign of the cross and followed it with a sign to ward off the evil eye. He hacked the heel off a loaf in silence, then glanced once more in Sally’s direction. [...] He raised his right arm and she shrank back, expecting a slap. Instead, he threw, as hard as he could, and the precious bread sailed past

⁹⁰ Anthony Trollope, *Castle Richmond* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860): 110.

⁹¹ Mrs Meredith “Ellen Harrington”, in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 69-70.

⁹² Mrs Meredith “Ellen Harrington”, in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 70-71.

her, landing on the ground five feet away.”⁹³ There is a certain cruelty in this action, as he treats Sally like he would an animal, and David Loyd writes that the dehumanisation of the victims that suffered most from the famine made it seem that the way they treated them was somewhat excusable.⁹⁴ The actions from Herbert in *Castle Richmond* (1860) are remarkably less cruel compared to Thomas Crampton, as Herbert attempts to restore some dignity to both the mother and the child by covering the corpse with his handkerchief, while Crampton treats a child that is still alive in an especially dehumanising manner.

The sense of power that people from higher classes have over lower class people regarding food is visible in *Grace* (2017) as well, as Grace comes across a woman who is handing out food to wanderers on the road and thinks to herself: “and it is then she realises the power of food this woman had over them and of a sudden she feels hateful. Take that fox stole from around her shoulders and wring her neck with it. Why are all these people standing in such wintering while she parades about in her fancy coach?”⁹⁵ Grace is angered by the differences between her and the woman to the point that she feels hatred for her. This anger is not only caused by the power of food, but also by the clothing that the woman wears and the material things she owns. Grace’s awareness of the differences between rich and poor grows throughout the novel, and her views of the rich are again primarily expressed through anger about the unfairness of it all: “watching such men in the coffeehouse and watching such men on the street and she thinks that these people have been born clean, born into a higher position, while all the rest of us on earth were born into a lower position and such a thing is all down to who you are and where you come from [...] and there is nothing you can do about it but take it back off them.”⁹⁶ This narrative continues when Grace almost gets run over by a carriage when she is walking down the road with her companion, who says to her that “the have-it-alls and well-to-doers don’t give a fuck what is happening to the ordinary people. You saw that village yesterday and how prosperous it was, untouched by this curse. [...] The only difference is that the rich can continue to live without affliction.”⁹⁷ This is a remarkable shift from the nineteenth-century stories, as the contemporary novels show an awareness about being born in a certain class and

⁹³ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 15.

⁹⁴ David Loyd, “The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger,” *Representations* 92, no.1 (2005): 152-185. 155.

⁹⁵ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 53.

⁹⁶ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 255.

⁹⁷ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 188.

not having the ability to change that. The characters know that this is unfair and emotions of anger, sadness, and bitterness are used to represent this.

The Killing Snows (2008) shows a different perspective than the other two novels, which is that of social divisions within the same class. Main character Luke is confronted with the poverty around him and because he has not been on that level before himself, he says: “it was only now that he saw the poverty around him. The boarding house stood in stark contrast to the rest of Scotland Road. Again he saw the miserable people with shrunken faces, some begging in the rain, others just standing at street corners.”⁹⁸ He has never been in the same position as the people that he encounters through his work, and this allows for him to become ignorant of his surroundings, as he has to shift his perspective in order to see the poverty that others suffer from. Moreover, as Luke shifts to higher ranks at his job, people start to see him as a “government man” and their sentiments towards him go from friendly to a slight contempt, mixed with shame: “people he had known for years refused to look him in the eye,” and “the shame was in having to work on the Relief Works at all. Having to sign in front of Luke made it worse, and they hated him for it.”⁹⁹ There is a serious divide between himself and the people that he once called his friends and has known for most of his life. This divide is mostly caused by the differences in power between Luke and the ordinary people, as he now seems to be a full stage above them in the hierarchy of society. This new job and position in the Irish social structure is also accompanied by talks of violence: “Mayo men saw their supervisors as the scum of the earth. Sometimes in the tunnels Luke had heard plans of murder, but he had reckoned it was only talk, and paid little heed to any of it. But it was different here. Now he was the supervisor.”¹⁰⁰ Luke fears for his life because he is the supervisor and people look at him in a different light now. These talks of violence were not unusual for this point in the famine, as Gale E. Christianson writes that “peasants increasingly took the law into their own hands by resorting to coercion and violence to bring about the desired resolution of their long-standing problems.”¹⁰¹ This agrarian

⁹⁸ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 25.

⁹⁹ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 135.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 171.

¹⁰¹ Gale E. Christianson, “Secret Societies and Agrarian Violence in Ireland, 1790-1840,” *Agricultural History* 46, no. 3 (1972): 369.

violence usually developed as a last resort among the peasants, whose growing frustrations from poverty could no longer be peacefully contained and then erupted with a vengeance.¹⁰²

3.2 Evictions

The relationship between two groups of entirely different classes, landlords and their tenants, is one of great complexity, which is accompanied by lots of anger and destruction. The mass evictions, which were also called clearances, were mostly done by Irish landlords. People's lives were constantly threatened by the possibility of eviction, as Robert James Scally writes that "on several occasions eviction notices were posted on the inhabitants' doors and the dates set for the bailiff's "emergency men" to appear at the townland's threshold with their hooks, rams, and torches."¹⁰³ James S. Donnelly writes about "how the assistant barristers and sheriffs, aided by the police, tore down the roof-trees and ploughed up the hearths of village after village, how the quarter-acre clause laid waste the parishes, how the farmers and their wives and little ones in wild dismay trooped along the highways..."¹⁰⁴ People were forced to leave their homes, and in sketches published by the *Illustrated London News* these violent practices are visualised. In one of their sketches called "The Ejectment," (fig. 3) Irish farmers are seen being removed from their home, as officers stand around with what seem to be weapons in their hands and others are destroying the roof. The owners of the house, a man and a woman, are visibly begging them to stop, but it seems to have no use. Scally states that after the evictions, the cabins were either levelled to the ground or rendered uninhabitable, to prevent people from illegally inhabiting them in the future.¹⁰⁵ The *Illustrated London News* writes that the evictions were "accompanied by an amount of human misery that is absolutely appalling," and that "each succeeding day witnesses its devastations, more terrible than the simoon, and more deadly than the plague."¹⁰⁶ In another sketch, appropriately named "The Day After the Ejection," (fig. 4) the family is seen seeking shelter in a ditch, with nothing to protect them except for a few barren trees. The emotions that

¹⁰² Gale E. Christianson, "Secret Societies and Agrarian Violence in Ireland, 1790-1840," *Agricultural History* 46, no. 3 (1972): 382.

¹⁰³ Robert James Scally, "Eviction," in *The end of hidden Ireland: rebellion, famine and emigration*, 105-133 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 106.

¹⁰⁴ James S. Donnelly, "The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora 1850-1900," *Éire-Ireland* 31, no. 1&2 (1996): 41.

¹⁰⁵ Robert James Scally, "Eviction," in *The end of hidden Ireland: rebellion, famine and emigration*, 105-133 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 108.

¹⁰⁶ *Illustrated London News*, "Evictions of Peasantry in Ireland," 16 December 1848.

are evoked by sketches like the previously mentioned ones show that, as Margu rite Corporaal writes in her book, the evictions, or extermination by the landlords, are “an inhuman system that spread wide and helpless desolation over the country.”¹⁰⁷ Corporaal continues by stating that the landlords “are free to evict the starving tenantry at will, [...] the very unequal power relationships in Irish society, the lack of rights on the parts of the landless, but first and foremost the detrimental agency of the landlords themselves.”¹⁰⁸ The significant differences in power between the landlords and their tenants therefore explain how they could evict people out of their homes, as the lower class people were not able to pay their rent and landlords decided to level their homes.

The cruelty and unfairness of the evictions especially comes to light in William Carleton’s story “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant” (1857). Owen M’Carthy, who had previously been a successful and kind man, starts to rapidly decline as the famine progresses: “Owen, after a long and noble contest for nearly three years, sank, at length, under the united visitation of disease and scarcity.”¹⁰⁹ As a last resort, Owen leaves his wife and children behind to go on a journey to Dublin, to hopefully find the landlord and ask him to save them from eviction: “my intention ‘ud be to lay our case before the head landlord himself, in hopes he might hould back his hand, and spare us for a while.”¹¹⁰ When Owen arrives at the landlord’s house, there is a stark contrast between himself and the place he is visiting: “a toil-worn man turned his steps to a splendid mansion in Mountjoy-square; his appearance was drooping, fatigued, and feeble.”¹¹¹ He is initially not allowed to see the landlord, and is instead referred to his agent by a servant in the house. After being pushed down and receiving a severe cut on his head, the landlord agrees to speak with Owen, and this is when the landlord says that he “never interferes between him [the agent] and my tenants.”¹¹² There appears to be an extra stage between the

¹⁰⁷ Margu rite Corporaal, *Relocated Memories: The Great Famine in Irish and Diaspora Fiction, 1846-1870*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017): 86.

¹⁰⁸ Margu rite Corporaal, *Relocated Memories: The Great Famine in Irish and Diaspora Fiction, 1846-1870*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017): 87.

¹⁰⁹ William Carleton, “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1857): 391.

¹¹⁰ William Carleton, “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1857): 393.

¹¹¹ William Carleton, “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1857): 395.

¹¹² William Carleton, “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1857): 396.

landlord and his tenants, which is the agent. Robert James Scally writes that “many landlords preferred to place agents as a screen between themselves and public embarrassment or worse,” for the absentee landlords only wished for the steady flow of rents, and their agents had to deal with the rest of the activities, such as rent books and rent collections.¹¹³ Carleton shows this separation as Owen’s landlord does not know, and also does not care, about his tenants’ dire circumstances, when the landlord tells his agent to “give him [Owen] another crown, and tell him to trouble me no more.”¹¹⁴

The workings of the inhuman system of eviction as described by Corporaal come to light when Owen comes back home and a neighbour tells him that the family has been evicted while he was gone to see the landlord: “you have neither house nor home, Owen, nor land. An order came from the agent – your last cow was taken, so was all you had in the world.”¹¹⁵ After some time, Owen responds to this by saying: “The heart within me’s broke – broke!”¹¹⁶ Carleton ends the story of Owen M’Carthy by stating that the family’s house and land remained unoccupied for two years, “and when it was ultimately taken, the house was a ruin; and the money allowed by the landlord for building a new one, together with the loss of two years’ rent, would, if humanely directed, have enabled Owen M’Carthy to remain a solvent tenant.”¹¹⁷ The landlord’s acts towards the M’Carthy family are especially cruel as Owen went all the way to Dublin to visit the landlord, and spoke to him face-to-face, and he still had his family evicted before he could arrive back home. There is an extra punch of cruelty in the fact that the landlord did not even rent the property to another family, or even levelled it, but instead left it empty and without any tenants. Mrs Maberly published her story “The Present State of Ireland and its Remedy” (1847) during the famine, and she writes about the relations between landlords and their tenants. She seems to sympathise with the landlords to an extent, as she thinks that the immense competition for land has rendered them helpless and “the sheer power of numbers forces him to submit to dictation,

¹¹³ Robert James Scally, “The Land System,” in *The end of hidden Ireland: rebellion, famine and emigration*, 23-35 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 27.

¹¹⁴ William Carleton, “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1857): 397.

¹¹⁵ William Carleton, “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1857): 399.

¹¹⁶ William Carleton, “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1857): 399.

¹¹⁷ William Carleton, “Owen M’Carthy; or, The Landlord and Tenant,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1857): 401.

and his efforts at improvement are paralyzed.”¹¹⁸ However, she also emphasises the unequal power balance between landlord and tenant when she writes about people that have left their home behind in order to find work. Upon their return “they will find no trace of home, their wretched hovels will have been levelled with the dust. Too happy to find them deserted, the proprietors of the land will have effaced even their whereabouts.”¹¹⁹ The landlords’ cruelty and their ability to erase a family’s history in the blink of an eye is clearly not something that Mrs Maberly agrees with. Overall, she writes that the relations between landlord and their tenants are not particularly friendly: “the only meeting between them is on a question of rent, and few tenants look upon their landlord as their friend.”¹²⁰ Mrs Meredith’s “The Redeemed Estate” (1865) tells the story of a wealthy family that suffers a lot of material losses and risks losing their estate, which is a perspective that differs from the other stories, as the focus is often on the lower classes being evicted. It proves that anybody could get evicted, no matter their presumed wealth. The family has a lot of debts with creditors, and get paid a visit from government men: “they are bailiffs, and when they serve him with the writ they have in their pockets, he’ll be a prisoner for life.”¹²¹ The debts the accumulated are catching up to them, and Horace tells Mrs Fitzwalter: “I hate to break it to you, but it must be done – flight is our only hope!”¹²² They have to leave their estate or they will be arrested due to their debts.

The depiction of the landlords’ acts and the suffering of the tenants that they evicted is not something that was easily forgotten by the Irish. James S. Donnelly writes that the public memory of the famine was radically influenced by “the suffering and death inflicted by many members of the Irish landed elite, and it essentially obliterated the recollection of whatever good had been done by some of the members of that class.”¹²³ This alteration of the Irish public memory regarding the landed elite is visible throughout the contemporary novels, as they portray the relationships between landlords and their tenants as more hostile. The protagonist in *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) is part of the lower class and has to leave her own home due to her

¹¹⁸ Mrs Maberly, *The Present State of Ireland and its Remedy* (London: James Ridgway, 1847): 6.

¹¹⁹ Mrs Maberly, *The Present State of Ireland and its Remedy* (London: James Ridgway, 1847): 12.

¹²⁰ Mrs Maberly, *The Present State of Ireland and its Remedy* (London: James Ridgway, 1847): 23.

¹²¹ Mrs Meredith, “The Redeemed Estate,” in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 135.

¹²² Mrs Meredith, “The Redeemed Estate,” in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 135.

¹²³ James S. Donnelly, “The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850-1900,” *Éire-Ireland* 31, no. 1&2 (1996): 38.

parents' deaths. The cabin she used to live in is then given to another family and Sally says that "Joly's estate man had broken the rules and given it [the cabin] to a new family. They must have had a few coins set aside to square him, either that or they had some sort of hold over him."¹²⁴ This means that the family would not have obtained it without somehow persuading the landlord's agent, as the cabin was most likely ready to be levelled to the ground. This is not the only confrontation Sally has with eviction, as she hears multiple stories of people being evicted from their homes because they could not pay their rent, and listens to the people around her express their disgust by the landlords' actions. She tells her temporary companion Patrick that "Mickey Dooley died of the want, and his rent unpaid, and Joly had the family put out of the cabin and the roof tumbled."¹²⁵

Landlord Joly is depicted as a ruthless man that evicts people out of their homes without mercy, seeing that the main provider of the family died from hunger yet he still removed the remaining family members from their home. Patrick replies to this by saying that "the unplanted lazy beds are being grazed by sheep now and the landlords are rubbing their hands in glee to be rid of the bloody nuisance of the Irish people off their lands."¹²⁶ Again, there is a depiction of how greedy and selfish the landlords are and that they refuse to let any form of human suffering stop them from their ways. The Joly family name is an interesting one, as it seems to not be entirely fictitious on author Orla McAlinden's part, but instead a historical one. In a text on the famine and its visual and material culture, Ciarán Reilly writes about the Jolys and their journey to Ireland. Reverend Henry Joly was granted the rectory of Clonsast, which "was by no means spared the horrors of the famine years and there were widely reported instances of the depravations that they wrought."¹²⁷ However, the Jolys remained intentionally oblivious to the famine as it unfolded around them. Henry Joly apparently "did little to prevent the hunger as it continued to grow worse,"¹²⁸ but instead spent lavishly during the famine years on items such as musical instruments, books, and furniture. The use of this particular historical name cannot be a coincidence, and it is interesting that McAlinden used it in her otherwise fictitious novel.

¹²⁴ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 18.

¹²⁵ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 51.

¹²⁶ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 52.

¹²⁷ Ciarán Reilly, "The Famine Diaries and Sketches of John Plunket Joly," in *The Great Irish Famine: Visual and Material Culture*, ed. Marguérite Corporaal (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018): 58.

¹²⁸ Ciarán Reilly, "The Famine Diaries and Sketches of John Plunket Joly," in *The Great Irish Famine: Visual and Material Culture*, ed. Marguérite Corporaal (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018): 58.

The Killing Snows (2008) offers another perspective of the brutalities that evictions caused, as the characters in the novel have to evict a family off their property themselves. The two elderly people, Sorcha and her husband, live in Luke's family's cabin on the lower field and they thought that because they do not have the sublet in writing, it would not officially count. However, the land agent and the landlord see it as a breach of the contract. Luke tries to bargain with the land agent but they have to evict the family from their premises. He tells Sorcha that "we're going to have to finish things, the landlord is insisting."¹²⁹ Luke and his family are not particularly high in social ranking, like the landlords, but this makes it clear that the family is one stage above the ordinary people. He does feel horrible about it and makes the comparison between them and the landlord when he says "we go on and on about [landlord] Clanowen, and we're no better ourselves."¹³⁰ There is a certain awareness of the social position they find themselves in, as they know that their actions are similar to that of the landlords. Stories like this were not told during the nineteenth century, as the focus proved to be more on what was happening to the victims of the evictions.

3.3 Workhouses

The many evictions that took place during the famine era caused many people to become homeless, and they ended up on the streets. People would often take their families along with them and try to walk to another city, with hopes to find a place to work or food to eat. James S. Donnelly writes that: "to receive some of the exterminated [smallholders], poorhouses were erected all over the island, which had the effect of stifling compunction in the ejectors. The poorhouses were soon filled."¹³¹ However, these workhouses were built for relieving abnormal distress in a poor country in normal times, and not to contend with the mass starvation and disease of a catastrophic famine. The houses were quickly overcrowded, as James S. Donnelly writes in his book on the potato famine that "the Fermoy workhouse in County Cork, with proper accommodation for only 800 persons, was inundated with more than 1,800 paupers."¹³² The healthy and diseased people were all mixed together due to lack of space, which meant that the mortality rates in this particular house rapidly rose with appalling percentages, as "out of 2,294

¹²⁹ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 120-121.

¹³⁰ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 120.

¹³¹ James S. Donnelly, "The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850-1900," *Éire-Ireland* 31, no. 1&2 (1996): 41.

¹³² James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007), 103.

persons admitted, as many as 543, or nearly 24 percent, had perished within two months.”¹³³ The conditions in the workhouses were therefore absolutely horrifying, and writers emphasised this in their stories as well, especially the lack of space people had.

In the nineteenth-century stories, the sentiments towards the workhouses are not particularly hopeful, as ending up in one is often presented as the very last resort for families. The story “Attie and his Father” (1912) by writer Slieve Foy, features a family that is about to go their separate ways out of absolute desperation: “John, who was a peasant farmer, had shrunk from proposing the poorhouse to his aged mother, although he saw that there was no other resource.”¹³⁴ The decision to go to a workhouse is not taken lightly, as they are basically forced to do so in fear of starvation. Mrs Hoare’s story “The Black Potatoes” (1851) presents going to a workhouse as an option that is seen as worse than starving on the streets, as character Jude says: “she preferred undergoing those sore privations to seeking admission into the overcrowded pestilential precincts of the workhouse, where she would be separated from her children.”¹³⁵ Being separated from her children is something that she cannot bear to imagine and prevents her from seeking shelter at the workhouse, as well as the horrible conditions there. “Little Mary” (1851) is another story by Mrs Hoare that emphasises the condition in the workhouses, when one of the main characters says that she does not want to “follow the rest of the country into the poorhouse, which was crowded to that degree that the crathurs there hadn’t room even to die quietly in their beds, but were crowded together on the floor like so many dogs in a kennel.”¹³⁶

The representations of the workhouses have not changed much throughout the years, as the contemporary novels provide the reader with similar sentiments, as well as scenes regarding the workhouses. In Charles Egan’s *The Killing Snows* (2008), Luke has to visit a workhouse as part of his job, and he is severely shocked by the conditions in which people have to live there. He observes that “it was overcrowded, with twice the number of inmates it was designed for. Families had been split up into male and female. In the dormitories, the inmates were sleeping sometimes two or three a bed, sometimes on straw on the floor with rough blankets thrown over

¹³³ James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007), 103.

¹³⁴ Slieve Foy, “Attie and His Father: A Tale of the Poor,” in *Stories of Irish Life, Past and Present* (London: Lynwood, 1912): 44.

¹³⁵ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 44.

¹³⁶ Mrs Hoare, “Little Mary”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 86.

them.”¹³⁷ It is not only overcrowded inside the workhouse, as there are crowds of hundreds of people outside the workhouse as well: “At the front of the crowd, there were men and women clamouring to be allowed in or to be given food.”¹³⁸ Too many people wanted to get into the workhouses, and this shows that the lower class has become massive, with people descending further into poverty as time goes on. Another consequence of this overcrowding is the many deaths that it causes, Luke describes how this is dealt with: “At the side wall on the other side of the Workhouse, another pit was dug as a mass grave. Every night corpses were thrown into it, every morning more was dug, and the grave grew longer.”¹³⁹ His outsider view allows him to make observations that seem to be more factual, as his family never has to deal with the decision whether or not to go to the workhouse.

Orla McAlinden’s character Sally in *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) however, does have to think about potentially ending up in the workhouse. Her feelings towards the idea are similar to those of the characters in the nineteenth-century stories though, as she says: “I’ll never go to the workhouse, Patrick. My father said he’d rather die than go to the workhouse.”¹⁴⁰ Her reasoning is the same as that of the main character in “Little Mary,” (1851) as she explains that “in the workhouse in Parsontown a hundred and one people died of typhus in the space of seven days, and in Edenberry there’s two thousand crammed into the space intended for six hundred.”¹⁴¹ The fear of catching fever plays a role in her decision to never go to a workhouse as well, as she knows that fever is prominent and almost self-evident in the workhouses. The differences between the nineteenth-century stories and the contemporary novels regarding sentiments towards and representations of the workhouses are therefore not that big. They remain places of illness, death, and last resorts in the literature and the descriptions of the conditions within the workhouses have not changed immensely either. An aspect that has become less visible in the contemporary literature is that of family separations in the workhouses, as the main characters in the novels do not actually go to a workhouse themselves. The nineteenth-century stories do portray these separations as the characters are seen leaving their houses due to extreme poverty and desperation.

¹³⁷ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 159.

¹³⁸ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 137.

¹³⁹ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 159.

¹⁴⁰ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 54.

¹⁴¹ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 54.

4. Imperialism

4.1 Government relief

There was a combination of political and ideological considerations that led to the British government's response to the partial potato crop failure of 1845-46, as T.A. Jenkins states that Peel "urged upon his cabinet colleagues the policy of throwing open United Kingdom ports immediately, admitting foreign grain and all other foodstuffs without importation duties."¹⁴² Peel stimulated the import of cheap substitutes for the potato, which were mostly maize and rice. Furthermore, he repealed the Corn Laws, in the hope of replacing the potato for a longer period of time, which Peter Gray writes went combined with "an element of free-trade opportunism."¹⁴³ His decisions helped to stave off starvation in the first year of the famine, but it also ended up splitting the ruling Conservative Party and eventually terminated Peel's career in politics.¹⁴⁴ In early 1846, Peel's government secretly bought about £100,000 worth of Indian meal, which did not serve the primary purpose of directly feeding the Irish people, but instead was bought to regulate the market price of grain and help the Irish peasantry get accustomed to the new food.¹⁴⁵ As distress regarding hunger started to aggravate, the government slowly opened depots where people were able to receive their food. The government did not expect the Indian meal that was distributed throughout the country to be so 'popular,' as it had previously been rejected by people. However, James S. Donnelly writes that the resistance was short-lived, as the Indian meal was "much too good a thing to be rejected by starving people."¹⁴⁶

The British government's decisions regarding their relief attempts and shipments of Indian meal did not go unnoticed in the nineteenth-century stories, as Mrs Hoare writes in "The Black Potatoes," (1851) that the "Relief Funds, supported partly by a government grant, and partly by liberal subscriptions from the landlords, were established through the country. [...] The poor women, whose husbands and sons were working on the roads, would walk a distance of six,

¹⁴² T.A. Jenkins, "Prime Minister 1841-6," in *Sir Robert Peel*, (London: Palgrave, 1999): 124.

¹⁴³ Peter Gray, "Famine and Land, 1845-80," In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History*, ed. Alvin Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 3.

¹⁴⁴ Peter Gray, "Famine and Land, 1845-80," In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History*, ed. Alvin Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 3.

¹⁴⁵ Peter Gray, "Famine and Land, 1845-80," In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History*, ed. Alvin Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 8.

¹⁴⁶ James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007): 51.

eight, and sometimes ten miles, to purchase the meal and carry it home on their backs.”¹⁴⁷ The Indian meal depots were spread over the country, which meant that people had to walk long distances to collect their much-needed food. Another writer, Mrs Meredith, writes in her story “Ellen Harrington” (1865) about the shipments of Indian meal that came through the Irish ports: “she [the ship called the Breeze] was laden with food for the relief of the famine-stricken inhabitants of the district; and, forwards in love as in war, before she came to an anchor, preparations for the delivery of her cargo were rapidly progressing.”¹⁴⁸ The nineteenth-century stories do not speak much about the effects of the government’s actions or express opinions about these attempts at relieving the famine.

After another complete crop failure in 1846, the Whig-Liberal administration of Lord John Russell was tasked with responding to the renewed catastrophe. They obtained an uncertain majority in Parliament and were therefore already a weaker government than Peel’s previous administration. Public relief works had already been started; however, Russell wanted to make this the country’s primary form of relief and put the government’s interference with the grain trade on the backburner.¹⁴⁹ This political ideology was largely influenced by Charles Trevelyan, who had held the assistant secretaryship at the Treasury since 1840, and wanted to implement a “laissez-faire”-policy. With this “laissez-faire,” Trevelyan proposed minimal intervention, which James S. Donnelly explains as “the supply of the home market may safely be left to the foresight of private merchants.”¹⁵⁰ This meant that the government limited itself to providing employment on public works while the distribution of food should be left to private charities, with the possible exception of remote areas, but they were essentially only going to put money into relief projects. Mrs Hoare mentions this specific moment in “The Black Potatoes,” (1851) as the narrator talks about how “at the end of August this seasonable supply was obliged to be stopped, and the poor were thrown on the resources afforded by their miserable gardens.”¹⁵¹ The combination of not prohibiting exportation and their stance on interfering with the grain trade after the summer of 1846, is what most scholars would agree are Russell and Trevelyan’s biggest

¹⁴⁷ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’ Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 33.

¹⁴⁸ Mrs Meredith “Ellen Harrington”, in *The Lacemakers* (London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865): 55.

¹⁴⁹ James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007): 65.

¹⁵⁰ James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007): 67.

¹⁵¹ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’ Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 33.

mistakes, as it allowed for the Irish food prices to rise exponentially, which quickly led to mass starvation.¹⁵²

Along with the rise in food prices came the massive burst in activity on the public relief works in late 1846, as people did not have any other source of income. Work on the relief projects often consisted of either the building or reparation of roads and bridges, with the main tasks being cutting hills and filling hollows.¹⁵³ Later the government and the supervisors would also impose “piece work payments” on the labourers, which intended to stimulate work-discipline and reward effort, except it did more harm than good for the already ill and weak people. Another reason for introducing the piece work payments was that the government officials could reduce people’s wages significantly.¹⁵⁴ In “The Black Potatoes,” (1851) one of the characters speaks about what her husband is going through: “my husband is working on the Cahersh road since yesterday week without getting a penny wages: he went there today without breaking his fast.”¹⁵⁵ People were barely getting paid enough to buy food for their families and would often go to work without having eaten anything for breakfast. The conditions on the relief works started to decline even more rapidly as the famine grew worse, and stories like “A Sketch of the Famine” (1851) by Mrs Hoare describe how people literally worked themselves to death on the relief works: “her husband had died the week before by the side of the road where he was working.”¹⁵⁶

The contemporary novels explicitly emphasise the disbelief and frustration about the relief policies that the British government implemented, especially regarding the public relief works. The titular character in Paul Lynch’s *Grace* (2017) starts to work on one of the public works because she is mistaken for a boy in one of the cabins she stays in and is approached by a man from the relief committee who asks her: “why aren’t you out at the public works? You are of age, are you not? The best thing you can do for your family in this straitened times is to be out earning coin. Report there tomorrow - nine pence a day for a full man, but seven pence for

¹⁵² James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007): 69.

¹⁵³ James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007): 71.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Gray, *Famine and Land*, 14.

¹⁵⁵ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 45.

¹⁵⁶ Mrs Hoare, “A Sketch of Famine”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 206.

you.”¹⁵⁷ The preposition is an interesting one, as previously only adult men were allowed to work on the projects as they were the breadwinners for their families. Boys that were fit enough to work were now able to, and most likely pressured into, working on the public relief projects themselves, while women and young girls could not do this yet.¹⁵⁸ Her feelings towards the preposition are mixed and she feels that it is unjust that she has to work, while she has become aware of the fact that other people do not have to work in the relief projects at all: “unjustness, that’s what all this is - feels it sitting on her chest, a different pain from the dullness of hunger.”¹⁵⁹ She does end up going to the relief works, as it is the only option she has left. She starts to talk to some of the men there, who are very sceptical about the goal of the public works:

“And let me tell you, this bog road is nothing but folly. We’re only digging it so they can give us work. He tells her the road site is called the Harrow. Says nobody knows where it will end, they haven’t figured that bit out yet. And the gaffer here doesn’t know what he’s doing or where he comes from and he’s never called work on a road, that’s for sure, but he’s happy enough taking money from the Crown. Some say this road will go over the mountains and cross the channel into England and head onwards towards China.”¹⁶⁰

What the quote also exemplifies is how people will happily take money from the British government, even if they are not sure what the goal of the public works is at all, which depicts their resentment towards the British crown. Main character Sally from Orla McAlinden’s *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) also emphasises the pointlessness of the relief works, as she thinks that it is completely useless and endless: “the other men were off doing pointless famine-relief works, building walls around nothing and roads to nowhere.”¹⁶¹ Grace also hears about the exports that take place, and although she is not sure about whether this is true, she expresses that if it is true “she wonders how anybody could allow it.”¹⁶² This kind of scepticism and outspoken disagreement with the system that the government implemented is not visible in the nineteenth-

¹⁵⁷ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 145.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Gray, “Famine and Land, 1845-80,” In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History*, ed. Alvin Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 17.

¹⁵⁹ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 146.

¹⁶⁰ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 151-152.

¹⁶¹ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 20.

¹⁶² Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 254.

century stories, as they more often described what was happening without explicitly critiquing the government. The main reason for this significant change is the amount of historical research that was done after the famine, and is still being conducted to this day. Research by scholars such as Peter Gray and James S. Donnelly helped establish a historiography of the Great Irish Famine, as well as the influence that the British government had on Ireland during the famine era. The contemporary novels, like *Grace* (2017), contain a number of criticisms regarding the government's interference, or lack thereof, that have only come to light because of the scholars that took an interest in revealing the ins and outs of the famine era.

The Killing Snows (2008) offers the perspective of a young man who starts to work as a public relief works supervisor and has to follow the British government's restrictive rules. However, Luke is still surprised when he hears that food is being exported out of Ireland: "I didn't think we'd be sending food out at a time like this. It's a bit odd, isn't it? Bringing corn all the way in from America, while we're sending food out?"¹⁶³ However, it is explained to him that the cattle and butter is being exported because it is too expensive for the Irish people to buy, while the imported corn is something that they can actually afford to buy. Moreover, the money from the exports partly pays for the soup kitchens that are set up throughout the country: "it's the ratepayers that are paying for the Soup Kitchens. If there's no money from beef, there's no money to pay the rates, and no money for corn."¹⁶⁴ These soup kitchens are set up by Edward Yardley, an Englishman who has regular contact with the prime minister, after Morton closes down the public relief works one by one due to not having enough money to pay the labourers. Yardley explains his intentions to Luke: "as you know from Knockanure, we've been organising our own relief efforts independently of the Union and the Government. We're going to open our own Soup Kitchen right here in Brockagh."¹⁶⁵

The consequences of the piece work payment implemented by the English supervisor Morton are violent and unfair: "you'll see that the number in the gang dropped the day after Morton was here. [...] We're paying the piecework on a gang-by-gang basis, so no one wants weak fellows in their gang, it drags everybody's wages down."¹⁶⁶ People on different gangs are threatening the weaker labourers to leave, which turns the public works into a place that

¹⁶³ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 317.

¹⁶⁴ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 317.

¹⁶⁵ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 293.

¹⁶⁶ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 182.

resembles the survival of the fittest. Morton later even reduces the basic wage that people earn and Luke replies to this by saying that “the people won’t stand for this,” to which someone else replies: “they’ll have to. They’ve no choice. They haven’t got it in them anymore.”¹⁶⁷ The extremely cold weather during the winter, paired with the conditions that both the public works and the people themselves were in caused problems on the projects, as “people started to light fires, stealing turf from cottages nearby. This caused fighting, as the local people saw their only source of heat for the winter disappear. He tried to have the stealing stopped, but survival was more important to desperate men and women.”¹⁶⁸ Luke cannot do anything about it, as he sees how desperate people are and that this is their only option to survive.

4.2 The English and the Irish

The relationship between the English and the Irish people had been severely strained and difficult, as the English felt that they were burdened by the Irish and the situations they were in. Much like the *Illustrated London News*, the magazine *Punch* also published topical and satirical sketches in their issues. An example is one called “The English Labourer’s Burden; or, The Irish Old Man of the Mountain.” (fig. 5) It was published in 1849 and shows an English labourer struggling under the weight of a grinning Irish peasant, who is carrying a sack containing £50,000, which was the amount of a relief grant given to Ireland by the English. The tone of the sketches was often very satirical, with the Irish people being presented as lazy, pathetic and truly a burden to the English. Another frequent depiction of the Irish is one where they are portrayed as having ape-like, bestial, or demonic features, which can be seen in a sketch called “The British Lion and the Irish Monkey” (fig. 6) that was published in *Punch* in 1848. Compared to the English majestic lion, the Irish caricature looks inferior. This is not mentioned in stories of the era; however, it is present in contemporary literature like *Grace* (2017). The Irish as the English burden is what Mrs Maberly emphasises in “The Present State of Ireland and its Remedy” (1847), as she writes that if the English government continues to help Ireland, the “evils of the Irish system will spread to England; the standard of wages will fall, a spirit of discontent be engendered.”¹⁶⁹ She writes about the Irish situation as if it is a curse and the English are at risk if they interfere too much. The main consequence of this is that “instead of

¹⁶⁷ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 191.

¹⁶⁸ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 182.

¹⁶⁹ Mrs Maberly, *The Present State of Ireland and its Remedy* (London: James Ridgway, 1847): 12.

raising Ireland to an equality with itself, England will sink from her high estate to the level of those whose sorrows she has so long deplored.”¹⁷⁰ The English will lose everything if they continue to help and support the Irish people and relieve them of their hunger.

James S. Donnelly writes in his book about the famine that “the relative rarity of specific denunciations of the British government in famine folklore, should not be interpreted to mean that victims and survivors of the famine had little or no grasp of hostile forces beyond those that they could see at close hand.”¹⁷¹ The general public seems to assume that the Irish had little to no knowledge about the differences between themselves and the English during the era. Donnelly argues that through Irish ballad tradition, people spread their (negative) concerns and sentiments regarding the British government and the English people in general. Although there is not a lot of representation in stories written during the era, the Irish were not as oblivious to their situation as this implies. Mrs Hoare’s “The Black Potatoes” (1851) portrays the way the Irish interacted with the English: “his wretched ill-clad wife, standing beside him, with a dish, to receive the black unwholesome food, looked first on the ground, and then, glancing upwards with such a look of patient death-stricken anguish as Englishmen seldom see.”¹⁷² She means that the English have barely seen hunger and just how it can affect human beings up close, especially the kind of agony that is visible in the woman’s eyes. Another aspect that comes to light in this particular story is what can be interpreted as a satirical, sarcastic jab at the English: “for the Irish peasant (when he can be supplied with them gratis,) is quite as fond of swallowing drugs as any titled lady in London can be, when suffering from an attack of the nerves.”¹⁷³ The tone of voice seems to suggest that the English ladies in London will take drugs to soothe their nerves, and Mrs Hoare relates the character’s struggle with fever and illness to this in a kind of sarcastic manner. Moreover, the English ladies most likely have no serious reason to calm their nerves. They do not have to deal with severe poverty and hunger, but instead face problems that are trivialities compared to the Irish people’s daily lives.

The contemporary novels do not conceal their opinions about the English in any way. The authors are straightforward about their feelings towards the actions of the English and do not

¹⁷⁰ Mrs Maberly, *The Present State of Ireland and its Remedy* (London: James Ridgway, 1847): 12.

¹⁷¹ James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007): 38.

¹⁷² Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’ Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 34.

¹⁷³ Mrs. Hoare, “The Black Potatoes”, in *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches from Ireland* (Dublin and London: J. M’ Glashan, Patrick and Oakey, 1851): 39.

shy away from using crude language to describe how their Irish characters feel about their situations. Paul Lynch's *Grace* (2017) expresses a clear view about the fact that the Crown and British government have to help them, as their hunger is growing worse and they cannot do anything about it. Grace hears a man talk about how the Crown will have to do something to relieve them of their hunger: "the prices [of oats] will go up and up so that the rich can protect themselves and that is always the way of it. The Crown will have to do something. They'll have no other choice now."¹⁷⁴ When this does not happen and Grace has found a companion, he indicates that there is a certain loss of hope regarding the Crown and their willingness and ability to help the Irish people: "but who is going to deliver them? Not God and not the Crown and not anybody in this country. Hope is the lie they want you to believe in. [...] Keeps you in your place. Keeps you down."¹⁷⁵ Her companion explains that what the English want is for them to keep hope, to keep believing in them, which will keep the Irish in their place like docile animals. Moreover, there is a mention of an image that Grace saw in school, and she explains what it was: "for a moment she can imagine them, strange creatures with long arms like that drawing one time passed around in school that showed a monkey-man wearing a stovepipe hat and a jacket and breeches that was supposed to be an Irishman talking to some Englishman, long teeth for nibbling."¹⁷⁶ She is aware of and has seen one of the sketches that depicted the Irish as less than the English, she seems to know what her position as an Irish girl is compared to the rest of Britain. This anti-Irish sentiment is something that started to rise rapidly during and after the famine, as Hazel Waters writes that in English minds it was "a widespread, pervasive stereotype of the Irish as a race apart, inferior in every way to the powerful Anglo Saxon, where the English were honest, the Irish were liars; where the English worked and prospered, the Irish idled in poverty."¹⁷⁷ The stereotypes and anti-Irish sentiment continued to exist in cultural memory, as contemporary authors still mention them in their novels, and they have become more critical of the way the Irish were discriminated against.

Orla McAlinden's characters in *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) have a deeply rooted dislike of the English in general. The dislike even goes as far as looking like hatred towards the

¹⁷⁴ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 233.

¹⁷⁵ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 188.

¹⁷⁶ Paul Lynch, *Grace* (London: One World Publications, 2017): 270.

¹⁷⁷ Hazel Waters, "The Great Irish Famine and the Rise of Anti-Irish Racism," *Race & Class* 37, no. 1 (1995): 98.

English government especially. It starts with what the characters do and say when Oliver Cromwell is mentioned: “they both blessed themselves instinctively, and spat, at the mention of the English monster. The curse of Cromwell on ya, the men would shout in the field when the scythe slipped in their hand and gashed them, or a rock fell upon a poorly shod foot during the building of a dry-stone wall.”¹⁷⁸ In a later conversation they talk about how they feel towards the English and say: “oh the Irish ate meat, like the rest of the world, and counted our riches in fine hides of beef, before that English bastard came over and swept through the land like a plague.”¹⁷⁹ Words like these cannot be found in nineteenth century stories, as writers used different terms back then, which can be seen in the previous paragraph. The focus of their views is mostly geared towards the government, as they do not talk about the ordinary English people but instead attack their leaders. The characters’ sentiments are also placed in one long tradition of colonial history, as their view of the English was established in the past and this suggests that their sentiments have already existed in cultural memory for a longer period. There is a particularly disturbing scene in the novel which depicts an English soldier violently raping a young prostitute, and nearly beating her to death afterwards. Sally seeks refuge with a group of women and she tells them that they will not harm the young child she has with her because she is too young, to which one of the women replies: “too young? Catch yourself on, too young for that pack of bastards yonder in those tents? [...] There’s men in that camp that would get up on a cracked plate, or on a new-born baby. Oh, she’s well big enough to interest those boyos.”¹⁸⁰ Much like the feminisation of the famine regarding depictions of hunger, the violence of the English officers is again targeted towards women. The way McAlinden depicts the soldiers and their horrifying acts is something that does not occur in the other two contemporary novels.

The previously mentioned stereotype of the Irish as “lazy and idling in poverty”¹⁸¹ is visible in *The Killing Snows* (2008), as an English man, Morton, has become a new supervisor on one of the relief works. He quickly establishes new and strict rules regarding people’s wages: “there are ways of making them [people with fever] work faster. We’re going to introduce piecework. A basic wage and the rest by work measured.” He enforces these rules because of his

¹⁷⁸ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 52.

¹⁷⁹ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 52.

¹⁸⁰ Orla McAlinden, *The Flight of the Wren* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2018): 108.

¹⁸¹ Hazel Waters, “The Great Irish Famine and the Rise of Anti-Irish Racism,” *Race & Class* 37, no. 1 (1995): 98.

belief that the starving and tired Irish people are “lazy beyond belief, they will not work unless they are forced to.”¹⁸² However, the Irish characters have particular opinions about the English too, especially regarding money and clothing. There is a specific type of clothing that is viewed as an English way of dressing and there are stereotypes regarding class that go with this. When character Danny is in England for a potential business opportunity, one of the Irishmen on the relief works asks him: “what’s a man like you doing in English clothes? [...] We’ve little enough money to be feeding like Englishmen.”¹⁸³ What this way of dressing suggests is that the English have different reasons for wearing certain clothes, or as Peter Singer explains in his article: “when we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look “well-dressed” we are not providing for any important need.”¹⁸⁴ The starving Irish people need clothes to stay warm and survive, their need for clothing does not come from wanting to look well-dressed, like *The Killing Snows* (2008) suggests it does for the English.

¹⁸² Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 176-177.

¹⁸³ Charles Egan, *The Killing Snows*, (Bristol: Silverwood Books, 2008): 246.

¹⁸⁴ Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229-243, 235.

Conclusion

The Great Irish Famine and its representations in contemporary literature have gone through quite a lot of significant changes throughout the years. The era has left many scars on the Irish national identity and has remained alive in Ireland's cultural memory, as the three analysed novels contain vivid re-imaginings of the events that took place during the nineteenth century, and tap in earlier repertoires of famine literature and imagery. All three authors are Irish themselves, and have either lived in Ireland their whole lives or grew up in England, meaning that they all have different ideas and perceptions of what the famine means. The written text that they each produced are all densely populated by starving, tired, stick-thin people who, not that long ago, had thriving potato fields and were happy and healthy. Visions and people like these are the most common in texts written during the nineteenth century as well, meaning that although many people tragically passed away during the famine, their memory remains somewhat alive in the contemporary literature of the twenty-first century.

The workings of cultural memory in terms of literature is very much visible in the comparison between the nineteenth-century stories and the twenty-first-century novels. The stories' emphasis lies most often on what is happening to the people that the writers are surrounded by, as they themselves are slightly removed from the worst of the suffering. Moreover, the writers and most of the people alive during the era, did not know the details about what was happening to them and what the British government's plans were to try and somewhat relieve them of their hunger. Their view of the era is therefore limited as they often did not possess information about the broader aspects of the catastrophe, they instead had to focus on the things that were happening around them. This did involve politics, but on a local level instead of a national one. The representations in stories by writers such as Mrs Hoare and Mrs Meredith established a particular view of the famine through their localised memories, which were largely based on what poor people had to go through. The Irish popular mind focused itself, understandably enough, mostly on the famine as a moral outrage. This influenced the cultural memory for a long time, as the disturbing fact of, for example, the large exports of food while the masses starved spread quickly without any proper research to back the claim up. Scholar James S. Donnelly explains that "the growing strength of this public memory from the time of the famine itself essentially explains why these localised memories and the 'national' memory do

not neatly dovetail with one another in their concerns.”¹⁸⁵ These memories that existed during the nineteenth century were the base of research that was yet to come.

As the years went on, the cultural memory developed itself as well, and more research was conducted which established a timeline of the era and its consequences. The contemporary literature written during the last decade or so, is largely based on the knowledge that was obtained through this new research. Novels like *The Killing Snows* (2008), *Grace* (2017) and *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) are all loosely based on the true events of the famine. They contain similar themes as the nineteenth-century stories, those of hunger, social relations and imperialism, however these themes are represented in a different way. They contain a broader sense of history, as the authors have the ability to use decades of cultural memories in their work. Overall, the contemporary novels contain characters who have more knowledge on the famine themselves, which is most likely because the authors have as well. Main characters Grace, Sally, and Luke are all young people that seem to be more active in their existence than the characters in the nineteenth-century stories. They are rather critical of the British government, have a certain awareness of their status in the social hierarchy, and generally talk about their feelings and observations with people around them more than in the other stories. The historical novel is thus an interesting vehicle for the workings of cultural memory, because the authors have the ability to inject new and distinct elements into their novels, which were not available during the nineteenth-century.¹⁸⁶

Analyses

The theme of hunger presents itself in subcategories of landscapes, faces of hunger, desperation for food, and the subsequent fever that hunger brought along. Both the nineteenth-century stories and the contemporary novels portray scenes of extremely rainy weather that ruined the potato crops, and the rot that blackened the potato fields which were once full of blooming flowers. The representations of what the hunger did to the Irish people, especially from the physical perspective, are strikingly similar. Both contemporary novels and nineteenth-century stories depict, what Margaret Kelleher calls, a feminisation of hunger, as the focus is mostly put on the way women and children look as they are seen as the most vulnerable people in society. The

¹⁸⁵ James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007): 40.

¹⁸⁶ Astrid Erll, “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory,” In *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 152.

descriptions of their starving bodies are very graphic, and nothing is left to the imagination. Moreover, their desperation for food and what they are willing to do for it is also similarly visible in both of the centuries' representations. There is a distinct willingness to want to sell anything that the starving people possessed in order to buy a scrap of food. People that were not able to properly feed themselves would sometimes be so vulnerable and weak that they would catch the "road fever," as the Irish called it. This fear of fever and what it did to people presents itself more often in the nineteenth-century stories, especially in Mrs Meredith's "Ellen Harrington" (1865), as a certain barrier of a threshold divides the healthy and the sick people. This threshold is also visible in contemporary novel *The Killing Snows* (2008), as the fever is hid behind cabin doors.

One of the significant differences between the depictions of class relations in the nineteenth-century stories and the contemporary novels, is that the latter shows that the characters have the perception that the class system is unjust, and that they are born in a certain class without the advantages that other do have. The nineteenth-century stories are mostly written by people that are one stage above the starving class, as they are able to write about their observations, and their stories feature narrators that are in the same positions. The way they interact with the poor people is that they are visibly disgusted by the way they look, which Anthony Trollope's *Castle Richmond* (1860) depicts. Others seem to expect to receive some form of gratitude from the people they have helped, which is especially visible in Mrs Meredith's "Ellen Harrington" (1865). The evictions that took place during the famine are depicted as one of the most cruel actions done by the landlords in the higher class, as they showed no mercy towards the poor people. Such representations are visible in both nineteenth-century and contemporary stories, with Charles Egan's *The Killing Snows* (2008) offering the perspective of a family that has to evict people off their own premises, whereas *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) shows people talking about their fears of being evicted themselves. One of the consequences of losing their homes was having to go to a workhouse, which the nineteenth-century stories present as the very last option for the characters in for example "The Black Potatoes" (1851), as they would rather die in the streets than face the horrible conditions in the workhouse. This line of thinking is visible in the contemporary literature as well, as Sally in *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) refuses to end up in a workhouse, as the conditions are appalling and it will most likely be the last thing that she does. The overall depictions of the differences between the lower and

higher classes are present in stories from both centuries, however, the contemporary novels show more awareness about it, while the characters in the nineteenth-century stories shows a certain passivity.

Imperialism and criticism regarding the British government's actions is a theme that has gradually become more visible in contemporary literature about the famine. The relief measures that the government took during the famine are presented in the nineteenth-century stories as something they have to endure and which they are unhappy about, however, they do not express their unhappiness with the British government. One of the characters in Mrs Hoare's "The Black Potatoes" (1851) talks about the pointlessness of building the roads, but does not go deeper into the subject. The contemporary novels, on the other hand, show the dislike and the unfairness that the characters feel towards the public relief works, and blame it on the government as well. Paul Lynch's *Grace* (2017) depicts characters on the public works talking about how the measures taken by the government do nothing to help them, and emphasise how useless the work they do seems to be in the big picture. The anti-Irish sentiments that existed among the English is visible in sketches that were drawn during the famine, as well as in a story by Mrs Maberly called "The Present State of Ireland and its Remedy" (1847), where she warns the English government about the possible negative consequences of providing relief for the Irish. The contemporary novel *The Killing Snows* (2008) depicts the anti-Irish sentiments explicitly, as an English supervisor on the public works treats his workers as less than human and believes a lot of the stereotypical notions that existed in the English society. The nineteenth-century stories show a subtle dislike for the English, with Mrs Hoare writing about how the English had not seen the Irish faces of hunger before and are visibly shocked by it in her story "The Black Potatoes" (1851). The characters in the other contemporary novels do not shy away from explicitly criticising and questioning the government, with novels *Grace* (2017) and *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) showing a deeply rooted dislike for the English through their main characters. Titular character Grace gradually starts to become more aware of the way the English treat and perceive the Irish through conversations she listens to, while Sally in *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) has been raised with an anti-English sentiment.

Implications and further research

The implications of the results of this thesis are an addition to the field of Irish literature studies, as the amount of research conducted on contemporary literature is limited. The results imply that the representations of the famine in nineteenth-century stories and contemporary literature have changed throughout the years and have impacted the Irish cultural memory, and vice versa. Moreover, the cultural memory has changed too, as more historical research about the famine meant more knowledge about the political and social workings during the era. The results of this thesis can show the reader the impact of the famine to those most vulnerable in Irish society, and how hunger affects people physically, but also psychologically. They might provide the reader with insight into the political relations between the British government and Ireland in general, and how literature can spread a certain line of thinking among the population. A full picture of the famine can also not be painted without looking at all the different perspectives and social positions that people lived in during the era, as most people suffered immense losses due to the widely spread hunger. The obvious and most extreme losses were suffered by the poorer classes, as they lost what little possessions they had. However, the reader might not have known that people one stage above the poor classes, like Luke's family in *The Killing Snows* (2008), had to make difficult decisions and suffered significant losses as well. Overall, these results offer an insight into the representations of hunger, class relations, and imperialism in three contemporary novels that were published in the last decade.

There are a great number of possibilities for further research. The results of this thesis offer an insight into the contemporary literature that was written about the famine, and how the representations of the themes have changed throughout the years. The corpus of contemporary famine literature is still growing, and the revival in famine literature research is still ongoing. In order to establish a reliable statement concerning the impact of cultural memory on contemporary literature, more research is needed on not only other novels, but other themes as well. There are a number of other literary perspectives to be explored, as this thesis offers two different ones, although they are not extremely far removed from one another. Examples of further research could be an expanded analysis of the three themes presented in this thesis, but also an in-depth look into gender relations in the contemporary literature. It would be interesting to see how the overall perception of the famine and its establishment in media culture has changed throughout the years, which can be achieved if the research on newly published novels

continues. This thesis is a good starting point with regards to famine representations in contemporary literature, but more evidence is needed to lend the results more weight.

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Appendices

Appendix 1



BEGGING AT CLONAKILTY.

Fig. 1 "Begging at Clonakilty." Illustrated London News, February 13, 1847.
<https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/image-index/woman-begging-at-clonakilty/>

Appendix 2



BOY AND GIRL AT CAHERA.

*Fig. 2 "Boy and Girl at Cahera," From Illustrated London News, February 20, 1847.
<https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/image-index/boy-and-girl-at-cahera/>*

Appendix 3

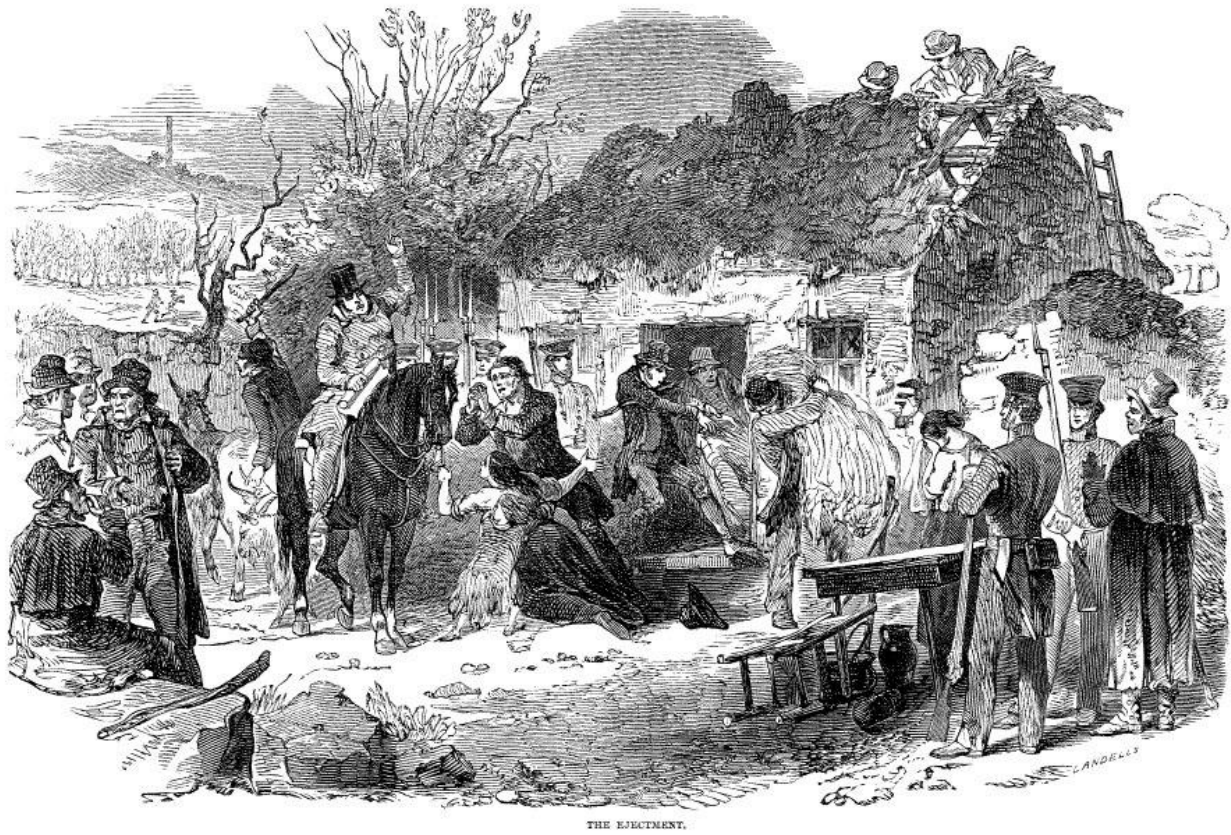


Fig. 3 "The Ejectment," *Illustrated London News*, December 16, 1848
<https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/image-index/the-ejectment/>

Appendix 4



THE DAY AFTER THE EJECTMENT.

Fig. 4 "The Day After the Ejectment," *Illustrated London News*, December 16, 1848
<https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/illustrated-london-news/evictions-of-peasantry-in-ireland/>

Appendix 5



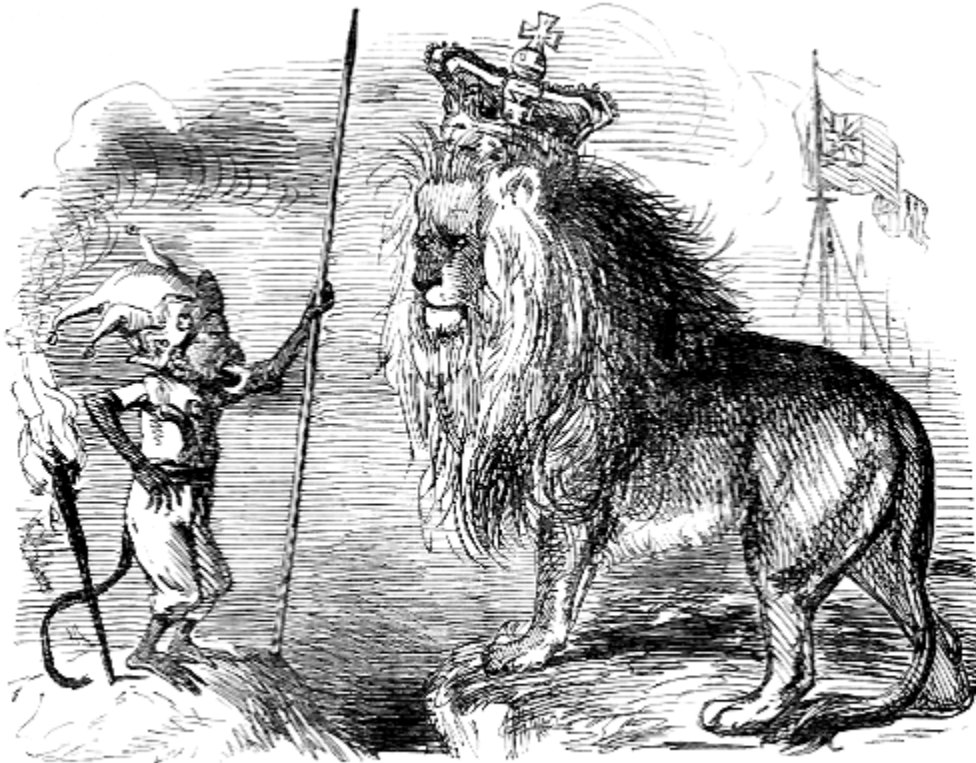
THE ENGLISH LABOURER'S BURDEN;

OR, THE IRISH OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN.

Drawn by Mr. Wallis.

Fig. 5 "The English Labourer's Burden; or, The Irish Oldman of the Mountain," February 2, 1849 <https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/punch/english-labourers-burden/>

Appendix 6



THE BRITISH LION AND THE IRISH MONKEY.

Monkey (Mr. Mitchell). "One of us MUST be Put Down."

Fig. 6 John Leech, "The British Lion and the Irish Monkey," April 8, 1848
<https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/punch/the-british-lion-and-the-irish-monkey/>