

2018

A Transformative Tragedy

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Karn, Cassandra. "A Transformative Tragedy" (2018). *Mary Wollstonecraft Writing Award*.

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A Transformative Tragedy

HONR 101

Dr. Gillette

Fall Term 2017

Short Analytical

In 1845, a potato blight arrived in Ireland, blackening the potatoes and making them inedible. As potatoes were the main crop of Ireland at the time, disease and famine ravaged the country, killing over one million people in the span of five years (“Great Famine”). However, from this destruction and despair rose hope for societal change. The Great Famine changed women’s roles during the crisis, leaving an impact on these women and their society. This change can be seen by looking at the roles of Irish women before, during, and after the famine, as well as Irish-American women after the famine. Sometimes it takes tragedy and dire circumstances to show the true measure of the ability of women, and once shown, this demonstration of women’s abilities becomes a stepping stone to greater equality for women in society.

Prior to the famine, Ireland was a “patriarchal, male-dominated society” (Diner 16). When women would get married, they would live with their husband’s family, follow traditions of that family, and contribute to the upkeep of that family’s home. Hasia R. Diner, a professor of history at New York University, uses studies by Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, two anthropologists of the early twentieth century, to add to this idea of a patriarchal country. These anthropologists found that it was customary for women in Ireland at that time to walk behind their husbands and eat dinner after their husbands had. Additionally, if a man needed help with a task, he could ask his wife and she would be expected to do so; however, if a woman needed help with a task, she could ask her husband for help, but most likely he would refuse to help with a woman’s task. Diner also brings up the separation of women and men in Irish society, saying, “Both had their own sphere” (16). Husbands and wives would not interact at social events; they would even attend church separately. If they did address each other, one would not refer to the other by his or her first name (Diner). This further ingrained into the Irish people that men and

women were meant to have completely different roles in society. With Ireland being male-dominated at the time, the separation of the sexes helped to enforce men's power.

When the people had to focus more on the survival of themselves and their families, the gender barriers broke down. As in other times of desperation, women who were previously generally restricted to duties within the home were found to be taking over male roles out of necessity. Prior to the famine, Irish women were expected to manage and prepare the food, while men were expected to grow or purchase it. However, when food became scarce, women were enlisted in the procurement of sustenance. According to Patricia Lysaght, a professor at University College Dublin, women went to great lengths to find food for their families. Women would walk for miles to sell goods in order to buy food (Lysaght). This example also shows women leaving the home and making money, which was not a common occurrence before the famine. Women making money would have been seen as a noticeable shift in the standards of Irish society. These journeys are also noteworthy because they were often "in vain, or even dangerous," as people would steal the food these women procured (Lysaght 28). Sometimes these people would even kill women to take their food. Lysaght discusses one woman who was "brutally murdered for the one pound of meal she had carried home from the meal-distribution center" (29). Oral accounts of the Great Famine emphasize the violence against these women (Lysaght). The emphasis on the violence against them was meant to show how extraordinary the actions of the women were. Irish women were thrust into roles previously designated for men, and they stepped up to the challenge, showing they had the ability to carry out these tasks just as well as men.

However, when the crisis was resolved, gender roles fell back to the norm from before, but this reversion would not last. Diner writes that Ireland saw an increase in "religiosity ... the

devotional revolution with its tremendous growth in both the number and the power of the clergy” (4). This shift to increasingly conservative values affected marriage. Because of the lack of money and land, it became common for only the oldest son to marry because they would be the only son to inherit anything. This situation caused parents to be heavily involved in the selection of a wife for their son (Diner). Parents generally looked for a woman who was “pleasant, traditional in values, and accepting of her role” (Diner 11). Many women were left without opportunities to marry, especially those who did not meet the standards of the previous generation. The majority of these women emigrated from Ireland, usually to the United States, to find more opportunities (Diner). After the regression to more conservative values, a progressive movement surfaced. The first wave of Irish feminism began in the 1860s, with organizations advocating for suffrage, education opportunities, and property rights for women. However, the Catholic church’s grip of power caused these activists to slowly push for equality so as to avoid too strong of a backlash (Crowe). Luckily, it paid off. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Irish women were more commonly found living away from home both before and after marriage, generally to find work in a home or shop. Women also were “allowed to be more innovative economically” (Diner 17). These women found creative ways to make and save money, and they often oversaw the finances of their family, deciding what money would be spent on (Diner). This development in the duties of women was a step forward in Irish society, albeit a slow step forward.

While this change did come to Ireland eventually, some Irish women might have not wanted to wait that long for a more liberated life. In the years after the Great Irish famine, more women emigrated from Ireland than men, unlike any other country at that time (Diner). According to Bernadette Whelan, Irish women saw America as a land of opportunity, “where

personal ambition and hopes could be met” (910). This shows a desire for independence and the freedom to pursue their own goals. Diner comments that Irish women “also accepted jobs that most other women turned down, and their rate of economic and social progress seems to have outdistanced that of the women of other ethnic groups” (xiv). They had a willingness to do what was necessary to succeed, which would have also been an impact of the trying times of the Great Famine. Diner continues, saying, “Irish women viewed themselves as self-sufficient beings, with economic roles to play in their families and communities” (xiv). This was not the case in Ireland, as they depended on their husbands or fathers to have an income. Women who wrote home to Ireland described their lives as having more “privacy, independence, and autonomy” (Whelan 908). These correspondences show that many of the Irish women who immigrated to America found the independence they desired. Irish-American women were also more likely to become the head of the household after their husbands died than women of other ethnicities in America (Whelan). One such woman was Sabina Gibbons McGuire. She immigrated to America from Ireland with her husband, Patrick McGuire, in 1850, towards the end of the Great Irish Famine (“Thomas Gibbons Family,” “Great Famine”). After her husband died in 1890, Sabina ran the farm instead of her oldest son, who would have been thirty-six years old at the time. In both the 1900 and 1910 censuses, Sabina is listed as the head of house, despite having two middle-aged sons still living with her. Additionally, Sabina’s occupation is listed as farmer, and her sons’ occupations are listed as laborers on the farm, once more showing that Sabina was in charge of the farm, even at the age of 85. This differs from female immigrants from other countries. For example, Elizabeth Karn, a woman who immigrated from Germany, lived with the family of one of her daughters after her husband died, and is listed as the mother-in-law of the head of the family in the 1940 census. Many women who weren’t of Irish descent follow this pattern of

moving to live with a son or daughter after the death of a husband (Ancestry). This demonstrates further how Irish-American women generally were more independent than women descended from other European countries.

The famine changed women's roles in Ireland while it was wreaking havoc upon the country. This tragedy left ripples in the pond of Irish society, slowly but surely causing a movement toward equality between the sexes in Ireland. The famine also increased the number of women immigrating to America, and the women who did immigrate were more autonomous than both the women still in Ireland and other female citizens of America. While times of hardship and tragedy leave scars on a community, these events lead to the eventual betterment of the societies they impacted.

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