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**Stories of the Great Famine:  
“The Hungry Death” as an inspiration for  
*The Countess Cathleen***

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## Abstract

The Great Irish Famine (1845-1848) resulted in the loss of twenty-five percent of the Irish population. Thus, the Famine meant a significant trauma for Ireland, which is reflected in the literature covering this historical period. Many literary works focused on themes such as starvation, death, and sacrifice. There are two works by Rosa Mulholland and by William Butler Yeats which deal with the most recurrent themes of Famine literature but also present a connection between them. This is because William Butler Yeats illustrates in his play similar literary motifs previously captured in Mulholland's story. This dissertation carries out a comparative analysis to show how Rosa Mulholland's "The Hungry Death" may have inspired William Butler Yeats to write *The Countess Cathleen* without it being a literary adaptation.

**Key words:** Famine, Rosa Mulholland, William Butler Yeats, Sacrifice, Mother Figure.

La Hambruna Irlandesa (1845-1848) significó la pérdida del veinticinco por ciento de la población irlandesa. Por eso, la hambruna supuso un gran trauma para Irlanda, que se refleja en la literatura que abarca este periodo histórico. Muchas obras literarias se centraron en temas como el hambre, la muerte y el sacrificio. Hay dos obras de Rosa Mulholland y de William Butler Yeats que, además de abarcar los temas más recurrentes de la literatura de la hambruna, presentan una conexión entre ellas. Esto se debe a que William Butler Yeats refleja en su obra motivos literarios similares a los plasmados anteriormente en la obra de Mulholland. Esta tesis lleva a cabo un análisis comparativo para reflejar cómo "The Hungry Death" de Rosa Mulholland pudo haber inspirado a William Butler Yeats para escribir *The Countess Cathleen* sin tratarse de una adaptación literaria.

**Palabras clave:** Hambruna, Rosa Mulholland, William Butler Yeats, Sacrificio, Figura Materna.



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## Introduction

The Great Irish Famine, which took place between 1845 and 1848, had a great impact on Irish literature. Within the literary legacy which it brought we find writers like Rosa Mulholland, author of the short story “The Hungry Death”, first published in Charles Dickens’s *All the Year Round: A Weekly Journal* in 1880, and William Butler Yeats, author of the play *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), among many others. Although both works are different —Yeats’s ‘spirituality’ stands in contrast with Mulholland’s Gothicism— both works present a close relationship due to the dominant and similar details which they share. Thus, Rosa Mulholland’s “The Hungry Death” may have been a great source of inspiration for William Butler Yeats to write *The Countess Cathleen* a year after he published Rosa Mulholland’s short story in his *Representative Irish Tales* (1891).

The great literary impact that the Great Irish Famine entailed also led to the subsequent study of both the historical event and the literary production that emerged from it. For instance, works like *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919* by Melissa Fegan (2002) or “Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice” written by George Sweeney for the *Journal of Contemporary History* (1993) discuss the impact of the Great Irish Famine on Irish literature and the way in which the works handle themes such as sacrifice. In this B.A. Thesis I will focus on the Famine literary motifs which Yeats’s play and Mulholland’s story share.

Thus, through the comparative analysis I will carry out, my intention is to evidence that Yeats may have been inspired by Mulholland’s “The Hungry Death” to write *The Countess Cathleen*. For this purpose, my objectives are to perform a historical and literary contextualization of both works and to establish a relationship between them. My final objective is to compare a series of literary motifs which, being present in differing plots, are presented in a similar manner in both works.

This dissertation will be divided into two chapters. The first one, “Great Irish Famine: Historical Context”, along with the section “Literary Impact after the Famine” serves to provide both the historical context and the literary context which encompasses the two works. This chapter covers the historical period of the Great Irish Famine during 1845 and 1848 along with its social and literary impact. The second chapter, “Rosa Mulholland’s “The Hungry Death” and William Butler Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen*”

introduces the reader to the authors William Butler Yeats and Rosa Mulholland in preparation for the subsequent analysis. Therefore, the second chapter establishes the connection between both works by conducting a comparative analysis which covers the literary motifs that both works deal with. Three main themes are discussed, dealing with topics such as the involvement of the social elite during the Famine in both works, the sacrifice made by wealthy women, and nature along with homes descriptions in order to recreate a realistic scenery resembling those existing during the Great Irish Famine.



## The Great Irish Famine 1845-1848

### 1.1. Historical Context and Legacy of the Famine

The Great Irish Famine took place in Ireland between 1845 and 1848. This period meant a before and after in Irish history since it was a devastating event. The famine emerges after the importation of a blighting fungus which destroyed the potato crop, the main food of the Irish. In addition, the political and social tensions of the time aggravated the already inhumane situation, especially for those whose dependence on the potato crop was vital for their survival. The beginning of this new and devastating era is placed in August 1845 due to “the appearance of a blight, *Phytophthora infestans*, which within months had destroyed three-quarters of that year’s yield.” (Larkin 87). Unfortunately, despair not only continued but increased as the following years saw no improvement but a deterioration of the situation. “The numbers starving to death began to mount alarmingly in the autumn of 1846.” (Ó’Gráda 34). In addition to that, many people did not have a coffin or a dignified burial. Besides death, the Famine also meant a massive migration. Thus, “within the space of six years, Ireland’s population fell by 25 per cent, making the Irish famine one of the most lethal in modern history.” (Kinealy 186).

#### 1.1.1. Political crisis of the Corn Laws

During the onset of the Great Irish Famine crisis, the British government formed the Irish Relief Commission with the intention of addressing the Famine crisis through relief measures. At the same time, the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws meant a very heated political debate in Parliament which completely overshadowed the matter of the Famine crisis. The Corn Laws were intended to protect and support British producers by hardening import measures. The debate existed because the Conservative Party was opposed to any changes regarding the market trade and the opposition was willing to intervene. The Liberal Party believed that accepting the importation of foreign grain would be beneficial for the whole nation because of high food prices, especially that of

bread, which affected British society directly. But according to the Corn Laws, it was not possible to carry out foreign importations without investing large sums of money. This debate supposed a political crisis in Parliament which not only did not bring solutions but worsened the already crucial situation. Thus, the Prime Minister set in motion a secret plan in 1845 whereby he would trade with Indian corn. According to Gail Seekamp and Pierce Feirtear “he had secretly arranged for £100,000 worth (£5 million today) of Indian corn, or sweet corn, to be shipped to Ireland from America.” (12). The fact that the Irish could “buy corn at 1 penny per 1b (21p per 500g today)” (13) made it available to be consumed, so there was a slight improvement in the Famine crisis for the time being. There were various reasons to believe that the terrible episode caused by the blight was beginning to calm down, but while the British government focused on the crisis caused by the Corn Laws, finally repealed in the summer of 1846, the blight attacked the potato crop again. Consequently, the disaster of the Famine far from disappearing would return with more force. Many reports and journal articles were written reflecting the agony and the loss of hope. A case in point is this one by William Steuar Trench that Seekamp and Feirtear have collected:

On August 6, 1846 – I shall not readily forget the day – I rode up as usual to my mountain property, and my feelings may be imagined when, before I saw the crop, I smelt the fearful stench, now so well known and recognised as the death sign of each field of potatoes. [...] the experience of the past few days taught me that all was gone, and the crop was totally worthless. (14)

In short, the loss of the 1846 crop was much greater than that of 1845, putting the poorest in an even more critical situation.

### **1.1.2. Kitchens, ‘Soupers’ and Workhouses**

During 1846, insufficient measures were taken and the opportunity to implement an efficient solution was lost. Indeed, “the relief measures introduced in 1846 were more parsimonious than in the previous year and were unsuited to providing emergency relief” (Kinealy 184). A case in point is public works for road construction. This job needed a great and heavy manual work, even harder for starving people. Nevertheless, despite the harsh conditions and low pay —as Seekamp and Feirtear state “even a fit worker would

only earn 8 pennies a day (£1.66 today)” (20)— it was the only livelihood many families had to live on, and they could not afford to lose their jobs. Even when workers were too weak to perform the hard work or fell ill “and could work no more, their wives and children took their place.” (20). But later, after realizing that public works were inefficient and a high cost, “the Government decided that a cheaper and better way to feed people was through soup kitchens.” (23). Since there were many who did not own the required means to cook the food, “by November 1846, soup kitchens, or shops, had been set up in four Irish country towns.” (22). This fact supposed that some people could afford a hot meal at a moderate price. These soups kitchens had a religious background as they “were run by the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers.” (22).

As the situation in Ireland worsened, some citizens of England felt it necessary to offer some help. Therefore, “on 1 January 1847, wealthy citizens set up The British Association for the relief of the extreme distress in the remote parishes of Ireland and Scotland.” (23). The aid consisted of providing food, clothing, and fuel to those in need. Therefore, “in February 1847, the government passed the Soup Kitchen Act to set up kitchens all over Ireland.” (23) and there will be an improvement, since as Christine Kinealy states “3 million people were receiving daily rations of food from the soup kitchens.” (185). Kinealy shows that public works were replaced “by a network of soup kitchens where the poor could obtain free rations of soup and bread.” (Kinealy 185). But unfortunately, before the arrival of this relief measure many lives had already been lost, and the poor were not being fed in a totally altruistic manner either. People who accepted the already mentioned religious conditions were known as ‘souters’. Again, at the cost of the poverty caused by the Famine, there were still people being able to benefit from it. Furthermore, “the food value of the often watery soup was low, and the people were routinely humiliated by being made to queue for hours.” (Ó’ Gráda 38).

Unfortunately, in some cases it was believed that “distributing free food to the poor would pauperize the Irish population even further.” (Geber 39). As a consequence, “the Irish Poor Law Extension Act of June 1847 switched the main burden of relief to the Irish Poor Law system.” (Ó’Gráda 38), which introduced a network for the construction of what are known as workhouses. While it was considered a measure of relief, the reality was that life in the workhouses was quite harsh. The poorest would offer their labor in exchange for shelter and food, but living conditions, especially in terms of hygiene, were

dire. In fact, there were many diseases that ended the lives of many poor people, especially typhus, increasing notoriously the mortality rate of the period. “Older people were more likely to die from typhus, and children from dysentery.” (Seekamp and Feirtear 30). In fact, “most of the 1 million people who perished during the Irish Famine died of fever rather than hunger.” (29).

With respect to the poor living conditions in workhouses, Government assured this measure supposed a worse situation than trying to make a living in the fields. As Jonny Geber mentions in his book, the philosopher Jeremy Bentham believed paupers “weighed the ‘pleasures’ of staying outside the workhouse with the ‘pain’ of entering it” (28). According to this theory, “only the truly destitute would accept relief while the able-bodied would be encouraged to find work and improve their situations by themselves.” (28). This way, only the most desperate paupers would look for that relief measure whereas the rest of them would have to solve their problem by themselves, through real work in the fields. In fact, that was one concern of the government since cheap labor could disappear if each pauper intended to end up in a workhouse. Nevertheless, another way of looking at this issue is by appreciating that this relief measure meant an effort for the Government of the time. “This was particularly true for children, who were given some education and were taught practical skills that —it was hoped— would benefit them later in life.” (Geber 28). Without considering the malignant intention behind that provided help, at least children were the most benefited ones. Ultimately, having achieved the goal that as few people as possible would want to go to the workhouses, and that those who were there would want to leave them, the next major front that Ireland faced during the Famine crisis appeared: mass migration.

### **1.1.3. Migration and Revolts**

Throughout the Famine period there had been revolts that were usually settled with the authorities killing the paupers who revolted, adding yet more death. In 1848 Young Ireland revolted trying to repeal the Act of Union for, as Seekamp and Feirtear report, John Mitchel, the founder of Young Ireland argued that “the Almighty indeed sent a potato blight, but the English created a Famine.” (36). However, there was division. On the one hand, there was The Young Ireland group, which “inspired by the recent revolution in

France, argued for a republican revolution to end the political connection with Britain” (Kinealy 186) and was willing to use violence. On the other hand, there were the Moderate Repealers, who did not support the use of physical force and “continued to oppose an uprising”. Ultimately, “the failure of the uprising in 1848 destroyed the repeal movement and considerably weakened the republican cause in Ireland.” (Kinealy 186).

At the same time, and considering the deplorable situation in Ireland, many opted to leave their land achieving the highest migration figures in Irish history given that “between 1845 and 1855, 2.1 million people left the country.” (Larkin 109). Some tenants helped to finance the trip for some farmers and were benefited the most by being able to evict dependent paupers. However, those trips were not a ticket to a better life for everyone. According to Christine Kinealy, “emigrants were willing to risk dangerous winter crossings in order to escape from Ireland, and also chanced travelling in ships that were ill suited to carry passengers.” (186). This is why those ships were known as ‘coffin ships’. The function of these ships was to transport goods. But they were not only loaded with goods but with more passengers than permitted, so it was common for many not to survive after being in a coffin ship. The destination of most people who managed to survive was usually the US, where they had to face discrimination from the natives who embraced the image of the lazy and barbaric Irish. However, with the passage of time they managed to gain respect and recognition for their work after demonstrating that they could perform hard work such as in the mines.

By the year 1852, due to this terrible episode in the history of Ireland, the country would have lost 25% of its population, leaving an unforgettable and unforgivable legacy for many. No one is to blame for the appearance of the fungus that ruined the harvest, but politicizing the crisis was certainly not an effective measure to solve it. There are those who speak of genocide, others of a wound that to this day remains unhealed. It really is an episode that marked the society and history of a country, and its current and subsequent culture is a mirror of it, especially literature.

## **1.2. Literary Impact after the Famine**

Throughout history, literature has been a powerful platform to express reflections, convictions, and feelings, but also to expose the history and background of a society, sometimes even constructing it. From the beginning of the Great Irish Famine until today, many different authors and publishers have employed a wide variety of resources in order to depict the misfortune of the Famine and its repercussions: from essays and testimonies to folklore depicting the Famine collecting different perspectives. The infection of the crop by the fungus implied that Irish society faced the greatest food shortage it had ever experienced. Destroyed fields and crops became the picture of daily life for the poor peasants during the years of the crisis. They were the most affected by hunger, causing them to suffer from severe undernourishment accompanied by other diseases caused by food shortages and poverty. All this was the main cause of this crisis and therefore of the great loss of the Irish population. As a consequence of food shortages, the suffering and desperation of society increased. The desperation was growing as the circumstances were not only not being addressed but were worsening with each passing year. As we have seen before, many of the paupers opted for jobs that required great effort but offered terrible working conditions. Some were forced to enter the workhouses, where the working conditions not only did not improve, but the poorest of the poor had to face the various deadly diseases. Others ended up rebelling and taking part in the numerous revolts that emerged during the crisis, which in many cases were solved by killing the rebels. Unfortunately, many had to do great sacrifices, among which were choosing to feed themselves or pay the rent, considering that not even everyone could afford to choose between at least one of the options. Furthermore, the unstoppable and increasing loss of life meant great psychological pain for a society that in many cases did not even have the means to provide dignified burials for all those whose lives had been taken by the Famine. All in all, the situation of the poorest was summed up in the physical and psychological suffering that this entailed, the impotence of the impossibility of acting, and despair at seeing what was happening and was continuing to happen.

Although there is a wide variety of literary works and genres addressing the historical period of the Great Famine, the reality is that during the years of the tragedy and after, there are those, like Eagleton, who considered that “the Famine was shrouded

in silence.” (Wright 444). Writing about this topic was a tough job, especially for those who had experienced the atrocity of the Famine firsthand, with many survivors expressing “a reluctance to remember the horror, or an incapacity to represent it adequately.” (445). Moreover, “publishers and readers could be hostile” (446) since it is a matter that could hurt the sensibilities and memories of many. On the other hand, and as Julia M. Wright points out, Cusack and Goss’ collection of essays *Hungry Words: Images of Famine in the Irish Canon* (2006) “suggests that references to the Famine are pervasive in Irish literature—even in Joyce and Yeats.” (445). She also quotes Bernhard Klein, who explains how, contrary to Eagleton’s belief, “the great ‘literary silence’ of the Famine is in fact no silence at all but rather a loud roaring.” (445). Despite using few words, Klein is able to convey in a very direct way the grim legacy left by the Irish Famine. Sometimes silence can speak louder than words ever will.

Both history and literature may be appreciated through different perspectives. That is why, in a crisis as conflictive as the one caused by the Great Irish Famine, a great diversity of contributions can be found in the course of time. The trauma of living through a situation beyond one’s control and with such devastating consequences is a very relevant factor when it comes to sharing this experience. Taking this into account, it is understandable that a traumatic experience affects each person in a different way, from a complete distortion of reality to the blocking of those traumatic memories. Therefore, just as it is hard work for a writer or survivor of the Famine to collect those memories and transform them into a testimony, plot or literary work, it will also be hard work for the reader who has not experienced it to understand it.

The political management that was carried out was highly questioned both during the development of the Famine and during the following years until the present day. Therefore, it is normal that much of the literature covering this historical event is related to this topic. Besides, “many of the Famine poets were also political activists; but while their poetry is often apocalyptic or religious, resigned to revenge by a ‘spectral army’, the poets themselves were mostly committed to political violence.” (Fegan 3). One way to transmit this brutality, to ask for help and to recriminate the lack of humanity was the printed press. In this case, a recurring medium was the Irish newspaper *The Nation*, a nationalist and weekly newspaper. According to Melissa Fegan, during the transition period after the Famine, the situation was denounced through *The Nation* by a large

number of poets including James Clarence Mangan, Richard D'Alton Williams, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, and Jane Francesca Elgee. Among the famous poems written for *The Nation* we can find poems such as Jane Francesca Elgee (Lady Wilde)'s "France in '93: A Lesson from Foreign History". Through foreign examples of revolutions, she intends to show how violence and the uprising is the way to achieve the victory:

Hark! the onward heavy tread –  
Hark! the voices rude –  
"Tis the famished cry for Bread From an armed multitude.  
They come! They come!  
Not with meek submission's hum.  
Bloody trophy they have won,  
Ghastly glares it in the sun - Gory head on lifted pike.  
Ha! they weep not now, but strike! (Morash 225)

Lady Wilde's "The Enigma" also tried to convince society "that the only solution was revolution." (Wright 447). In the same line, Thomas D'Arcy McGee "hoped their poetry would be the means of inspiring and uprising." (447). It is true that the literature of the Famine provides great polemics and political debates and that may be one of the reasons why it is sometimes difficult to associate this type of literature with the concept art.

However, there were also novelists such as William Carleton and short story writer Mrs. Hoare who along with "many others reacted by writing about the tragedy *in media res*." (Fegan 2). Particularly, in William Carleton's *The Squander of Castle Squander* (1852) there is a horrifying scene dealing with death and dogs turned into beasts eating almost unburied corpses:

[...] were engaged in huddling into the earth miserable shells of coffins, burying them at a depth of not more than ten or twelve inches into the ground; and one horrific remnant of humanity, whose nearly black feature retained the frightful and spasmodic contortions of cholera, was in the act of being thrown, coffinless and half-naked, into what was rather a shallow trench, than a grave! Round about, and in this awful cemetery, were numbers of gaunt and starving dogs, whose skeleton bodies and fearful howlings indicated the ravenous fury with which they awaited an opportunity to drag the unfortunate dead from their shallow graves and glut themselves upon their bodies. (139)

Both Carleton and Hoare tried to make English readers aware of how serious the Famine issue was. But differing from the previous poets, they conducted it with a different tone. For instance, Carleton's tale of Irish Famine "The Black Prophet" was dedicated to Lord



John Russell. Carleton's intention was to make him be aware of the situation Ireland was going through from a respectful position, as he states, "this is an Irish Book, my Lord, to which I would respectfully solicit your Lordship's attention." (Carleton 1847, iii). But even though he himself calls his tale a "TALE OF IRISH FAMINE" (iii), the plot of the tale deals with an unsolved murder and a love affair. Regarding Mrs. Hoare, *Shamrock Leaves; or Tales and Sketches of Ireland* (1851) is a collection of tales and sketches that "originally appeared in various periodicals" (Hoare 5). In the same line as Carleton, she intended to awaken British society, arguing that she trusted "the British Public will not utterly despise these few wild 'Shamrock Leaves', gathered with a loving hand from the famine-stricken fields of my native country." (5).

In the twentieth century there are many other writers that used the Irish Famine as "either central or a potent image or metaphor" (Wright 445), such as Tom Murphy's *Famine* (1968), William Trevor's "The News from Ireland" (1986) or John Banville's *Birchwood* (1973). We continue to find works on this matter in the twenty-first century, such as Niall William's *The Fall of Light* (2001), Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* (2001), Melissa Fegan's *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845-1919* (2002), Carol Birch's *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* (2005) and many others that testify to Cusack and Goss statement of the Famine remaining pervasive in Irish literature.

Another point worth mentioning is that in many works regarding the Famine there is a recurrent kind of scenario which represents the famine focusing on death after a sacrifice. This is usually pictured as "a character —often the protagonist, usually of a higher class— [who] enters a cabin to find starving or diseased victims, usually nameless." (Wright 449). This was made with the intention of convincing the reader about the dreadful consequences the Famine brought with it. Women, especially those who were also mothers, had a relevant role within this kind of representations. This was because introducing the role of a suffering mother in these scenarios provided the author with the ability not only to get the reader's attention but also to reach the reader's conscience. Showing the desperation and the sacrifices of mothers for their children was something nobody could read without experiencing any kind of feeling. Wright collects some fragments of different works that attest this, such as William Gorman Will's *The Love that Kills* (1867), where "a dying mother attempts to suckle her dead baby." (449). She was almost dying, but she looked for the strength she probably did not even have to try to save

her baby rather than herself. Sacrifice is something which will be very present in many works since that was the reality of the Irish society. Many had to sacrifice themselves in order to try, not necessarily successfully, to save somebody else. This is why the Famine also brought a feeling of union and nationalism within Irish society.

Another recurrent image in these works was that of skeletons which did not necessarily belong to a corpse. “Some were living skeletons, tottering with diseases and weakness. Some looked like scarecrows, dressed up in rags, and moved by some inward machinery.” (quoted in Wright, 454). This is why the image of frightened and psychologically affected people fighting for food was the other side of the coin. William Gorman Will’s *The Love that Kills* (1867) shows both sides since, as Melissa Fegan has noticed, “a previously devoted father drags his daughter outside the cabin to die so that he can eat their remaining food in peace.” (234). Having to live such extreme situations turned many of them into wild people without being aware of the atrocities they could be able to do in order not to see themselves as the skeletons they were constantly seeing.

From what has been presented, it may be clear that the subject of the Famine was a great trauma for those who lived through it and a great suffering for those who put those memories on paper. During the Famine and the years that followed, Famine literature spans a wide variety of literary genres, which, according to Fegan, include “histories, autobiographies and biographies, travel narratives, letters, diaries, journalism [...] alongside novels, poems, short stories, and plays.” (3). Thus “the impression that very little has been written about the Famine, or that it had very little impact on the country’s literature, is clearly misguided and needs to be revised.” (Fegan 2).

**Rosa Mulholland’s “The Hungry Death”  
and William Butler Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen***

Within the many works on the Great Irish Famine which depict a scenario covered with death and sacrifice, there are some that personify those themes throughout the image of a woman. Moreover, as it was mentioned previously, it was regular to present the protagonist as a high-class character in contrast to the starving people. In what follows, these details will be reflected in two works that, although apparently contrasting, share many elements. *The Countess Cathleen* written by William Butler Yeats and “The Hungry Death” written by Rosa Mulholland present a high-class woman who fits the most frequent illustrations in the literature of the Famine, but also share a similar pattern among them. I contend that a relationship between both works may exist.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was born in Dublin and became an Anglo-Irish poet who was raised between London, Sligo and Dublin. Yeats believed literature and arts should be employed to preserve Irish politics, so he founded the Irish National Literary Society. The purpose of this society was to bring out a cultural renaissance of Irish literature and to build a school of Irish poetry based on Irish myth and history. Nowadays, the Society still exists in London, and that society was the embryo of the movement known as the Irish Literary Revival (1892-1922). This movement did not only deal with literature, but with other social issues. In fact, the main purpose of Yeats was to keep alive Irish literature, culture, tradition, and beliefs after the grim historical events Ireland had gone through.

Another important contribution to Irish literature by Yeats is the foundation of the Irish Literary Theatre (1899) along with Lady Gregory. The Gaelic world had no dramatic tradition and any theatrical performance that had taken place in Ireland so far was English. Therefore, both Yeats and Lady Gregory considered to introduce drama into Irish literature. The Irish Literary Theatre intended to represent the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland through Irish plays, and although there were no authors, no actors, and no audiences, they themselves undertook the writing of poetic and imaginative plays with valid Irish material. Besides, this theatre became an additional resource for authors

writing poetic-legendary, socio-political and psychological drama, which were much more meaningful in an Irish context than many comedies previously written by expatriates.

The first play performed by Yeats in the Irish Literary Theatre was *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899. This play resorts to Irish folklore to depict a high-class woman, Cathleen, who ends up selling her soul to some demons in exchange for money during a famine. The image of Cathleen sacrificing herself to save Irish peasants during a famine has a very deep background since Cathleen represents what would be the ideal Irish aristocrat but also a symbol of the nation. Besides, the tradition of representing Ireland as a woman, initiated in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century with the Irish poet Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's Aisling poems, is something Cathleen restates.

Rosa Mulholland (1841-1921) was born in Belfast and the Great Irish Famine broke out when she was just four years old and, consequently, she witnessed the devastating consequences of this historic period. Nevertheless, Rosa Mulholland was able to enjoy an education within a wealthy home and family since she was "the second daughter of a doctor whose family had become prosperous from textile manufacture." (Dalby 1). This was probably a relevant factor for her to develop her career as a writer, even though she began signing her works "under the pseudonym Ruth Murray." (Dalby 1). Afterwards, "in the late nineteenth century Rosa Mulholland achieved great popularity and acclaim for her many novels [...], several of which chronicled the lives of the Irish poor." (Dalby 1). Her great ability to reflect the daily life of its society, including its needs, anxieties, emotions, etc., made her a relevant writer who caught the interest of recognized writers such as Charles Dickens.

It may be that having been born in such a harsh period as the Great Irish Hunger was a condition for the fact that "most of Rosa Mulholland's latter novels and short stories were set in rural Ireland, and many achieved a wide readership in the pages of *Irish Monthly*." (Dalby 3), which was an important Irish Catholic magazine founded in Dublin. Furthermore, "her writing was encouraged by Charles Dickens, who published her stories in his *Household Work* and *All the Year Round*." (Cahill 167), but some other artists also expressed interest in her work, among whom we find William Butler Yeats. Within the many Irish tales collected in Yeats's *Representative Irish Tales* (1891) appears the short

story of Rosa Mulholland “The Hungry Death”, a gothic story dealing with the Great Famine, which may have had a great impact for Yeats to write *The Countess Cathleen*.

As we have previously seen, many works have been written that had famine as their main theme. However, there are several reasons why it could be interpreted that Yeats may have taken Rosa Mulholland’s short story as an inspiration. According to Richard Dalby, “The Hungry Death” was written by Rosa Mulholland for *All the Year Round* on July 1, 1880. This short story is “a graphic macabre tale set on a remote Irish island during the 1840s famine.” (3). Some years after, William Butler Yeats publishes his very well-known *Representative Irish Tales* (1891) where he collects Mulholland’s story among other tales, and only one year later he publishes *The Countess Cathleen* (1892). Even so, although Mulholland’s work may have been a source of inspiration for Yeats, his work is not a literary adaptation of Mulholland’s story.

Both authors deal in their works on the one hand with poverty and famine and on the other with the sacrifice of a high-class woman. However, the plot is not similar. In Mulholland’s dark and gothic tale, the development of a love triangle has a great weight and coexists with starvation and despair. Yeats in contrast does not exploit romance in his work, but he does provide spirituality along with fantasy scenes. He focuses on Irish folklore as well as the sacrifice of the high-class woman, also in response to starvation and despair. It is in the descriptions of the landscape and social situation, along with the sacrifice of two high-class women that Yeats’s nods to Mulholland’s work can be found.

## **2.1. The Social Elite as a Helping Presence**

The first scene of Yeats’s play may be one of the most famous and well-known when talking about *The Countess Cathleen*. This scene describes a humble home in which there has been an argument probably generated by the tensions caused by hunger. Mary’s husband had gone in search of food but returned empty-handed after spending a long time away, and Seamus ends up cursing the rich before Cathleen, the high-class woman and main character of the play, arrives. Meanwhile, the Countess Cathleen has been wandering around town trying to cover the needs of those who needed it most, but she ran out of supplies.

CATHLEEN. I gave for all and that was all I had.  
Look, my purse is empty. I have passed  
By starving men and women all this day,  
And they have had the rest; but take the purse,  
The silver clasps on't may be worth a trifle.  
But if you'll come to-morrow to my house  
You shall have twice the sum. (18)

Cathleen is an aristocratic figure, yet she showed more interest in her people than in herself. She is a picture of the aristocracy that the Irish people needed and craved during the harsh process of the famine. However, when the Countess arrived at Seamus and Mary's home, she had no more resources. This situation made Cathleen more aware of the reality that her people were suffering and the difficulty of covering all the need of the village.

This famous scene from *The Countess Cathleen* bears some resemblance to one of the last scenes in "The Hungry Death" when Coll desperately begs Brigid for food in order to save his beloved Moya. Like Cathleen, Brigid, a high-class woman, devoted the last days of her life to feed her people. However, Brigid was hurt because she hated both Moya and Coll since she was in love with him:

A knock came to the door which at first she could not hear for the howling of the wind; but when she heard and opened there was Coll standing before her.  
'Meal,' he said faintly – 'a little meal, for the love of Christ! Moya is dying.'  
A spasm of anguish and tenderness had crossed Brigid's face at the first words; but at the mention of Moya her face darkened.  
'Why should I give to you or Moya?' she said coldly. 'There's them that needs that help as much as ye.' (339-340)

Both situations are different, each according to the plot of each story. However, in both we find the high-class women who are feeding and taking care of their people who run out of resources, and not prioritizing themselves but feeding others, as can also be appreciated in these lines regarding Brigid:

'But I cannot help everyone,' she moaned; 'I'm starving myself an' there's nothin' but a han'ful o' meal at the bottom o' the bag.  
After a while she got up, and carried the mess of porridge to the house for which she had intended it, and all that day she went about, doing what charity she could, and not tasting anything herself. (340)

The figure of an altruistic aristocracy was what the Irish people missed during one of the worst periods of their history. Moreover, it is curious how Yeats begins his play with a scene similar in concept to one of the final scenes of *Mulholland*, as if he intended to establish a connection.

## 2.2. Sacrifice and Mother Figure

As it was mentioned before, sacrifice was quite present in the literature related to the famine. This sacrifice could appear in different forms, but in all cases, it showed situations of extreme despair. Therefore, the literature of the famine depicts how some people made the decision to sacrifice themselves to save someone else. Such a sacrifice also symbolizes a feeling of union and fighting in the face of adversity, since they were going through a common evil.

This is also reflected in the other works belonging to the Irish Literary Revival which, according to George Sweeney, “helped to legitimize the sacrificial motif.” (423). The sacrifice of many throughout Irish history is understood as necessary so as to fight off the colonizer, generating this feeling of togetherness and nationalism. In fact, Irish society has carried over the concept of sacrifice from the old Gaelic tradition, taking the famous hero Cuchulain as an inspiration. “The exploits of this mythological chieftain, who [...] sacrificed his life to allow fellow warriors to escape capture and death, were retold, popularized and incorporated into the literary productions of poets and writers.” (Sweeney 423). Indeed, not all sacrifices were necessarily made only for a loved one; one can also find sacrifices to save the community itself, as is the case of *The Countess Cathleen*, where Cathleen sacrifices herself for all her people.

On the other hand, we have also seen how, behind the sacrifice, many times there was the image of a protective mother figure. Therefore, in many scenes related to the sacrifice, a woman usually appeared sacrificing herself for her children. This fact is not only because a mother usually tends to do as much as she can for her children, which may also be the case, but the subtext of these scenes has more to do with the image of the woman than with the image of the mother as such.

Throughout the history of Ireland, the image of the woman has played a very relevant role in its literature. As previously mentioned, Aodhagán Ó Rathaille initiated a literary tradition by which Ireland was presented as a woman and as a mother-figure. This is because in many *aisling* poems Ireland was personified through the image of a woman lamenting the loss of either her beloved or her protector. “However, the use of the female image as a metaphor for Ireland is not confined to the *aisling*. From early Old Irish literature of the 8th century up to the modern era, depictions of Ireland as a woman extend.” (Apple 2). This tradition has been maintained within Irish literature for many centuries, as we will be able to see in our two works. In fact, another of the most relevant plays by Yeats (written with Lady Gregory), *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), also relies on the allegorical identification of Ireland with a woman.

As we have seen in the previous scenes, both Brigid and Cathleen show total devotion to their people, symbolizing the protection and response longed by the suffering peasants. And it is no coincidence that both are women. Moreover, not only do they show a protective side towards their people, but in both stories they both end up sacrificing their lives to save them.

In Brigid’s case, after first denying food to Coll, she ends up having a great remorse that does not let her sleep peacefully, because she knows that her attitude was due to spite. Finally, she decides to give him the last sustenance she has, knowing that it could mean the difference between dying or staying alive. With hardly any strength, Brigid goes in search of Coll to offer him the food she had previously denied him.

The poor fellow had prayed so passionately, and was in so exalted a state, that he almost expected to see an angel of light upon the threshold bring the food he had so urgently asked for. [...] Trembling, he opened the door; and there was Brigid, or her ghost.

‘Am I in time?’ gasped she, as she put the vessel of food in his hand.

‘Aye,’ said Coll, seizing it. In his transport of delight he would have gone on his knees and kissed her feet; but before he could speak, she was gone. (342)

Apart from the sacrifice itself, the altruism of Brigid is also present since she did not expect anything in return, which fits with the previously mentioned image of the altruistic aristocracy. Indeed, Brigid ended up dying in place of Moya:

Falling, fainting, dragging herself on again, she crept within the shelter of the walls. A little more effort, and she would be at His feet. [...] Darkness, silence,



peace, settled down upon her. The storm raved around, the night came on, and when the morning broke, Brigid was dead. (342-343)

The Great Irish Famine was a phenomenon that awakened in some people their most altruistic and protective side, creating that feeling of togetherness and brotherhood previously mentioned. It also awakened the darkest side of many others. But generally, mothers, as is reflected in many works of Irish famine literature, did not hesitate to make that sacrifice for their children. Therefore, the character of Brigid reflects that role of protective mother figure that has accompanied Irish literature for many centuries.

Regarding Yeats's play, during Cathleen's encounter with demons posing as merchants, her greatest internal debate begins. Cathleen made her fortune available to the people and ordered shipments of food, but it was not enough. The famine was still present, and people were willing to sacrifice their souls at the request of these demons in exchange for money to get food. It was then that Cathleen finally realized that the sacrifice of her soul was necessary to prevent both the deaths due to the famine and the loss of people's souls. Besides, she also negotiated to recover the souls already lost:

CATHLEEN. The people starve, therefore the people go  
Thronging to you. I hear a cry come from them  
And it is in my ears by night and day,  
And I would have five hundred thousand crowns  
That I may feed them till the dearth go by.

FIRST MERCHANT. It may be the soul's worth it.

CATHLEEN. There is more:

The souls that you have bought must be set free.

FIRST MERCHANT. We know of but one soul that's worth the price.

CATHLEEN. Being my own it seems a priceless thing.

SECOND MERCHANT. You offer us –

CATHLEEN. I offer my own soul. (91)

In Yeats's work it is also clearly reflected how a woman of high class works altruistically for the benefit of her people. Moreover, the protective mother-figure is appreciated in the kindness and purity Cathleen shows. After having decided to sacrifice her soul, she does not show any concern for herself, but is happy to finally save her people.

CATHLEEN. Bend down your faces, Oona and Aleel;  
I gaze upon them as the swallow gazes  
Upon the nest under the eave, before  
She wander the loud waters. Do not weep

Too great a while, for there is many a candle  
On the High Altar though one fall. Aleel,  
Who sang about the dancers of the woods,  
That know not the hard burden of the world,  
Having but breath in their kind bodies, farewell  
And farewell, Oona, you who played with me,  
And bore me in your arms about the house  
When I was but a child and therefore happy,  
Therefore happy, even like those that dance.  
The storm is in my hair and I must go.  
(*She dies.*) (98-99)

In fact, prior to that speech she instructs Oona to continue her purpose and consider the needs of each person. Once again Cathleen is seen not caring for herself, even having sold her own soul, but for her people:

CATHLEEN. (*half rising*) Lay all the bags of money in a heap,  
And when I am gone, old Oona, share them out  
To every man and woman: judge, and give  
According to their needs. (98)

The only moment when one finds concern in Cathleen's words is when she thinks of her people's future without her. However, she is calm in leaving that responsibility to Oona, like a mother trusting someone else with the care of her children.

Taking into account all of the above and despite finding different scenarios in both works, we can find similar results behind the actions of the two women who protagonise them. Yeats was able to recreate in his work the sacrifice and the protective mother-figure that Mulholland captured in hers, thus resulting in two different works that start from a similar base and raw material.

### **2.3. Nature and Homes**

The description of the landscape and nature also plays a relevant role in both works. In addition, the detailed description of the environment in which the different plots are developed helps the authors to contextualize both works.

In Mulholland's "The Hungry Death" we find a very realistic and devastating depiction of the landscape of the Irish island where the story is set. In this way,

Mulholland is able to reinforce the devastation that the famine brought with it. A characteristic of Gothic literature is to represent the nature of the setting of the work in line with the feelings and emotions of the characters. In addition, the Gothic nature tends to place the reader in a grim and cold environment. Mulholland captures all of this with the first fragment of the story without even introducing the characters or contextualizing the work:

It had been a wild night in Innisbofin, an Irish island perched far out among Atlantic breakers, as the bird flies to Newfoundland. Whoever has weathered an ocean hurricane will have some idea of the fury with which the tempest assaults and afflicts such lonely rocks. The creatures who live upon them, at the mercy of the winds and waves, build their cabins low, and put stones on the roof to keep the thatch from flying off on the trail of Mother Carey's chickens; and having made the sign of the cross over their threshold at night, they sleep soundly, undisturbed by the weird and appalling voices which have sung alike the lullaby and death-keen of all their race. In winter, rain or storm is welcome to rage round them, even though fish be frightened away, and food be scarce, but when wild weather encroaches too far upon the spring, then threats of the 'hungry death' are heard with fear in its mutterings. (324)

That is why the landscape we find is made up of destroyed and dead fields: "but the greater part of the island is barren bog and rock. No shrub will grow upon it, and so fiercely is it swept by storm that the land by the northern and eastern coasts is only a picturesque wilderness" (322). Once the story is contextualized, we continue to find scenes in which nature is described as a challenge to survival. In addition, it can be seen how nature has a direct impact on the attitude of the characters.

Meanwhile the rain went on falling. The spring was bad, the summer was bad, potatoes were few and unwholesome, the turf lay undried and rotting on the bog. Distress began to pinch the cheerful faces of the islanders, and laughter and song were half-drowned in murmurs of fear. (330)

In fact, in some scenes this bleak nature poses obstacles that the characters have to face, reflecting the feats that people must perform in order to survive; for example, when Coll crosses a dangerous bog with Moya in his arms since she was not able to cross it alone:

[...] straining his eyes in the direction whence it came he saw a small form standing solitary in the middle of a distant hollow, a piece of treacherous bog, dangerous in the crossing except to knowing feet. [...]

Approaching as near as he could with ease to the person who had summoned him, he saw a very young girl standing gazing towards him with piteous looks. [...]. Terror had taken possession of her, and she stretched out her

hands appealingly to the strong man, who stood looking at her from the opposite side of the bog. [...]

It was a nice feat for a man to pick his way through this bog, with even so small a woman as this in his arms. The girl clung to him in fear, as he swayed and balanced himself on one sure stone after another, slipping here and stumbling there, but always recovering himself before mischief could be done. At last the deed was accomplished – the goal was won. (332-333)

This scene reflects the fear and despair of having to continue with life while the obstacles that appear may take it away, so we find again a nature completely in line with the historical context.

On the other hand, in *The Countess Cathleen* nature is presented in a more idealized way, in line with the spirituality of the play. The nature depicted in this work does not match the feelings and emotions of people as such, but rather we find a closer relationship of nature to the character of Cathleen. It seems that both Cathleen and the nature Yeats describes were in harmony. Cathleen's castle is set among an idealized nature. In fact, as the Countess confirms that this is where she lived, Mary (a peasant) already knows that she is Countess Cathleen:

CATHLEEN. God save all here. There is a certain house,  
An old grey castle with a kitchen garden,  
A cider orchard and a plot for flowers,  
Somewhere among these woods.

MARY. We know it, lady.  
A place that's set among impassable walls  
As though world's trouble could not find it out.

CATHLEEN. It may be that we are that trouble, for we—  
Although we've wandered in the wood this hour—  
Have lost it too, yet I should know my way,  
For I lived all my childhood in that house.

MARY. Then you are Countess Cathleen? (15-16)

Cathleen's allusion to the wood in which now she is lost represents despair as opposed to her memories of the idealized nature that surrounds her home. In fact, when Cathleen speaks of what happens outside the castle walls, she mentions a harsh landscape in contrast to the flowery landscape of her castle, feeling grateful for it:

CATHLEEN. My thanks to God, to Mary and the angles,  
That I have money in my treasury,  
And can buy grain from those who have stored it up  
To prosper on the hunger of the poor.  
But you've been far and know the signs of things,

When will this yellow vapour no more hang  
And creep about the fields, and this great heat  
Vanish away, and grass show its green shoots?  
FIRST MERCHANT. There is no signs of change – day copies day,  
Green things are dead—the cattle too are dead  
Or dying—and on all the vapour hangs,  
And fattens with disease and glows with heat.  
In you is all the hope of all the land. (64)

This differentiation of landscapes matches the difference of classes that is depicted in the play and that there was also in the historical period in which it is set. Moreover, in this dialogue it can be seen how the death of nature is something that is associated with the poor. However, the fact that Cathleen was in harmony with nature and, like nature, she dies too, may be a symbol similar to the death that Mulholland represented through nature in “The Hungry Death”. Both authors manage to contextualize their works and represent the death of Ireland through the death of nature.

In the same way that Mulholland represents people and their suffering through nature, Yeats shows class difference through it, something that can also be observed in the description of Brigid’s house in “The Hungry Death”. Unlike the humble homes of the rest of the village, Brigid’s home is presented as a wealthy place that also enjoys the luxury of a pitch of fertile land:

Lavelle’s prosperity appeared before the world in a great deal of clean whitewash outside the house, and an interior more comfortable than is usual on the island. The cabin consisted of two rooms - the kitchen, with earthen floor and heather-lined roof, roosting-place for cocks and hens, and with its dresser, old and worm-eaten, showing a fair display of crockery; and the best room, containing a bed, a few pictures on sacred subjects, some sea-shells on the chimney-piece, an ornamental tray, an old gun, and an ancient, time-blackened crucifix against the wall, this last having been washed ashore one morning after the wreck of a Spanish ship. This was the finest house in Bofin, and Tim Lavelle, having returned from seeing the world and married late in life, had settled down in it, and on the most fertile bit of land on the island. It was thought he had a stockful of money in the thatch, which would of course be the property of his daughter; so no wonder if the handsome Brigid has grown up a little spoiled with the knowledge of her own happy importance. (326-327)

In *The Countess Cathleen*, Cathleen’s castle has the wealth that the rest of the village does not, just as in Brigid’s case. In addition, as mentioned above, the nature surrounding

Cathleen was idealized as opposed to the dead fields in which the rest lived, not to mention the luxuries that, like Brigid, were available to her:

SCENE. —*Hall in the house of COUNTESS CATHLEEN. At the Left an oratory with steps leading up to it. At the Right a tapestried wall, more or less repeating the form of the oratory, and a great chair with its back against the wall. In the Centre are two or more arches through which one can see dimly the trees of the garden. CATHLEEN is kneeling in front of the altar in the oratory; there is a hanging lighted lamp over the altar. (55)*

Due to the description of the wealthy homes of the protagonists, and in comparison with the situation of poverty in which the people found themselves, both authors reflect how in a situation as critical as the Famine, the class difference fades into the background as both the upper and lower classes suffer the hard consequences of the catastrophe.

As mentioned earlier, Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* is not a carbon copy of Rosa Mulholland's "The Hungry Death". However, Yeats recreates several details of which Rosa Mulholland made use in order to portray the Great Irish Famine. In this way, both authors employ the same literary motif depicting a wealthy woman sacrificing herself for her suffering and starving people, which they present in a very similar manner.

## Conclusions

The main aim of this B.A. dissertation was to analyze the relationship between the short story “The Hungry Death” written by Rosa Mulholland and the play *The Countess Cathleen* written by William Butler Yeats to illustrate that “The Hungry Death” may have inspired William Butler Yeats to write *The Countess Cathleen*.

After having contextualized each work by providing a historical framework of the Great Irish Famine, a literary context has been provided that encompasses the main themes of the literature of the Famine. Due to the atrocious consequences of the Famine, Ireland suffered the loss of twenty-five percent of its population, so it can be concluded that this trauma is one of the main drives for the writing of plenty of literary works on the subject of the Famine. For this reason, the most recurring themes in these works were famine and death.

Indeed, these are the themes behind the two works selected for this dissertation, “The Hungry Death” and *The Countess Cathleen*. A comparative analysis has shown that there are two scenes that presented a great similarity between them, consisting one of the final outcome in “The Hungry Death” and the other on the contrary, the beginning in *The Countess Cathleen*. Nature along with the homes provide in both works a scenery that reflects the trauma generated by the Famine. Above all, the main literary motif that reinforces the similarities between both works is the presentation of two high-class women who make a sacrifice to save their starving people. Moreover, all these literary motifs that both works share are not only presented in both of them, but they also bring up similar descriptions and themes of the literature of the Great Irish Famine, in which the sacrifice and the personification of a wealthy person in front of a devastated village were recurrent.

This analysis has also illustrated that William Butler Yeats does not similarly recreate the existing literary motifs of “The Hungry Death” in *The Countess Cathleen* but rather they are recontextualized and adapted to the context of his play. In this way, Yeats manages to establish a connection with Rosa Mulholland’s work that suggests “The Hungry Death” as an inspiration for Yeats to write *The Countess Cathleen* without it being a literary adaptation. Furthermore, the chronological order of publications in which Yeats

publishes *The Countess Cathleen* one year after publishing Mulholland's story reinforces the hypothesis of this connection.

This B.A. dissertation has successfully reached the anticipated results after having established a connection between two works apparently unrelated. Besides, this project provides a study of the literature of the Great Irish Famine, highlighting how the historical framework is crucial for writing many literary works. Perhaps, future research could lead to further study and comparison of works related to this historical event and the trauma that continues to pursue many generations after the event.



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