

# The hungry death rosa mulholland english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



an Analysis of the Story Level (plot, setting, background, characters & characterisation, themes & motifs > with particular reference to Famine and faith / religious world view.

## **344 SE Literary & Cultural Studies Seminar**

Recollecting Hunger: Memories of the Irish Famine (1845-48) in Irish Fiction from the 19th Century to the Present WS 2012/13 Ao. Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Franz-Karl Wöhrer

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### **Declaration of Authenticity**

I confirm to have conceived and written this Seminar paper / BA Thesis in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references, either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors are truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

### **1. Introduction**

The aim of this seminar paper is to undertake a detailed literary analysis of the story level of Rosa Mulholland's short story 'The Hungry Death', which was written in 1891. The story was published by W. B. Yeats in his anthology Representative Irish Tales in the same year (Deane, Carpenter and Williams

952). The story was written in memory of the Great Irish Famine between 1845 and 1852, and so poverty and starvation play a significant role throughout the story. The first section of the paper is about the state of Ireland in the historical period of the Great Famine. There are three main topics which are covered in this section: Famine, Irish nationalism and religion. Each of these topics is structured into sub-sections. The first categorises the Great Irish Famine in terms of duration, causes and impact. What follows is a detailed summary of the historical background of the Famine with particular reference to the political context of that time and the long-term effects which the Famine brought to Ireland. The second topic is Irish nationalism, and addresses its emergence in the wake of the Famine and nationalist movements after the Famine. The final topic deals with religion, in particular rising Catholicism from the time of the Famine up until the decade Mulholland wrote 'The Hungry Death', with reference to the growing economic and social power of Catholics. In chapter 3, the state of women in Irish Famine literature is identified. There follows a discussion of Mulholland's female contemporaries and a summary of Rosa Mulholland's biography, including personal and professional information. The next section introduces the literary text I worked on and a general definition of its genre, as well as some description of archetypal plot mechanics. First of all, the meaning of plot in general will be specified and secondly, the plot of 'The Hungry Death' will be summarized with reference to the page numbers as found in Colm Toibin's anthology *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999), which was the published edition I worked with. Chapter 5 has the setting as its topic. The first part of this chapter deals with a definition of the concept of

setting. Furthermore, the setting of the story 'The Hungry Death' in particular is examined in terms of location and time. The local setting gives detailed information about the place where the story is set, and about its background. References to the Famine reveal that the story takes sometime place during that time. A deeper analysis of the temporal setting leads to informed conjecture about when the story might have actually happened in terms of dates, placing it squarely at the height of the Famine. The historical and political background of Ireland around the time the story is set will be in chapter 6. Emphasis is drawn to the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Chapter 7 deals with the characterization of literary works in general and the characters of the story in particular. At first, a general introduction of the concept of characterization and its methods is given and subsequently applied to the characters in the story. Furthermore, the main characters of 'The Hungry Death' are analysed according to their character traits, actions and development. The following figures are portrayed in greater detail: Brigid Lavelle, Coll Prendergast, Moya Maillie and Tim Lavelle. In addition, a brief introduction of the minor characters is included in this section. The following section is broadly similar and includes a description of the literary terms of motifs and themes. Subsequently, the story's most significant themes and motifs with particular reference to the Famine and religious world of view are identified. The final chapter of this paper is about the conclusions I drew while reading and analysing the short story 'The Hungry Death'.

## **2. The State of Ireland in the Historical Period of the Great Irish Famine**

### **2. 1. Famine**

#### **2. 1. 1. Categorising the Great Irish Famine**

There is no clear date when the Great Irish Famine started or ended and there are also differing opinions about its exact length in years. Some historians claim that the Irish Famine started with the potato crop failure during the autumn of 1845 and lasted until 1849 (Foster 318), while others write that it only ended in 1852 (Kinealy, The Poor Law 171). There is also no clear indication of how the Famine started. There is the argument that the Famine set in with the "government relief effort" of Sir Robert Peel (Morash 2). Others claim that the Famine occurred while there was calamity in the West of Ireland, but there had been food deficiencies in some places in Ireland persistent during the 19th century. There is also position that the Famine was a time generally full of diseases, emigration and bad harvests. However, there had been serious epidemics, like cholera, before 1845 (Clarkson 221). This might suggest that these arguments were not the reason that converted a period of misery into the Great Famine. Like other historical events the Famine does not have a "formal structure" according to Christopher Morash (3). As there is not a precise date of the beginning and of the ending, there is also no ceremonial procedure framed by texts as a war has, for instance. A war has an officially stated declaration to mark when it starts and when it finishes a contract is signed (Morash 3). As a matter of fact, the Famine is primarily a "retrospective, textual creation", i. e. "The starvation, the emigration, and the disease epidemics of the late 1840s have

become ' the Famine' because it was possible to inscribe those disparate, but interrelated events in a relatively cohesive narrative" (Morash 3).

Another fact that is not clearly defined is that of the number of people who died during the Great Famine. There is some speculation that 500, 000 to 1, 500, 000 people died (Daly 98). However, " the precise number who died will never be known" according to Corma Ó Gráda, who did some calculations on this issue (The Great Irish Famine 48-49). It is also claimed that the " primary referent of the word ' famine' is death" (Arnold 17). Talking about the Famine is always related to the incredible number of fatalities.

## **2. 1. 2. Historical background of the Great Famine**

In 1845 Belgium was the first country to be affected by a blight on their potato crop. The potato blight spread immediately to other European countries and reached Ireland during the autumn of 1845, destroying more than a half of the Irish crop. The situation was very serious for the Irish as about 50 percent of the populations depended on the potato harvest for its existence. They also needed the potatoes to feed their animals, like cattle and pigs (Kinealy, The Stricken Land 11-12). After Sir Robert Peel, the British Prime Minister at the time, had noticed the serious situation in Ireland, he immediately imported " Indian corn (a low-grade grain)" from America to expand the food supply and to stabilize the provision price (Kinealy, The Stricken Land 12). This relief was successful and nobody was killed in the first year of the potato blight. However, Sir Robert Peel had connected the failure with his personal political goals of abolishing the Corn Laws. As a result the corn protection was no longer guaranteed in the United Kingdom

and as a result, the "Ireland's agrarian sector changed from grain production to pasture" (Ó Gráda, Ireland before and after the Famine 151-3). As another consequence, Peel lost his leadership and the Tory Party collapsed. In 1846 the potato blight reoccurred again and the new leader of the British Government was Lord John Russell of the Whig Party, who decided to decrease the import and sale of potatoes, as the situation became more severe than the year before. He left supply to the market rather than intervening with further government regulation. Public work seemed to be a relief for the country at first. However, it turned out a failure. The working conditions were corrupt and exploited people, including women and children, to work physically for twelve or more hours a day for a very low salary. Employed people often worked on construction projects that had little value, outlined in the description of "roads that led nowhere and walls that surrounded nothing" (Kinealy, A Death-Dealing Famine 66-77). Consequently, many people suffered from severe diseases and the rate of fatalities was already very high by the winter of 1846-47. In addition, emigration and eviction were other problems that the Irish had to face (Kinealy, The Stricken Land 13). The British finally introduced effective relief in the form of soup kitchens, which were inexpensive to operate. And yet, despite the success and cost efficiency of this policy, the government put a stop to it because of its popularity with the Irish, and the fear in London that the population would become dependent on this handout. It is treatment like this that contributed to growing Irish resentment with the British, leading to a surge in Irish nationalist sentiment during the second half of the 19th century (Kinealy, The Stricken Land 13). In 1847 the blight on the potatoes

decreased gradually. The crop, however, was still very small (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 13). After 1852, Ireland defeated the potato blight and had for the first time a good crop again. The country, however, had changed dramatically within these six years of famine. The rate of population had decreased by about 25 percent. Though, the precise number of dead and emigrated people during the famine could have never been determined. (Ó Grada, *The Great Famine and today's famines* 248-258). Furthermore, the impact of the Famine also led to a high rate of mortality especially among young children and middle aged men (Ó Grada, *Ireland before and after the Famine* 106-8). Death and emigration can be considered as long-term effects of the famine (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 16). Although the Famine was over, people continued to leave Ireland, resulting in mass emigration. An estimated one million people emigrated from Ireland in each decade after 1852. As Kinealy writes, " by the end of the nineteenth century, an international network of Irish communities had been established" (Kinealy, *This Great Calamity* 297). People moved preferably to the United States with 80 % of all emigrants opting to resettle there. Other popular places were Britain, Canada and Australasia (Kinealy, *This Great Calamity* 297). As already mentioned, the exact number of emigrated people will never be known, but the approximately number of emigrated Irish between 1847-1855 is estimated as follows:

### **Emigration Rates, 1847-55**

1847-219, 885 persons  
1848-181, 316  
1849-218, 842  
1850-213, 649  
1851-254, 537  
1852-368, 764  
1853-192, 609  
1854-150, 209  
1855- 78, 854 (Kinealy, *This*



Great Calamity 298) Statistics also show record fatalities from 1847 through to 1849:

## **Mortality Rates, 1847-1849**

### **1847 1848 1849**

Leinster 59, 20850, 53660, 360 Munster 82, 49669, 71592, 737 Ulster 64, 58646, 22242, 742 Connacht 43, 04541, 77944, 958

### **Ireland 249, 335208, 252240, 797**

(Kinealy, This Great Calamity 251) To conclude, the impact of the Famine was not restricted to Ireland. In the years after the Famine, " its remembrance was a painful reminder to nationalists of British misrule" (Kinealy, The Stricken Land 16).

## **2. 2. Nationalism**

### **2. 2. 1. Emerging Irish nationalism in the wake of the Famine**

Growing dissatisfaction with the government of Sir Robert Peel, as discussed in 2. 1. 2., offered ammunition to a nationalist movement which gained in political strength over the following decades. In her article The Stricken Land: The Great Hunger in Ireland, Christine Kinealy identifies two critics of the British Government who established important public profiles with political agendas stemming from popular dissatisfaction and unrest: John Mitchel and James Fintan Lalor. As Kinealy points out, Irish nationalist politics at the time of the Famine still had its moderate voices, but more trenchant calls for reform were increasingly prominent. On Lalor, Kinealy cites Daly (James

Fintan Lalor 112-13), writing that "[his] response was to propose that a social revolution should accompany the political revolution, believing that without a reform of the land system, political changes would be meaningless" (The Stricken Land 17). Lalor's platform was the anti-British publication The Nation, which proved so inflammatory that circulation was suppressed in 1848 (Donnelly 9). Kinealy writes that Lalor incited civil disobedience among tenants (The Stricken Land 17), a view which John Mitchel, who had "continued to hope that Irish landlords would had the struggle for independence" (The Stricken Land 18), himself embraced in 1848. Mitchel also used the press to spread revolutionary objectives. Kinealy describes his newspaper, the United Irishman, as "more militant" than The Nation (The Stricken Land 18), and shows that Mitchel's call for the Irish population to mobilise themselves with weapons led to popularity for his publication, with circulation rising to 12, 000 within a few weeks of its establishment early in 1848. Kearney highlights the anti-British rhetoric used by Mitchel as a further weapon in The United Irishman's promotion of nationalist sentiment. He quotes Mitchel as claiming that "the Almighty indeed sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine" (272), and to some extent agrees himself, arguing that "[Peel's] policy was one of complete inaction" (272). He also cites William Smith O'Brien, who claims that Ireland's own resources were "abundantly adequate" to maintain population as it stood and prevent the Famine (272). For Mitchel, the Famine was a "gigantic conspiracy against the Irish people", in which Irish landlords were used as accomplices by the hostile British government (Kearney 273). The British, in turn, took steps against Mitchel, including transporting him to the distant colony of

Bermuda, which Kinealy describes as a "draconian measure" that only served to increase tensions and make insurrection more likely (The Stricken Land 19). In July 1848, a British-led attempt to suspend the right of habeas corpus created much further mistrust, with Kinealy noting that at the time a resulting uprising in the South of Ireland was much discussed (The Stricken Land 19-20). An uprising led by Smith O'Brien in July 1848 in County Tipperary posed no real threat and was easily fought by the government, but left an impact on the following generation of nationalists (The Stricken Land 20).

## **2. 2. 2. Nationalist movements after the Famine**

The traumatic effects of the Famine included mass population reduction mainly through death and emigration, particularly to the United States. It was Irish nationalists active in America which led to the establishment of the Fenian Brotherhood in 1858. 1848 had seen a radical transformation in the political outlook of Irish intellectuals sympathetic towards cultural nationalism, who Kinealy describes, citing Terry Eagleton (Scholars and Rebels 61), as previously "essentially conservative, paternalistic, backward-looking and sometimes apolitical" (The Stricken Land 21-22). Labelling the 1848 uprising as an "abject failure", Kinealy nonetheless notes that its "legacy was considerable", and that "[the] remarkable achievement of Young Ireland, therefore, was that it transformed a group of what were essentially romantic nationalists into radical and revolutionaries" (The Stricken Land 22). Young Ireland's poetic ideals and literary background made much impact on the writing of the period, but the movement's eventual

politicisation proved just as important for later generation of literary figures, including Rosa Mulholland writing in the 1890s. Increasingly politicised nationalist movements were not only represented by John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny, described by Kerby A. Miller as "single-minded fanatics" (228). Their Foundation of the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States inspired similar movements at home in Ireland, most significantly the Irish Republican Brotherhood. As described by Byrne, Coleman and King, the Irish Republican Brotherhood enjoyed more success than the Fenians, and "led bombing campaigns in England in the 1880s, revived to assist Sinn Féin, directed the 1916 Easter Rising, and endured under their leader, Michael Collins, through the Anglo-Irish war until the founding of the Free State" (466). The Irish Republican Brotherhood however was lacking in legitimacy, through its status as a secret organisation and citizen militia. Its activities found a more realistic political parallel in the founding of the Home Rule League in 1873 and that also of Sinn Féin in 1905, which as White notes, "Because the political party of the Republican movement" (20). By the time Rosa Mulholland wrote 'The Hungry Death' in 1891, nationalist politics had established a legitimate foothold in Ireland's political system, supported in no small part by the notion of feasible independence which gained credibility after British neglect and mismanagement during the famine.

## **2. 3. Religion**

### **2. 3. 1. The geo-religious split**

The longstanding divide in Irish nationalist discourse has traditionally been seen in terms of Protestant Ulster and the Catholic South. Kearney states

that the political question of the Union with Britain or Irish independence rested on " whether the Irish nation was an ethno-religious or a civic entity" (28). A project to unite the nation would always face problems if phrased in religious terms, as Protestants and Catholics represented different social groups and rarely saw eye to eye. Irish Catholics however grew in strength as a social group during the nineteenth century, and Larkin writes that " there is no doubt Irish Catholics increased their share of national wealth" in the hundred years from 1801 to 1901, though there are no reliable hard statistics (32). He also estimates that the Catholic share had reached half the national income during this period (32), which is notable as the Protestants were on the side of the colonial power and more likely to be landlords and skilled professionals. In addition to rising material wealth, there was also an increase in national identity among Irish Catholics. Again, the course of the nineteenth century was one long turning point. Kimberly Cowell-Meyers writes that " Irish Catholicism would become indissolubly linked to the concept of the " nation" as it grew in this period," adding that by the end of the nineteenth century in Ireland, Catholics were the " nation" (73). Identity and economic power are two important factors in the accumulation of political power, and it is not surprising that during the nineteenth century, growing political strength led to religious conflict.

### **3. The State of Women in Irish Famine Literature**

#### **3. 1. Female writing and female tropes**

Women played a significant role in Irish Famine literature. Their high profile can be related to the colonial condition of Ireland: " Ireland was symbolically

embodied by female figures in response to a ' hypermasculine' regime of imperial oppression", according to Margaret Kelleher (Feminization of Famine 187). The female characters within Irish Famine fiction itself can be divided into three categories: there is the image of the " suffering mother" who sees her own child in the face of the death by starvation. This conception of maternity is found for example in ' The Black Potatoes' by Mrs Hoare (Kelleher, Feminization of Famine 74). Furthermore, there is the category of ' maidens', who are powerful and often Catholics. One example that turns into a heroine and saves the lives of many people is Brigid Lavelle in ' The Hungry Death' by Rosa Mulholland (Innes 16-17). The third category concerns ' old crones'. Young Ascendancy daughters in Famine fiction often follow the image of the " empathic Angel of the House who safeguards the moral well-being of her family, while overstepping gender boundaries by challenging the authority of a paternal figure who represents colonial power", but are also regularly depicted (Corporaal, Cusack, and Janssen 19).

### **3. 2. Mulholland's female contemporaries**

There are few female Irish writers who reflect the perspective of Rosa Mulholland, and Mulholland herself frequently commented on the lack of emphasis given to Irish identity in contemporary fiction of her time (Gardiner and O'Dowd 929). In ' Wanted an Irish Novelist' a polemic she penned in 1891, she lamented the " noticeable fact that writers who produce one good Irish novel, giving promise of store to come, almost invariably cease to be Irish at that point, and afterwards cast the tributary stream of their powers into the universal stream of English fiction" (Mulholland, Wanted an Irish

Novelist 821). James H. Murphy adds that " the Russells and Mulhollands represented a way of being Irish that was subsequently to be ruled out of court in an increasing polarization between unionism and nationalism" (16). In short, Mulholland's call for Irish fiction within the context of a pro-unionist political world view was seen as anachronistic by the 1890s, and the Catholic-oriented narratives she supported were in fact resisted by the very readership they were designed to court (Gardiner and O'Dowd 929). One woman who tried to follow Mulholland with strong Catholic narratives was Attie O'Brien, whose novels and short stories were not always received well (Gardiner and O'Dowd 929). Fannie Gallaher's ' slum fiction' focused on the deprived communities Mulholland often turned to, though her narrative emphasis was firmly centred on populist melodrama (Gardiner and O'Dowd 927). The work of Annie Hector and Margaret Hungerford was similarly sentimental, and they were much more realistic and enjoyed popular success in and outside of Ireland. Quite whether they represented the strong Irish identity that Mulholland called for is however debatable (Gardiner and O'Dowd 927).

### **3. 3. Biographical Summary of Author**

Rosa Mulholland, also known as Lady Gilbert, was born in Belfast, Ireland in 1841. She was a novelist, playwright and poet. Originally, Mulholland wanted to become a painter, and studied art in South Kensington. However, her career as an artist did not last for long, as her pictures were rejected. One of her supporters in her early literary life was Charles Dickens<sup>1</sup>, who also published two of her works (Read and O'Connor 270). After the death of her

father, Mulholland moved to a remote mountainous part of the West of Ireland. She spent some years there and this period had a significant influence on her literary works (Read and O'Connor 270). In 1891 she married John Thomas Gilbert, an Irish historian. Together they had one of the biggest private libraries in Ireland and lived in Villa Nuova, Blackrock, County Dublin, where Rosa Mulholland died in 1921 (Colman 162). She produced a great number of poems, novels and short stories. Her fiction is mainly made up of the information she gained on the peasantry during her time in West Ireland but is also considered as romantic fiction (Hogan et al. 479). She also wrote regularly for *The Irish Monthly* (Kelleher, *Prose Writing and Drama in English* 454), *The Lamp*, *Duffy's Hibernian* and *Cornhill Magazine* (Colman 162). Rosa Mulholland wrote under both her real name and the pen name Ruth Murray (*The Literary Output of Three Irish Women* 200). 1 The preface to Mulholland's novel *The Late Miss Hollingford* (London: Blackie & Son, 1869) states " Mr Dickens was so pleased with this tale, and some others by the same author, then a very young beginner, that he wrote asking her to contribute a serial story of considerable length to his journal" (p. ii).

## **4. ' The Hungry Death': Genre and Plot**

### **4. 1. Genre**

The ' The Hungry Death' is considered a short story and the edition I worked with was published in Colm Toibin's anthology *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999). A short story can be defined as a " brief work of prose fiction, and most of the terms for analyzing the component elements, the various



narrative techniques of the novel are applicable to the short story as well" (Abrams 286).

## 4. 2. Plot

The literary term plot is specified as " the thread of actions that carries the story and serves to exemplify the theme" (Turco 40). The short-story ' The Hungry Death' is set on the Irish island of Innisbofin and narrates the life of Brigid Lavelle, who lives together with her father on a farm. As Brigid comes one day on her canoe to Innisbofin to make her purchases, she is greeted by Coll Prendergast, a handsome man and suitor. However, all his friendly gestures of carrying her purchases and helping her into her canoe do not impress her. On her way back in the boat she thinks about her encounter with Coll and wonders whether he had known the reason for her trip to the store, namely to buy some provisions for the evening. On that evening Brigid and her father expect Coll, his uncle, and some other guests to come to their house, as Coll's uncle and Brigid's father had planned a match between the young people. However, Brigid is not interested in a marriage with Coll, or at least to marry in such a hurry. She is very proud and does not want to be handed so easily (Mulholland, The Hungry Death 268-271). While Brigid is waiting for the guests, the rain falls in torrents, which make her hope that the guests might stay at home and the match-making will come to an end. However, the guests enter, among them Coll, and fill the house with laughter and dancing. The heavy rain and the rotting potatoes are forgotten for that night. Coll, who is truly in love with Brigid, requests her to dance with him a couple of times without luck. She declares that she does not want to be the

wife of a man who chooses women so lightly and goes off and dances with another man. But Coll does not give up and presents her with lovely gifts. However, all his efforts turn out in vain. During that time, the weather becomes worse. After a bad spring and bad summer, the rain keeps on falling heavily and the potato crop is very small and of poor quality. At that time, when Brigid notices the bad times around her, she feels ashamed for her self-serving behaviour and swears that the next time when she meets Coll she will be willing to marry him. However, during her next meeting, her tormented feelings for him return and, in spite of all her efforts to love Coll, she rejects him again (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 272-274). Being tired of her insolence, Coll walks away and decides to court her no more. On his way home he hears a cry from the distance. When he comes closer to the noise, he notices a young girl in distress. After observing her for some moments, Coll feels that he has known her for a long time and that she belongs to him. The young girl is Moya Maillie and he knew her as a baby, but has not thought about her since then. Coll immediately falls in love with her and follows her home to make the hard times as easy as possible for her and her family (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 275-277). In the meantime Brigid feels remorse about her pride and is waiting for Coll's return. As she cannot bear it any longer, she makes her way to the island's fishing village with the hope of meeting Coll. When she does see him, he is together with his new beloved. Brigid is appalled and reproaches him (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 277-278). When the autumn comes to Innisbofin, the island is in distress because of the failure. The potato-seeds are either washed off by the heavy rain or those seeds that remained in the earth are diseased. The

island's inhabitants have to live with a small portion of Indian-meal once a day. The hunger also haunts Brigid and his father, who share what they have with their poor neighbours. Eventually, the father catches the fever which the Famine brought with it and immediately dies. As Brigid is on her own, she decides to take all the money the father has left and buy meal for her hungry fellow villagers. She travels from village to village to hand out meal and aid. She transforms into a heroine until her own strength begins to fail (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 278-279). In the meantime, the Maillie's house is affected severely. Although Coll gives his best to take care of the Maillie family, all of Moya's sisters and brothers die, and so eventually does her mother. But the hungry death also affects Moya. As Moya becomes delirious, Coll sets out and begs everyone in the village for a mouthful of food. One afflicted neighbour recommends him to go to Brigid Lavelle, who has become a benefactor to some of the suffering islanders. Coll goes off to Brigid's house and as he asks her for a little meal for the dying Moya, Brigid decides not to give him her last handful piece of food, reminding him that she will never forgive him for choosing Moya (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 279-281). That night, Brigid is haunted by a terrible dream, in which she sees herself dead and Moya and Coll going happily hand in hand into heaven. Frightened, she awakes and goes straight to the little church of Innisbofin. On her way, she passes some dead bodies and weak people digging graves. Inside the church, Father John is praying and suffering with dying people. Brigid lays herself on her face at his feet and prays for salvation. She tells him what she has done, that she refused to help Coll because of her hate towards Moya. The priest forgives her and instructs her that she must do

everything in her power to save the life of Moya. Brigid runs back to her threshold, picking up the last piece of food and hurries to the Maillie house to the Middle Quarter Village. Once she reaches the Maillie home, she delivers the small portion of meal, but before Coll is able to thank her, she leaves. Knowing what fate awaits her, she decides to spend all her remaining energy on returning to the church, where she lays her on the floor in front of a cross. That night a storm comes up and Brigid dies in silence and peace. She gives up her life to save her competitor Moya (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 281-283). The following morning a ship arrives with food relief that might have prevented her sacrifice. After Moya recovers, she and Coll leave Innisbofin and emigrate to America, where they pray every night for Brigid (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 283).

## **5. ‘ The Hungry Death’: Setting**

The literary term setting denotes " the locale or period in which the action of a play, novel, motion picture, etc., takes place" (Shaw 340).

### **5. 1. Local setting**

The story ‘ The Hungry Death’ is set on the Irish island of Innisbofin, or just Bofin as it is also referred to in the story. Innisbofin is called Inishbofin nowadays and is derived from the Irish Inis Bó Finne, meaning Island of the White Cow. The island is located off the western coast of Ireland, near Cleggan, County Galway (DeAngelis 352). Inisbofin is also the island to which Oliver Cromwell expelled troublesome Catholic priests in 1652, and later a prison was built to house these enemies of the British state. For priests banished to the island under Cromwell, their sentence saw much cruelty

(DeAngelis 352). In the story Bofin is described as a small island, with a high population. A large part of the island is "barren bog and rock", where "no shrub will grow upon it" (Mulholland 268). The countryside by the Eastern and Northern coasts is described as "only a picturesque wilderness" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 268). It has a school, a church and a little store, where the necessities, like meal, soap, etc. can be bought. The people are described as "light-hearted" and "frugal", and "they feel themselves a little nation"; the sea is a "treasury" for them (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 268). The islanders are cheerful and happy people at the beginning of the story, but as the Famine grows worse their optimism is challenged by hardship more severe than anything they had known: "Accustomed as they are to the hardships of recurring years of trial, the Bofiners became gradually aware that a visitation was at hand for which there had seldom been a parallel" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 278).

## **5. 2. Temporal setting**

In terms of time it is not clear when the story actually takes place. In the first part of the story a reference to "rotten potatoes" is made at the Lavelle's match-making event, indicating that the potato blight has already reached Innisbofin: "Soon the door was barred against the storm, [...] laughter, song and dancing filled the little house, and the rotting potatoes and the ruinous rains were forgotten" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 273). The second part of the story is all about the Famine reaching its climax. A reference made to "autumn", can be associated with the year 1845, as historically considered this was the autumn when the Famine started (Foster 318): "All through that

summer the rain fell, and when autumn came in Bofin, there was no harvest" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 278). Moreover, it can be assumed that the second part of the story flashes towards about four years, as a reference to "relief-meal" is made at the end of the story, which might indicate the end of the Famine: "The vessel with the relief-meal sailed into the harbour. For many even then alive, the food came all too late" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 283). When the Famine ended is not clearly stated. Some historians claim that the Famine lasted until 1849, while others write that it ended in 1852 (Kinealy, *The Poor Law* 171).

## **6. Historical and Political Background**

A colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland had existed since the twelfth century, and by the early seventeenth century British rule over the island had become firmly established. Ireland had long had its own parliament, but from 1494 to 1782 the country had effectively been ruled from Westminster. In 1782 the Irish Parliament won some autonomous power, with the Catholic faction suppressed, and for Irish nationalists looking to revolutions in America and France, this was too little. As Kinealy explains, "an unsuccessful republican uprising in 1798 brought this phase of limited self-government to an end and precipitated the Act of Union" (*At Home with the Empire* 77). In 1801 Ireland came under formal British rule as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (Kinealy, *At Home with the Empire* 77). These tensions are not referred to directly in 'The Hungry Death' and very little of what Mulholland writes is explicitly political. Nevertheless, Mulholland devoted much space to describing the social

condition of the islanders, which for the vast majority descends rapidly into misery as the story progresses, and this implicitly takes on a political dimension. Mulholland emphasizes the sense of community felt by the islanders through some revealing descriptions: Brigid appears in a striking crimson skirt portrayed as "the costume of the island" (The Hungry Death 270), while the people "feel themselves a little nation" and tell "with pride the storied interest of their island" (The Hungry Death 268). Inisbofin may be a remote and isolated island, but Mulholland uses interesting and almost defensive language to depict the numerical strength and hardiness of its people: "Bofin is of no mean size, and has a large population" (The Hungry Death 268). The costume, the reference to nation and the indication of a sizeable workforce demonstrate three fundamentally political characteristics necessary for any viable state: cultural identity, community, and self-sufficiency. Together with Mulholland's use of the evocative word "nation" (The Hungry Death 268), it is almost as if Inisbofin might be read as a microcosm which represents a greater, hypothetical Ireland. This image of a country capable of independence chimes with the thoughts of nationalists discussed in 2. 2. 1., and particularly William Smith O'Brien and John Mitchel, who challenged the popular view of Ireland as a poor country (Kearney 272). According to their assessment, Ireland only plunged into crisis due to the mismanagement of the British, and was rich enough in resources to prevent the Famine by itself. Mulholland acknowledges that the crisis of the Famine so devastates Inisbofin that in the end only, the "charity of the world" can save its residents (The Hungry Death 283), but earlier extended description of the islanders' resiliency and puritanical work ethic does much to suggest

that a proud and productive national community has fallen not through any fault of its own, but because of an inability to take action in the face of debilitating hardship. The anti-British stance is entirely sub-textual, but in drawing attention so relentlessly to the cruel suffering inflicted by the Famine, 'The Hungry Death' is a testament to how British misrule caused the deaths of millions.

## **7. 'The Hungry Death': Characters and Characterisation**

The literary term characterisation can be specified as "the process of connecting information with a figure in a text so as to provide a character in the fictional world with a certain property, or properties, concerning body, mind, behaviour, or relation to the (social) environment" (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 32). Generally speaking, there are two ways of characterising a figure: through direct characterisation, which refers to the verbal attribution of particular traits of a character, or indirect characterisation, which includes traits described through actions, manners, working life, etc. of the character (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 32). With the exception of Moya Maillie and Tim Lavelle, the characters are largely introduced through indirect description.

### **7. 1. Brigid Lavelle**

Brigid is the female protagonist of the story. She lives together with her father Tim Lavelle on a farm in the West Quarter Village of Innisbofin. She is described as very proud, hubristic, stubborn, but also fortunate and handsome. Her physical appearance is portrayed in a positive and beautiful way: "thick, dark-red hair", "red-brown eyes", "perfect oval face", "full red



mouth", "curved brows" and "two little round dimples fixed at the corners of the proud curved mouth" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 269-270). She is very aware of her appearance which is characterised by fresh and new clothes. Brigid is also an heiress and all the money which her father has saved will once belong to his daughter. Brigid has therefore "grown up a little spoiled with the knowledge of her own happy importance" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 271). She is not amused about the match made by her father and Coll's uncle. She considers herself as a young, independent woman who does not need a husband who cares for her, and above all, she does not want to be tied down. This is also the reason why she consistently rejects Coll's overtures. Though she is mostly described indirectly, her Icarus-like pride at this point becomes noticeable enough that she is the subject of direct description through the islanders' gossip: "She's too proud" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 270), comments a unidentified fisherman openly. When the Famine occurs in Innisbofin, Brigid's father dies because of the fever. She takes all his money and transforms into a heroine, travelling from village to village to take care of her weak and ill neighbours and to provide them with food. The full extent of her transformation is however far more extraordinary, as by the end of the story she sacrifices herself "to save the life of [Moya]" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 283). Indirect description also reveals that the motivation for her action is the love she feels for Coll, even though she rejected him before (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 283). With her sacrifice, there is also a religious subtext of martyrdom; so when Brigid is convinced by the priest in her local church that she should offer her last remaining food supplies to Coll and Moya, he gestures to the figure of

Christ on the cross, and we are told that Brigid " turn[s] her fascinated gaze to the crucifix, fix[es] them on the thorn-crowed face" (Mulholland, The Hungry Death 282). The connection made is that just as Christ gave his life to save mankind, she too must be a martyr and save Moya.

## **7. 2. Coll Prendergast**

Coll is described as a very handsome, helpful and " simple straightforward fellow" with a " strong frame and smiling bronzed face" (Mulholland, The Hungry Death 273, 270). Like most of the inhabitants of Innisbofin, he is poor and owns " nothing but his boat and fishing-tackle" (Mulholland, The Hungry Death 272). His uncle has saved some money, which Coll shall receive on the day of his marriage, and his lifestyle before this point is frugal. Coll and Brigid Lavelle are supposed to marry after a match made by Coll's uncle and Brigid's father. At the beginning, Coll is truly in love with Brigid. But Brigid constantly rejects him, which makes him more than a little stubborn as he really wants to marry her. Later, however, he starts to feel afraid of her, as whenever he says a gentle word to her, the " red light in her eyes would flash and strike him dumb" (Mulholland, The Hungry Death 273). When Brigid insults him as a " perseverinest", he starts to get " tired of her insolence" and decides to court her no more (Mulholland, The Hungry Death 274). A little later, Coll encounters a distressed young girl in the wilderness. He feels deeply for her and impulsively senses that they belong together at first sight. Helpful as he is, Coll takes the young woman in his arms and goes with her through the bog. At this moment, he swears to look after her, and moreover he is a man who does not break his word. As Moya becomes seriously sick

because of the hardship, Coll, weak as well, nearly risks his life by hitting the road to find something edible for his beloved. As he is not able to get anything, he goes to Brigid to beg for a small portion of food. When Brigid delivers some meal to Moya, Coll does not hide his feelings and expresses his gratitude with the thought of falling on his knees and kissing her feet. He also compares Brigid to an angel. When it comes to love, Coll is a big-hearted man who falls for women easily and pursues them persistently to the point of stubbornness. He is shy and timid, but will ask for help when desperate. A confirmation of his basic human decency and integrity comes at the very end of the story, when guilt drives him to pray every night for the soul he asked to sacrifice.

### **7. 3. Moya Maillie:**

Moya is described as a very simple and innocent girl. She is "small, slight, poorly and scantily clad" and 16 years old (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 275). Coll describes her physical appearance as a girl with a "wreath of wind-tossed yellow hair, and eyes as blue as forget-me-nots" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 275). Here we have direct description of Moya, but Coll's language is so obviously lovestruck that we can't be sure how reliable his tributes to her physical beauty are. This adds, indirectly to the descriptive observation that he is a man who falls for girls easily. Moya lives with her mother and seven siblings in a bare and poor cabin in the Middle Quarter village. She is also very supportive of her family as she is willing to work. Her work includes mending nets for fishermen and knitting stockings. During the Famine, Moya's mother, sisters and brothers die and eventually, she also

becomes affected and delirious. The reader does not get any information about Moya's feelings for Coll or what her thoughts are about Brigid.

#### **7. 4. Tim Lavelle:**

Brigid's father Tim is described in the story as a "consumptive-looking man, with a wistful and restless eye" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 271). He wishes a husband for her daughter, especially for hard times. Tim Lavelle has the finest cabin in Bofin, which consists of two rooms, a kitchen and a room including a bed and some valuable objects like "a time-blackened crucifix", "an old gun", and "a few pictures on sacred subjects" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 271). He travelled much around in the world when he was a young man, which is the reason for his late marriage and his small family, which consists only of Brigid. This contrasts with other families on the island, like the Maillie family, which have some more children. When distress comes to Innisbofin, Tim and his daughter share what they have with their poor and ill neighbours. But finally, Tim is also caught by the fever which the Famine brings, and dies.

#### **7. 5. Other characters**

Other minor characters that we get to know in the story are the old fisherman and the boat-maker, who are both informed about the match-making between Coll and Brigid; Judy O'Flaherty, one of the female guests of the party at the Lavelle's; Coll's uncle, who is also in favour of a marriage between Coll and Brigid and has therefore saved some money for his nephew, which he shall receive on the day of his marriage. Father John, the priest of the little church of Innisbofin, who Brigid asks for salvation; Moya

Maillie's mother, who is a widow; and Moya's sisters and brothers, who all die during the course of the Famine.

## **8. 'The Hungry Death': Motifs and Themes**

The literary term motif is identified as a "conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature" (Abrams 169). The term theme is very similar, but it is rather "applied to a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and makes persuasive to the reader" (Abrams 169).

### **8. 1. Match-making**

A minor theme of the story is 'match-making'. Match-making had at the time a long history in Ireland. Traditionally, professional matchmakers were engaged to set marriages up and to dispute between the two families. People got married to avoid emigration and to be able to accept family inheritances (Eagleton, *The Truth about the Irish* 123). If the marriage turned out to be a mistake, "you were stuck with it for life, in a land without divorce" as Eagleton states (*The Truth about the Irish* 123). Brigid Lavelle and Coll Prendergast are supposed to marry because of a match made between Brigid's father and Coll's uncle. Brigid's father wishes a husband for his daughter as he will not live forever, and especially as he senses that bad times are coming and "[he] will not let [her] face them alone" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 271).

## 8. 2. Emigration

Emigration is a more significant theme employed in the story. As already mentioned earlier in this paper estimated millions of people emigrated from Ireland between 1847 and 1855 in the wake of the famine (Kinealy, This Great Calamity 297-298). The reason why so many Irish emigrated was that they had no other choice to escape from starvation (Raum 102). The most popular destination was the United States (Kinealy, A Death-Dealing Famine 147), and this where Coll and Moya flee to in the story. During her conversation with her father, Brigid also says that " I could pack up my bundles and be off to America", when bad times come to Inisbofin (Mulholland, The Hungry Death 271). In many ways, America was the most realistic choice for many people, despite the vast distance from Ireland, as few other English-speaking countries were also anti-British or at least neutral at the height of the British Empire. Before the famine, Britain had also been an emigration destination, particularly Liverpool, but this slowed considerably when anti-Irish legal obstacles were introduced by one British at the time of the famine (Kinealy, A Death-Dealing Famine 147).

## 8. 3. Famine

One of the major themes in the story is that of Famine, which provides not just a living condition for the characters to cope with, but also an entire historical setting taken from recent and very real Irish experience at the Mulholland was writing. For her readers, the theme of Famine would have been in living memory, either directly or passed down as oral history, and so is a powerful element to structure the story around. Under Famine come

similar sub-themes such as poverty, fever, starvation and Death, and motifs including food, particularly potatoes and later meal. In the title of the story and throughout the narrative, Death even goes personified as 'The Hungry Death', which comes and takes possession of people like an evil spirit. As Moya phrases it, "The hungry death is on my mother at last" [emphasis added] (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 280). Famine can therefore be read in some part as a test of faith, with malevolent forces sent by God to strengthen people's religious conviction, or alternatively to punish them for turning away from belief.

#### **8. 4. Religion**

This leads on to the theme of faith, which is almost certainly Catholic even if this is never stated explicitly in the story. Brigid's father talks of purgatory, a purely Catholic limbo between heaven and hell (Mulholland 271). In addition, there is a reference to a saint (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 268), and Mulholland herself was Catholic. Brigid's transformation into Moya's saviour is also laced with religious connotations, not least of all the fact that her realization comes in a church, while she is in conversation with a priest. Once she delivers the food that saves Moya's life - a visit which Coll believes could only come from an "angel of light" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 283) - she is exhausted and on the threshold of death, but does not want to die alone at home. The story concludes on an intensely religious note, as Brigid journeys again to the church and throws herself in front of the crucifix, suggesting that she is at one with the suffering Christ on the cross (The Catholic Encyclopedia <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13309a.htm>).

## **8. 5. Sacrifice**

Brigid's agonising death in front of the cross is not just a religious reference, but also symbolic of a sacrifice she makes to save the life of another. This sacrifice is driven in part by the dreadful circumstances of the Famine, but is also motivated by a profound transformation Brigid undergoes during the story. The connection Mulholland makes between charity and sacrifice is very much a linear and causative one: Brigid would be unlikely to sacrifice herself for her rival if she had not become a friend to the world, hence her change in characters: " Brigid became a benefactor to numbers of their fellow-creatures" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 279); and the change is so drastic that it not only explains her sacrifice as inevitable, but also brings it closer at a cruel pace. There are ten pages of exposition during which Brigid is presented as headstrong and self-absorbed, and when her charitable instincts are revealed, in her act of buying meal for the island (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 279), the plot mechanics of her at first rejecting Coll's plea for food and then, through religious intervention, sacrificing herself unfold in a matter of pages. While her religious encounter is the final and most critical stage in Brigid's moral reform, the acceleration of charity into sacrifice is also a matter of her personal history and emotional bond with Coll, which explains the lengths she will go to and the speed at which she acts.

## **8. 6. Pride**

One of Brigid's most distinctive and not always attractive qualities is her pride, as discussed in the characterization on page 19-20 and also present in



the frequently recurring motif of a "red light" in her eyes (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 273). Most importantly, it is her pride which prevents her from reaching out to Coll even after she has mellowed towards him and admitted her love to herself. It is at the very moment when she means to blurt out a declaration of love that instead a "habitual taunt fl[ies] involuntarily to her lips" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 274). From that point on, Coll hardens towards her, having been exhausted by her insults. Alongside or even in place of Brigid's sacrifice, an alternative reading of the story might be that her death is a punishment for her overwhelming hubris, making the story a moral lesson from the perspective of Christian ethics. John Wilson Foster writes that Mulholland depicts hardship and desperate circumstances while offering as the only remedy "charity and ministrations" (123). Still, if the poor must suffer, they are considered blessed in Mulholland's eyes. Her Catholicism does not seem so retributive that she would strike down a repentant sinner like Brigid, but then again, for those who are not destitute – and Brigid is comfortably provided for by her father – her religious worldview is critical.

## **8. 7. Gothic motifs**

'The Hungry Death' is not an example of Gothic fiction but several motifs relating to weather and the physical state of Inisbofin are Gothic tropes, such as the constant rain, wind and gloom. The scenes involving people suffering from despair and hunger are also quite melodramatic in their realism and therefore typically Gothic. Patrick Lonergan confirms that other short fiction works, Mulholland "shows a familiarity with gothic".

## 9. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to give a detailed analysis of the story level of Rosa Mulholland's literary text 'The Hungry Death'. The plot of the story was discussed and explained and the most important elements, namely the setting, characters, themes and motifs were analysed. In addition, the context of the story, which includes the historical and political aspects of the Famine, the Irish and their religion was elaborated in some detail. In terms of themes and motifs, 'The Hungry Death' offers a variety of overlapping threads and patterns. The plot device which engineers the meeting of Brigid and Coll, namely match-making, also serves to signpost a broader point that Mulholland makes towards the end of the story, that those who are left isolated and alone have a worse chance of survival in desperate times than those who pool together. The idea of courtship and coupling as a purely strategic alliance is underlined in the promotion voiced by Brigid's father, and discussed in 8. 1., that bad times lie ahead and Brigid would be better off not facing them alone (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 271). By the end of the story, his advice is cruelly vindicated, as it is the two individuals who join together (Coll and Moya) who survive, and the person who resists marriage (Brigid) that perishes. There is further sub-textual meaning to be derived from the story's local setting, and particularly from Inisbofin's location as a place of Catholic persecution in centuries past, and by no less than the tyrannical British leader Oliver Cromwell. Following the short-lived abolition of the British monarchy and the English Civil War, disputes fuelled by Royalists continued to consume Ireland. In 1649 Cromwell was sent on a parliament campaign to quell the disturbances in the country. Cumming

writes that " Irish Catholics remembered Cromwell's Irish policy as brutal, with bloodthirsty massacres and a punitive treatment of Catholicism," adding that " they cursed Cromwell's sieges of Drogheda and Wexford in September and October 1649" (239). In addition to alienating the Irish therefore, Cromwell also became a figure of hatred for the nation's Catholics. His ruthless treatment of priests on Inisbofin stemmed from his fear of the Church's influence. Jendrysik explains that " for Cromwell, the Catholic Church as a whole, as an international power, was a more deadly enemy than any other nation because it claimed to hold the keys to salvation," and that in locally, " for Cromwell, the Catholic Church in Ireland existed more as a political organisation than a religious organisation" (87). Of all the Irish locations associated with Cromwell, few marry the two facts of his brutality and relentless Catholic persecution as well as Inisbofin. The construction of a prison on the island comes coupled with the macabre story that Cromwell shackled a bishop to a low-lying rock and left him to drown when the tide came in. To this day, there is a stone in the area which still goes by the name of ' bishop's Rock' (DeAngelis 352). Mulholland knows that the island's history will be familiar to her readers, and that they will recognize her choice of location as a very conscious decision. Still, she underscores the Cromwell connection close to the beginning of the story with a rhetorical flourish involving the island's other claim to fame, the 16th century pirate Grace O'Malley. O'Malley, despite her cutthroat profession, is praised as a " handsome masculine queen" whose activities on the island are depicted as constructive (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 268). As Mulholland poetically describes it, she " built herself a fort on a knoll facing the glories of the

western sky" (The Hungry Death 268). Cromwell on the other hand, is painted as O'Malley's destructive antithesis: he " raised those blackened walls" that O'Malley built (Mulholland The Hungry Death 268). With this flipside portrait, Mulholland blackly paints Cromwell, and by extension the English, as a thoroughly poisonous influence. In this way, contemporary anti-Catholic British misrule at the time of the story is highlighted through a historical parallel which allows Mulholland to play up the theme of colonial brutality. In a story filled with death and misery, by far the most poignant death is Brigid's own at the very end, and Mulholland's emotional use of language reaches a climax here. But Brigid's sacrifice is not only a tragic event; it has its positive colouration, at least from Mulholland's perspective. Brigid is a sacrificial victim in part but mainly she is a saviour, with the obvious Catholic connotations that holds as well as parallels with powerful female Irish figures, either historical or mythological. As Corporaal, Cusack and Janssen write, " Brigid provides rather than seeks assistance, saving the lives of many who nearly perish with hunger. Describing her as majestic, the characterization of Brigid moreover alludes to the mythical Cathleen Ni Houlihan figure, with the difference that she gives her life for her former lover and his new mistress rather than demanding offers from him" (20). Mulholland's evocation of place is just as important as her characters, and not just for the historical dimensions as discussed in reference to Oliver Cromwell and Grace O'Malley. The very first sentence of the story references the " wild night" which Inisbofin routinely faces and proceeds to a lengthy description of weather conditions which afflict the island, ranging from " ocean hurricanes to cowered residents who live " at the mercy of the winds

and waves" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 268). The connection of extreme weather to well-being and psychological state of the islanders is traditionally the realm of the pathetic fallacy, "whereby natural phenomena which cannot feel as humans do are described as if they could" (Baldick 250). One of Inisbofin's foulest storms rages on the night of Brigid's death, and the following morning, with Moya saved and the relief ship somewhat cruelly just sailed into the harbour, the clouds part "mildly and serenely", and "a pitiful sky looked down on the calamities of Bofin" (Mulholland, *The Hungry Death* 283). That is the sky takes pity on Brigid's tragedy; about as conventional a use of the pathetic fallacy could be. This is also a Gothic element to be read into these metaphorical weather patterns; as Huckvale argues, "the use of bad weather as an expression of turmoil felt by characters in [...] consistently Gothic" (36). To conclude, this paper may explore only some of the many details and themes Rosa Mulholland's fictional text contains. Continuing investigation on the story level, the Great Irish Famine and Irish religion would be interesting and might extend the textual analysis the 'The Hungry Death' made here.