

# Famine, Emigration and Survival in Joseph O'Connor's Star of the Sea

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**FAMINE, EMIGRATION AND SURVIVAL IN JOSEPH O'CONNOR'S *STAR OF THE SEA***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature and Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Star of the Sea* is a heartfelt and heart-wrenching story that plunges its readers into the depths of dark, brutal Irish history and explores the painful ordeal of the devastating Irish Potato Famine.

This thesis will try to explain the circumstances that led to the Great Irish Famine, describe its devastating consequences and show how it is depicted in Joseph O'Connor's novel *Star of the Sea*, a novel based on the Famine's destruction of the Irish community. Furthermore, it will explore the intricate narrative style of the novel, and its different perspectives on the Famine. We will see how the landlords reacted to the disaster, and how the tenants did. The main part of the thesis will follow the three protagonists and their attempts to survive the Famine.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The novel is set in 1847, "black '47", the harshest year of the Famine. With the exception of numerous analepses explaining characters' history and relations, the action takes place on board the titular ship carrying the fears and hopes of numerous Irish emigrants running away from the poverty, hunger and death that have befallen their homeland. As the journey progresses, we get different perspectives on emigration and the Famine through the eyes of the ship's captain and several passengers, such as a bankrupt aristocrat, a thief with murder on his mind and a maidservant who inextricably connects their two very different worlds.

The author describes the Famine and its repercussions so clearly, so vividly and introduces the readers to a variety of characters, from rich and elite high society members to paupers, tenants, beggars. The novel has the representatives of different social classes, rich

and poor, both men and women, so that the readers can get a broader understanding of this complex theme. O'Connor refrained from giving us a single point of view, because we gain a fuller perspective on the events when we hear more voices. While Lord Merridith, one of the novel's protagonists, blames the lack of help from the British government, his wife is under impression that the Irish brought the problem upon themselves (evoking Trevelyan's God's punishment theory, which will be discussed later). Another perspective holds the landlords accountable and it is advocated by the journalist Grantley Dixon, who writes an article, within the novel, blaming the incompetence and materialism of landlords, namely against David Merridith. Considering the whole novel is, on one level, actually Dixon's account, it is evident which perspective the author suggests is the most plausible. The author himself claims that he wanted to have the same events told from different points of view, because a book about how history gets written depends who is telling the story.

## **1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **1.1. Colonisation of Ireland**

In 1801 Ireland was united with the Kingdom of Great Britain by the Act of Union. Thus colonised Ireland became a constituent part of the United Kingdom and it mainly exported products which the Irish farmers cultivated on their soil. The land in the country was mainly owned by Protestant and Anglo-Irish landlords, while the majority of the people living there were poor Catholic tenants.

Many landlords enjoyed all the privileges of high society whilst some even thrived on the rents paid by the tenants, who worked on their lands in Ireland. There were, as well, many honest and right-minded landlords, who treated their tenants with respect. A lot of landlords were actually absentee landlords, who rarely, or never, visited their properties. That is why

they would find people, usually wealthier English migrants to Ireland, who would serve as middlemen, or rather, landlords to the poor Irish workers and farmers.

Avarice made some landlords divide their land up into as many parcels as possible in order to extract more and more money. All those parcels were being cultivated by the Irish peasantry, who would once a month pay rent and work for their landlords, who then would pay their rent to the real owners, the British landowners. (The History Place, webpage)

## **1.2. Beginnings of the Famine**

The vast majority of the Irish population was involved in agriculture. Besides cultivating the land for their landlords and exportation, tenants were also in charge of a minute piece of land that was entirely their own. There they grew potatoes, their main source of food. Potatoes were easily available and were all but pricey, they grew in abundance and the soil did not require additional tending. They could feed a tenant's entire family, as well, so we cannot even imagine the horrors tenants must have endured when a mysterious disease destroyed the very crops that literally kept them alive.

The disease, potato blight, struck Ireland in the 1840s. Its origins can be traced to Mexico from where it spread through North America to Europe and Ireland. In 1845, the crop that fed the Irish turned black, rotten and inedible. The fungus was airborne, and winds spread the blight all across the country damaging most potato plants in the area. Unfortunately, it was not possible to stop or even to control the spread of the disease. The poor tenants' only source of food was now inedible. Moreover, the following year brought no relief from this dreadful disease. In fact, by 1846 nearly every potato plant turned into decaying stump.

The blight disease did in fact affect other countries besides Ireland. However, the other afflicted countries were not almost solely dependent on the potato crop and had a variety of other crops to choose from.

Ireland did not grow exclusively potato crops. They grew various plants, crops, and grain, but that variety was exported, leaving the farmers with almost nothing to eat. (The History Place, webpage) That was the reason why over a million people died and another million emigrated with the hope of a better life in a new world. “The human cost of the famine is often captured in two numbers: a million dead and a million emigrated.” (Ó Gráda, 2001: 122) The Irish Potato Famine cost Ireland a quarter of its population.

### **1.3. *Laissez faire* and Charles Trevelyan**

The *laissez faire* economic policy didn't help either. This doctrine suggested that there should be only minimal government interference with Ireland's economy; otherwise, the Irish would become reliant on Great Britain and be unable to resolve their economic problems themselves. The British government advocated the free market hoping it would provide the necessary food and that problems would be solved naturally, without any intervention. This was most fully articulated by the Whig-Liberal MP and assistant secretary to the Treasury, Charles Trevelyan, who was responsible for famine relief in 1846-47. He did as little as possible to aid Ireland, and he issued a policy towards Ireland that prevented anyone else from providing help, fearing it would negatively affect the British economy or harm British landowners.

Being such an important figure, or rather, a malefactor during the Irish Potato Famine, it is no wonder O'Connor decided to use Trevelyan's quotation to introduce his novel:

“[The Famine] is a punishment from God for an idle, ungrateful and rebellious country; an indolent and un-self-reliant people. The Irish are suffering from an affliction of God's providence.” Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to Her Majesty's Treasury, 1847 (Knighted, 1848, for overseeing famine relief) (O'Connor, 2003)

Trevelyan's attitudes represent the unfavourable attitude and animosity of many British aristocrats towards the Irish. And it is his hateful epigraph that helps us understand just why their government did so little to help Ireland in times of need. Trevelyan's belief that the Famine was "the calamity sent by the judgment of God to teach the Irish a lesson" sheds light on his refusal to aid the Irish properly. He was adamant that the Irish were an underserving nation of "selfish and perverse people", who depended too much on the help of its coloniser, i.e. Great Britain, and were not able to support themselves. They depended solely on the potato crop, what resulted in a disaster and for that they should have been punished. The predicament they had found themselves in was God's punishment and Trevelyan believed they deserved it and that they should find the solution themselves, which explains his minimal help. Nevertheless, Trevelyan was awarded the title of the Baronet for administering famine relief. "For his role in the famine, Trevelyan was knighted. The Irish remember him differently. At Quinipiac's Great Hunger Museum hangs a picture of this English gentleman with a dedication: *For crimes against humanity, never brought to justice.*" (Egan, 2014)

Sir Robert Peel, the British Prime Minister, decided to help the Irish and, without consulting his own Conservative party, ordered fairly cheap American corn, known as maize, to be delivered to Irish tenants. However, they were unaccustomed to any diet but potatoes and they did not have mills or any necessary means to process the given maize. Therefore, Peel's plan, though benevolent, failed miserably.

#### **1.4. Emigration**

The Irish tenants had two options: to stay and struggle or leave and hope for the best. However, there were landlords who did everything that was in their power to protect their tenants, namely allowing them not to pay rent during the times when food was scarce. A number of landlords even suffered terrible losses and went bankrupt for that reason. However,



not everyone had the option of remaining on their parcels of land and continuing to work as many were evicted by their landlords. There was also the alternative of going to the workhouses that provided both accommodation and employment; however the conditions were not favourable as those workhouses were often crowded and unsanitary so numerous Irish farmers would rather opt to leave their homeland and travel to America or someplace else to seek better prospects for themselves and their starving and destitute families. Yet “a significant number of the famine’s survivors in Ireland must have had personal experience of the workhouse” (Ó Gráda, 2001: 134) as money was scarce and a large portion of Irish population had no means to emigrate or leave. If they could not afford to emigrate, they had little to no hope of survival, for “poverty and death were closely correlated”. (Ó Gráda, 2001: 123)

The transportation itself posed yet another threat. Their only chances were transatlantic ships – like the titular *Star of the Sea*, “a leaky old tub sailing from Ireland to New York in the terrible winter of 1847” (Kincaid, 2003) – which they could get onto only if they sold their valuables or heirlooms for they usually had no cash whatsoever. But the ticket itself did not guarantee their safety because they travelled on large, slow, poorly built, overcrowded ships that became known as ‘coffin ships’. The poor conditions on these ships, in combination with the extremely long and tiresome voyages to America were fatal for a large number of the dispirited Irish emigrants, who believed they were going to be rescued from their miseries the moment the ship embarked. Emigrating was indeed a better fate than dying but those who voyaged on the coffin ships, especially during the “black ’47”, fared badly for “a significant portion of those who left died *en route*”. (Ó Gráda, 2001: 123) Even those who successfully arrived in America did not have a fairy-tale ending. To find the new homes, properties, and employment that they had hoped waited for them in abundance in America did not prove to be an easy feat. While a number of Irish emigrants, who were also faced with ethnic and

religious prejudices in the USA, succeeded in making decent lives and enjoying the welfare and safety of the promised land, some of them failed to accustom themselves to their new surroundings, make a living, or provided for their families. During the Famine, Ireland lost as many people to emigration as to death and that is why there is no surprise to learn that it was *the emigrant* who became “the archetypal figure of the famine”. (Boyce, 1920: 120)

## **2. STAR OF THE SEA**

### **2.1. Motivation behind the novel**

O’Connor took on the task of exploring the Famine, possibly the most painful episode in Irish history that left scars and ramifications which still resonate with Irish community. Though it is “the single most important event in Ireland in modern period” (Whelan, 2005: 137), the Famine is still not explored enough and continues to intrigue historians and fiction writers for there is still so much to be learned and understood, the famine victims to be honoured, and there is the legacy that the new generations should be introduced to.

O’Connor’s intention was not merely to delve into the horrors of the past, to explore the trauma of the great Famine, to bring to light the sorrows of the people affected, or even to lament the famine deaths. Rather, his ambitions were much broader:

As I sketched out the novel, its intentions slowly cohered: without hatred or propaganda, to tell the story of this astounding cataclysm, of the culture that allowed it to happen. To celebrate the courage of those who were betrayed; to honour those who attempted to live with love and dignity in a world that regarded them as surplus to requirements. (O’Connor’s official webpage)

It was his way of paying respect to those who were neglected and forgotten in the mists of history, those who were powerless and who fell victim to the Famine. He gives voice to those who were mute and unable to share their perspectives. Governments and the ruling classes often failed to satisfy the needs of the common folk, of those who were unable to fight for their rights. The farmers and tenants in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland were affected the most by the Famine and the export policy of Great Britain. They were in no position to rebel against the system, let alone to win and secure livelihoods for themselves and their families. They were the greatest victims of that disaster but their voices are heard the least. Their stories of survival, misery or oppression were often lost in history only because they were not in the position of power and were not regarded as significant. Today, with O'Connor's or similar novels before us, their voices are, in a way, discovered. O'Connor tells their stories, and so familiarizes us with the past because when we read about their lives, those people become real.

O'Connor's polyphonic novel stands out on the short roster of famine-inspired novels just for that reason. Besides giving us the rich landlords' perspectives, it tells the story seen through the eyes of poor Irish emigrants, tenants, farmers, peasants, women, who would, in most stories, be secondary characters at best. He explores their pasts, their psyches, their emotions. Through breathing life into those characters, O'Connor finally acknowledges and does justice to those 19<sup>th</sup>-century society groups that have unfairly been neglected for far too long.

“A disaster that struck the poor more than the rich and that pitted neighbour against neighbour is hardly promising material for a communal, collective memory” (Ó Gráda, 2001: 121) because people are ashamed to admit that members of their family had lived in workhouses, had eaten in soup-kitchens, had died of hunger or been buried in a mass grave. (Donnelly, 2001: 37-38) “The shame of not having buried the dead properly [...] is a

particularly painful omission” (Fegan, 2011: 324) Even the people who died during such dreadful times deserve more than mass or unmarked graves, unrecognition, or faint recollections mixed with shame in the memories of their descendants. O’Connor’s novel is an attempt to rectify that. He makes the Famine the primary subject of his novel making his readers think about that devastating disaster, ask questions, sympathise with its victims. He faces them with the trauma of the Irish Famine.

In one house in Glankeen the entire of a family had died: the parents, all of their children and four old people. Two neighbourmen told me the last to die, a boy of six or seven years, had locked the door and hidden under his bed, being ashamed for his people to be found in that way. The men were tumbling the cottage around them as a grave, having no other place to put them. (O’Connor, 2003: 39)

Therefore it should come as no surprise that the Famine sparked the creation of relatively few novels. However, the less that is known about something, the more people are intrigued. And people today want to learn more about the Famine. “What cannot be doubted, though, is that there has been a desire in twentieth-century Ireland to learn something about famine, to hear its voices, as literary and historical accounts that explicitly deal with the event have sold remarkably well, a fact that could also be read as symptomatic of cultural trauma.” (O’Malley, 2015: 135) It is only natural for the Irish to want to learn something more about their own past, pay respect to the victims, and get to know the horrors of their history. Yet there have been so few accounts and stories tackling the subject. Authors might have been afraid to reopen the wounds or disturb the painful past, or as the critic Terry Eagleton argues: “If the Famine stirred some to angry rhetoric, it would seem to have traumatized others into muteness.” O’Connor stated that he felt challenged by Eagleton’s assertion that there are

almost no famine-inspired novels and that he wrote *Star of the Sea* in direct response to Eagleton's question. (Schultz, 2014: 24) Though the past may be distressing or hurtful, we cannot allow it to be neglected or forgotten just because it would be too painful to talk about it. Furthermore, Eagleton goes on to compare the Famine with Auschwitz, possibly the best example of history's harrowing memory whose wounds are almost too painful to reopen even today. Writing about the Famine conceals another challenge. There is the danger of trivializing the experience, or distancing it in a way that turns it into mere "historical" background. (Estévez-Saá, O'Connor, 215: 163) O'Connor avoids this pitfall as he places the Famine in the very centre of his novel and all the characters and events revolve around it, without overshadowing it. There is also the inevitable danger of inflaming hostility towards Britain as the Irish believe the English were responsible for creating circumstances which led to the Famine and that their government's response was not adequate, or satisfactory. Realizing how many pitfalls of writing the Famine there are, we can understand Eagleton's concern, or rather, understand why so many authors did not dare write about the Famine.

## **2.2. Narrative**

*Star of the Sea* is presented as a journalistic account of one of its characters, an aspiring novelist and journalist, G. Grantley Dixon. The novel is not entirely his version of events and we do get to hear other voices, but they are told through the prism of his work. He is the one choosing what to tell, what not to tell and how to tell it. He plays the role of a historiographer. He is influencing our reading, and our understanding of the events he presents.

However, the narrative is not as straightforward as it seems, it is not a chronological retelling of events. *Star of the Sea* comprises a number of different texts, like the captain's log, documents, journals, prayers, ballads, letters (to and from the Famine victims), a part of

Dixon's never-finished novel, a confession of a guilty mind in the form of an epilogue, to name but some of the texts. The author wrote this novel as a literary mosaic, as a text of a text within which many texts are embedded and this unconventional way of writing is an interesting play with a serious subject. At first glance, we can perceive it as disrespectful, but after realizing the author's intent, his play ceases to be disrespectful and becomes ingenious. The author wanted to engage his readers; he wanted us to try ourselves to understand the gravity of the Famine and draw our own conclusions. For if he presented us with a matter-of-fact account of the Great Famine, the story would not have the same impact. We have to collect all the pieces of the puzzle, we are presented with different perspectives and we are listening to various stories; we are looking for numerous, and surprising, connections between the protagonists or the relations between their actions (or the lack of these) and consequences. And finally, we create, and hopefully, understand the story in its entirety. The same story the author has cleverly constructed through the mosaic pieces to comprise his novel.

### **3. CHARACTERS OF *STAR OF THE SEA***

#### **3.1. Pius Mulvey**

The very first sentence of the novel introduces us to a “sticklike limping man from Connemara with the drooping shoulders and ash-coloured clothes.” (O'Connor, 2003: xi) The inhospitable behaviour of this figure and his unusual, somewhat frightening appearance, in combination with his avoidance of any interaction or human contact, alienates him from the rest of the *Star of the Sea*'s passengers, among whom he is known as “the Ghost” (O'Connor, 2003: xii). “But this is just the last of many aliases he has assumed in a life spent continuously remaking himself.” (O'Malley, 2015: 141)

Though all of them share the same interests, that is, immigrating to America and fleeing from hunger and poverty, the Ghost deliberately seeks solitude and wishes to have nothing to do with his fellow passengers. “But this inconsequential little man was different to all of them: this monster who haunted the decks at night.” (O’Connor, 2003: xxi) From the beginning, Dixon, our narrator, presents him as the villain and intrigues the readers: “There was something so intensely ordinary about him. It could never have been guessed that he meant to do murder.” (O’Connor, 2003: xxi)

The unusual nickname and the limp belong to Pius Mulvey, a central character of the novel, who will rapidly develop from the ship’s ghost into a pitiable blackmail-victim of an organisation of enraged tenants, ‘The Hibernian Defenders’, who order him to murder Lord Merridith for his failure to protect them from hunger and eviction. If he fails, he will be the one murdered. And then, even more quickly, he retrogresses to the monster Dixon’s ghastly description suggest he is.

Pius Mulvey’s life was marked by the famine. No matter where he went, hunger would follow:

Mulvey knew about hunger, its deceptions and strategies: its trick of letting you think you weren’t hungry and then suddenly hammering into you like a wild-eyed, shrieking robber. He had known it in Connemara, on the roads of England. All his life it had shadowed him, a sneaking spy. But now it was limping the decks alongside him. (O’Connor, 2003: 26)

His whole life, Mulvey has been running from misery, penury, as well as from his commitments and responsibilities. Yet he never failed to fend for himself. Hunger led him towards a life of thievery and crime. He did everything he could in order to get by, to get hold

of food or money, to survive. “His monstrousness consists really in casual cruelties of an everyday sort. And much of his previous criminal activity is strangely admirable, stemming from highly imaginative schemes for keeping himself alive.” (Kincaid, 2003) Realizing that people wanted to escape the worries of their everyday life, even for a moment, and were willing to pay to hear a ballad, no matter how poor or hungry they were, Mulvey tried his luck as a balladeer. However, he believed he had no personal experience to enrich his ballads that brought him some food and temporary fame. But this did not stop him. His fabrications turned out to be successful. He cleverly changed the lyrics to his ballads to please his audiences; depending, for instance, whether the audiences in Belfast were Catholic or Protestant, he carefully chose his words to insult the others. Once he met Charles Dickens, who believed one of Mulvey’s concoctions was an old, well-known ballad. In exchange for the story behind the ballad, Dickens bought him a meal and here we witness the brilliance of Mulvey’s craft as he came up with a fascinating, faux origin story and even inspired Dickens’s villainous Fagan. Mulvey abandoned singing and song writing when he discovered that trickery and stealing are more lucrative. However, we do see a glimpse of kindness in him for he never stole more than he needed and he believed that stealing is wrong yet necessary in order to survive.

Hunger and poverty made him move to different cities throughout Ireland and England, join a traveling circus (where an injury will mark the beginning of his distinctive limp), change jobs regularly, it even got him christened (but without his actual willingness to know God). To do so he assumed various identities, yet the monstrosity and betrayal that so strongly define his character will always be his companions for life. “A man with many names is also, perhaps, a man with no identity” (O’Malley, 2015: 143) Here we can draw parallels between Pius Mulvey, who constantly tries to remake himself by creating various personas, and the novel itself, which is pretending to be many other things, like a travel account, a history account, a gothic fiction and many more. Neither loses its identity because,



though the identities/styles are very different, all are parts of the same. The many identities of Pius Mulvey did not cause him to lose his own, they all are integral parts of him and they allow us to see him for who he is. Similarly, the novel would not be able to give us a broad picture of the Famine if it were not comprised of various genres.

In addition to having the same frailties all people have, Pius Mulvey was no stranger to murder and violence and he crossed the line between right and wrong lightly. Mulvey's murderous break from Newgate Prison was described graphically when he killed, in a most violent and gruesome manner, a prison guard. The monstrosity of the murder will mark the birth of "the Monster of Newgate" (O'Connor, 2003: 204) and introduce his barbarity to the world. Shortly after, Mulvey meets and makes friends with William Swales, a schoolmaster who too will fall victim to the ruthless Mulvey. "Nine was multiplied by zero." (O'Connor, 2003: 215) Swales was infatuated with the number nine, so the author cleverly disguises his death scene as a mathematical equation in which Swales is represented by his beloved number, and his death as the number zero, as nothingness. It was a more merciful way to describe a death than his previous, graphic description of the murder of someone Mulvey absolutely hated. Swales' murder was the result of self-preservation. To kill and to steal Swales' identity and, hopefully lucrative, employment at school seemed to be the only choice for the starved and frostbitten Mulvey. "*No other choice* was the phrase in his mind." (O'Connor, 2003: 214) It is beyond horrifying to see what hunger can do to a person and this novel offers many vignettes trying to illustrate those extremes. This is amply evidenced by Mulvey: he started out generously sacrificing his own food so he could give it to his hungrier brother, but as the story progresses, we see to what extent hunger can ruin a person. The will to survive is innate in every human. Mulvey did not take pleasure in the two murders he committed but he felt trapped and needed a way out. Taking those two lives meant freedom and survival for him, so he did it, without hesitation.

He also left his lover, Mary Duane, who was pregnant with his child at the time, because he was unable to support all of them, was ashamed of his poverty and because he thought he would be better off by himself. When Mulvey selfishly left her behind, when she needed him most, his more religiously-inclined brother Nicholas stepped in and decided to marry Mary so that her child would have a proper father. As fate would have it, Pius's child was stillborn and Nicholas and Mary had a daughter of their own soon after. Mulvey will eventually return, but to torment instead of helping them, making the readers doubt that he is capable of love at all. He insisted their land belonged to him, he killed their cow and destroyed their potato crops, taking their only sources of food and income, he manipulated and took advantage of Mary, who was weak while her husband was away, and he blackmailed them. Inadvertently, he triggered their eviction and left his brother with no choice but to kill his starved daughter. "She will not suffer, Mary, I will do it quickly and be not long after her." (O'Connor, 2003: 43)

Nicholas and Mary had no food or money at all and when he failed to obtain employment at Commander Blake's their family was defeated. It is virtually impossible to imagine Nicholas' horror – to "imagine what it is to see you only child scream with the hunger and be able to bring no ease nor comfort." (O'Connor, 2003: 40) In a state of hopeless despair, Nicholas wrote a touching and repentant letter to his wife before painlessly killing his own child and not long after, himself. Mary would hold Pius Mulvey responsible for the two deaths and would never be able to forgive him. "it's one foot he has and a gun-stone for his heart." (O'Connor, 2003: 275) It is difficult for us today to imagine the horrors of the Famine and the sufferings of its victims, let alone to understand the state of mind of a desperate father killing, out of a dazed sense of mercy, his own starved child, but O'Connor's descriptions certainly convey the pain and horror. Perhaps we cannot fully understand what those people were going through, but we can empathize. And more importantly, we have to ask ourselves

how many people are there in the world going through the same ordeals, for the Great Famine was not an isolated incident. There are many starving people in the world today and O'Connor points towards that problem as well.

Besides being a thief and a murderer, Mulvey was a keen trickster and manipulator. He was adept at manipulating human virtue and compassion. He knew how to get the things he wanted and he had a way with people. Upon meeting him, the ship's captain was convinced of Mulvey's kindness and nobility. "What an example that man is. Truly the angels are come among us every day. Our difficulty is so often that in our vanity and worldliness we so utterly fail to recognise them for what they are." (O'Connor, 2003: 85) By playing the role of a peaceful, quiet recluse, who avoids troubles and reads Swales' stolen Bible, Mulvey creates yet another persona, which deceives the Quaker captain, a hopeless optimist. But the captain was not the only one who failed to see through Mulvey's tricks. He deceived Lord Merridith and his wife and got himself invited to their son's birthday party, where he got the chance to dispirit Merridiths' servant and his former love, Mary, once again.

Pius Mulvey's heart was not always filled with hatred. He was "a haunted, lonely man, who had once been good, and who yearned to be again, were it not for a past that boiled with secret shames." (O'Connor's official webpage)

### **3.2. Lord Merridith**

On the other hand, we have Lord David Merridith, a wealthy aristocrat landlord and a loving father and husband who, at first glance, seems to be Mulvey's counterpart. The readers are introduced to a character as opposite to Pius Mulvey as one could be.

We learn of David Merridith's aristocratic ancestry the moment he appears in the novel: "The Right Honourable Thomas David Nelson Merridith, the noble Lord Kingscourt, the Viscount of Roundstone, the ninth Earl of Cashel, Kilkerrin and Carna, entered the Dining

Saloon to an explosion of smashing glass.” (O’Connor, 2003: 5) but what we will also discover is that he does not really fit into the mould of contemptuous and conceited nobility. While the rest of the upper class gentry on board ridicules the steward who dropped the salver carrying champagne flutes and cut his finger, Lord Merridith kindly assists the man and offers him a clean linen handkerchief. As the majority of aristocrats would never conduct themselves in such a manner, i.e. degrade themselves to assist a common servant, as is proven by their laughter and mockery, it is insinuated that Lord Merridith would be the one to disregard hierarchy and break the conventions of class boundaries.

Merridith’s plethora of names must evoke the numerous names, or identities, Pius Mulvey made up for himself trying to survive and keep himself alive. While some people are lucky enough to have everything from birth, some have to struggle. Unlike Merridith’s names, that represent the same man, powerless to escape his destiny, Pius Mulvey’s names create different personas who all try to avoid the predestined misery.

The Famine did not choose its victims. The poor were affected the most, but the rich could not evade its effects, even if they were generally much less severe. The landlords had better prospects to survive, like Lord Merridith did, for they had other resources and more money. Lord Merridith, despite being financially ruined, was able to buy boat tickets for himself and his family. Lord Merridith had not collected rent money from his impoverished tenants for four years and his inheritance of only financial debt from his late father has driven him and his family off their land and on board the *Star of the Sea* in hopes of securing a better life, much like his tenants. Following his decline, he could not depend on his tenants or his wealth any longer. In America, he planned to go into business, without anybody’s help. To earn money and provide for his family now meant swallowing his pride, rolling up his sleeves and working with his own hands. “From O’Connor’s perspective, Merridith was as powerless as his tenants to combat the horrors of Famine, and it is on the *Star* that this fact became most

apparent. Yet *Star of the Sea* does not simply equate landlords with their tenants, it actively transitions them from oppressors to oppressed.” (Schultz, 2014: 48) His reputation was fading and it hurt him that there was nothing he could have done about it. “Since when did the gentry stoop to working for a living? [...] How can an Earl be fallen low as a tradesman?” (O’Connor, 2003: 9) Yet a fading reputation is nothing compared to the harsh living conditions, uncertain future, oppression and dire poverty which comprised the everyday life of “the oppressed”. So, we can argue that the transition from oppressors to oppressed Schultz suggests was still not complete for Lord Merridith, though his sympathy-evoking childhood assert strong beginning of him being “the oppressed”.

What O’Connor tries to demonstrate through the character of Lord Merridith is how difficult it is to deal with inheritance. Unlike Pius Mulvey, Merridith did not grow up in a loving and supportive family. His mother was absent for a significant amount of time; his tyrannical father was preoccupied with different affairs and was unnecessarily harsh, distant and hard-hearted, never finding time to bond with his child. Lord Merridith’s upbringing was left to a nurse, Margaret Duane, who “had seemed a mother to him” (O’Connor, 2003: 250), and her family, whose poverty and modesty was a novelty and source of amazement for the young David. Even the squalor of their home was better than cruelty and coldness of his father’s heart. With this idea in mind, David tried to run away from his father’s home to the Duanes, hoping to find the affection he desperately needed. When he was old enough, he was sent to an English boarding school to fulfil his father’s ambitions. Young and gentle David inherited his love for the arts from his mother, but his father was opposed to this kind of sensibility and he expected his son to grow into someone influential and praiseworthy. The older Lord Kingscourt wanted a true heir, someone with matching qualities of a leader, ruthlessness and sense for business. Nevertheless, David could not meet those expectations. Disappointment and lack of affection hurt his spirit from an early age. And that is the reason

why he promised himself he will do anything to be a true father to his sons, by being always available, always supportive. The last words his father said to him “*Do not dare use the word “father” to me*” (O’Connor, 2003: 171) helped to shape him into a father he wanted to be for his children.

The complete opposite was his wife, Lady Verity, David’s mother, who was generous and caring, beloved by everyone, and who balanced her husband’s cruelty with her philanthropy and kindness. While he threatened his tenants with eviction, doubled their rents, and showed no mercy whatsoever, she set up a laundry for the tenant women, opened a soup kitchen, and set an excellent example for her son. She never refused to feed a hungry tenant and welcomed all those famished, “lurching phantoms”, which would frighten the young David until his mother made him see the poor, starving people through different eyes. “In the eyes of God that poor man is exactly the same as you or I. He has a wife and family. He has a little son. And he loves his little son just in the way that I love you.” (O’Connor, 2003: 56)

Merridith strived to be more like his mother but he was predestined to follow in his father’s footsteps. Family estrangement and Merridith’s inhospitable relationship with his tenants, who end up despising him for his failure to protect them, in combination with his defiance and sternness, make him more like his father than he ever wished to be. The unequivocal proof of their likeness was his discovery that his father was also an adulterer who had Margaret Duane, his son’s nurse, impregnated with a baby girl, Mary Duane, the same Mary with whom he, unknowingly, had an unusual incestuous relationship.

As flawed as Merridith’s spirit was, there was still goodness in him. His mother’s side – her philanthropy – prevailed when he paid for the voyages of a large number of tenants with the money that could have easily fed his own family in America for some time. However, he did care for his family, especially his sons, even though sometimes he struggled to find a way

to show it. His love becomes evident in a heartfelt scene where we see him as a father, who tries to console his son after a nightmare. He soothes him and tells him an intimate memory, a story how, when he was young, he lost his brother, who perished in a fire, to what his son replies: "I shall be your brother if you like." (O'Connor, 2003: 146)

While reading the novel we cannot but juxtapose Lord Merridith and Pius Mulvey. They are trying to survive the Famine and, in doing so, they act both generously and despicably. We can sympathize with Lord Merridith, but there also are scenes that show Mulvey's human side. We can see it in his youth, before the deaths of his parents, eviction and the subsequent misfortunes; most prominently, when he selflessly gave his food to his brother. During his time as a schoolmaster, we finally get to see his humanity after all the wrong he has done in the meantime. It is the children who trigger his guilt for abandoning Mary and his own child. However, after having changed multiple identities and after the development of his character, the readers cannot be certain whether the remorse Pius Mulvey demonstrates, for the deaths of his brother and child, is true or if it is one of his numerous schemes to mislead others.

Though completely different at first glance, one being an educated, once-wealthy aristocrat and landlord and the other a resourceful, cunning pauper burdened by self-preservation, Lord Merridith and Pius Mulvey are more alike than might be assumed at first glance.

They had far more in common than either of them realised. One was born Catholic, the other Protestant. One was born Irish, the other British. But neither of these was the greatest difference between them. One was born rich and the other poor. (O'Connor, 2003: 397)

Lord Merridith was born with all the privileges Pius could only dream of and he spent his whole life trying to experience even a ghost of Merridith's prosperity. However, Merridith's life was far from ideal. He had the aristocratic heritage and all the accompanying advantages but he gave it all up for the one thing he wanted the most – love. Ever since his loveless childhood (when he experienced, amongst other things, the premature death of his loving mother, the beatings and cruelty of his cold and distant father, and having to deal with his drunken aunt), he struggled to be loved and accepted. He initiated the romance, doomed to failure, with Mary Duane in their youth. He later defiantly chose to follow his heart and marry a woman of his choice, Laura, rather than defer to his father's wishes that he marries a countess to strengthen their families' bonds. Yet their love will break as well, as is seen in their infidelities and adulterous games outside marriage (which will earn Lord Merridith syphilis that would have been fatal if he had not been murdered). Neither Lord Merridith nor Pius Mulvey got what they wanted. Both of them strived for their respective dreams, but both fell short. Both are fleeing Ireland in pursuit of a new beginning and are haunted by their pasts that eventually destroyed them. They most certainly must not be equated but it is interesting to see how many parallels can be drawn between a landlord and a tenant. Yet another connection between the two can be found in the character of Mary Duane.

### **3.3. Mary Duane**

Mary Duane is a brave young girl whose destiny will be affected by Pius' monstrosity, Lord Merridith and the secrets involving his family, and the Famine itself. She will not let the horrors of her past wear her down, she is strengthened by her lived experience and adamantly moving forward, and, as the author himself suggests, she is "the book's hero." (O'Connor's official webpage)



The only man who ever truly loved her was David Merridith, but his father put a stop to their budding romance. The older Lord Kingscourt had engaged in his youth with his maid-servant and son's nurse. She later gave birth to Mary, which makes her David's half-sister. In order to prevent the incestuous relationship, the older Lord Kingscourt was stern with his son and hypocritically forbade him to pursue a relationship with someone below his rank, with a servant girl, fearing it would hurt their reputation. He was aware of his sin from the past, coming back to torment him. Mary's next romance will be even more ill-fated as her treacherous lover, Pius Mulvey, deserts her when she is pregnant with his child. After losing two children and her husband Nicholas to the Famine, and being left without home and safety, Mary resorts to prostitution as her only option to survive, and it is in a brothel where she is revisited by her past, in the form of Lord Merridith. Mary suffered a lot but she never backed down or surrendered. Just like Pius Mulvey, she put her self-preservation first but, unlike him, she also strove to preserve her humanity.

Upon arriving, the ship was quarantined in New York Harbour. Many passengers, exhausted from the long journey and unable to wait for permission to debark, saw land within reach and became restless. Some saw their opportunity and jumped overboard in the icy water in a desperate attempt to swim ashore, while some others tried to get there in the lifeboats. The last two places in these were offered to Mary and a member of her family, a title Pius momentarily recognized as his salvation. Disregarding everything he put her through, he believed that the seat next to Mary belonged to him, again putting himself first. That was the perfect chance for Mary to get her revenge for his salvation was entirely up to her. Yet, though initially hesitant, she showed mercy. "When the moment of retribution rolled up out of history and presented itself like an executioner's sword, she turned away and did not seize it." (O'Connor, 2003: 375) He was the source of almost everything unfortunate in her life, he was to be blamed for her husband's and child's deaths and when the chance to find closure was

bestowed on her, the only thing she could do was utter a single name in the eerie silence of the trapped ship – the name of her murdered child. That was an occurrence which bewildered everyone present: a victim, begging for his life, his condemner, shaking in tears and solemnly uttering the name of her child “like a prayer” (O’Connor, 2003: 374), whose death was the fault of the victim she was about to save. The author created the character of Mary to demonstrate that the Famine does not necessarily have to ruin people or bring out the worst in them. People, though harmed by hunger or poverty, were able to rise above the circumstances and did not lose the ability to forgive.

In a tangle of prayers, tears and other fallen children’s names their bereaved mothers were crying out, the ship was united in sadness and pain. Their togetherness was moving and fragile, yet meaningful in its fragility. Saying the names of children they loved, children that they were never going to see again, never embrace, never laugh or cry with, condemned the cruelty of both the Famine and society and conveyed the collective pain of people who will never allow their lost children to be forgotten. It made them real.

As though the act of saying their names – the act of saying they ever had names – was to speak the only prayer that can ever begin to matter in a world that turns its eyes from the hungry and the dying. They were real. They existed. (O’Connor, 2003: 374)

Besides pure imaginative fiction, O’Connor composed his novel from actual accounts of the survivors, which are given in the letters and prayers, or historical documents that open or close the majority of chapters. The author does not want to confuse his readers with this deliberate blurring of the line between fiction and reality, rather, he wants to make his story as real and authentic as it can be, but without giving us bare facts and numbers. He created characters and their stories but he entwined them with some real historical characters and real

extracts from newspapers, letters, songs, ballads and prayers to enhance the authenticity. The narrative itself presumably belongs to the fictional characters and their invented stories, but a keen reader will recognise when the author cleverly inserts references to the actual historical figures like Commander Blake, Daniel O’Connell, or even has Charles Dickens promenade through the pages of his novel. “In *Star of the Sea* historical sources interplay with fictional creations in ways that generate harmonies and disjunctions that allow the reader to get a broad, complex understanding of the period.” (O’Malley, 2015: 136)

## CONCLUSION

*Star of the Sea* adds another layer to our knowledge of the Famine. The novel is a work of fiction that has the quality to familiarize us with true participants of the past events; it helps us understand the lives, hopes and sufferings of actual people, something history often fails to do, as it only provides bare facts suitable for historical or political manipulation. Fiction can have vivid characters, not only the distant historical figures we find in textbooks, but relatable characters who are representatives of various social groups and with whom we can identify and even empathize with. Authors often play with our emotions and sympathies. From the actual events of history they create fictive worlds that appeal to us and encourage us to understand better the actions, thoughts, and destinies of our ancestors.

I stress again that *Star of the Sea* is a novel and not at all a textbook about the Famine; but one thing I do hope it reveals is that the mythologies about the disaster on both extremes of the historical debate are reductive, disrespectful, and wrong, both morally and factually. While the British government's relief efforts were often dismally ineffective, and the Irish poor were often regarded by their masters as a lesser form of life, some English people were humanitarian friends of the Irish, while some of the Irish – usually the wealthy ones – did absolutely nothing to alleviate the plight of the starving. (Estévez-Saá, O'Connor, 215: 165)

With a subtle blend of fiction and faction, the author successfully captures sufferings and torment of the Irish souls caught up in the famine, describes the repercussions they endured and ruthlessly delivers a condemnation of the society and the economic conditions that led to one of the most harrowing episodes in the Irish past.

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