



"The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine".

Reactions in Poetry and Politics to
the Great Irish Famine
(1845-1849)

Activity 1: Questionnaire

- 1. What is famine?
- 2. Do you think the following factors are all likely to be causes of famine?
 - Poverty
 - climate
 - natural disasters
 - conflict
 - political economy
 - poor agricultural infrastructures
 - over-exploitation of soil and natural resources
 - racial discrimination
 - financial crises
- 3. Have you ever heard of the potato blight or the Great Irish Famine? Would you associate the Irish famine with any of the following elements?
 - British rule
 - British colonialism
 - emigration
 - disease
 - death
 - mass graves
 - mass evictions

Keyword List

- Famine
- Artificial famine
- Malnutrition
- Food shortage
- Potato plant
- Potato blight
- Staple food
- Crop
- Rot
- Mould
- Corn
- Poor law
- Ration Tickets

- Soup kitchen
- Workhouses
- Poor relief
- Corn Laws
- Public works
- Laissez-faire
- Mass graves
- Mass starvation
- Eviction
- Emigration
- Produce
- Port
- Exports

The Great Irish Famine

The Facts

- 1845-6: failure of the potato crop In Ireland
- 1846-7:
 - Mass evictions
 - Black '47: the worst famine year
 - Starvation and disease
 - Emigration
- Numbers:
 - 1,000,000 Irish people died
 - 2,000,000 emigrated to America

British Action

- Indian corn
- Repeal of the Corn Laws
- Public works
- Soup kitchens
- Workhouses

Relief Card 1

- *Indian Corn*

- Find more information on the purchase of Indian Corn
- Was the distribution successful?
- Why do you think the British did not buy more corn after 1846?



GOVERNMENT SALE OF INDIAN CORN, AT CORK. — (FROM A SKETCH BY MR. MAHONY.)

Relief Card 2

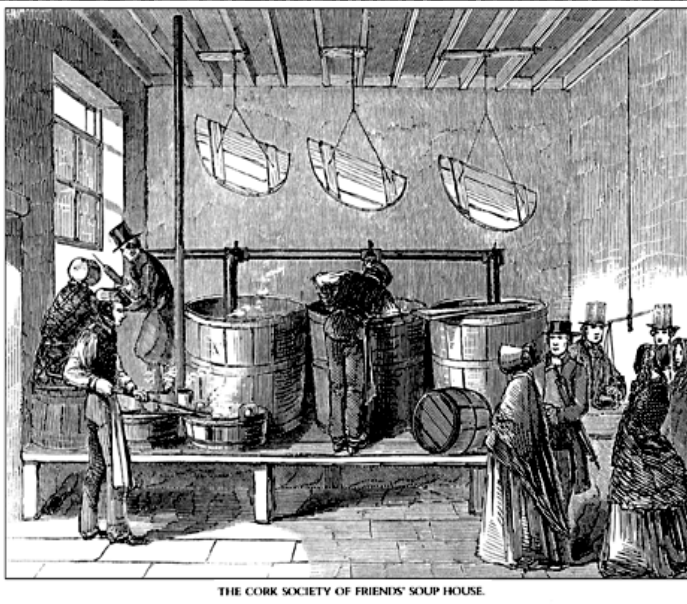
- Public Works

- Find more information about public works in Ireland
- Were the wages adequate?
- Were public works a success?



Relief Card 3

- Soup Kitchen
 - Find out more information about soup kitchens
 - Was the soup kitchen system successful?
 - Why was it discontinued?



Relief Card 4

- Workhouses
 - Find out more information about the Poor Law and workhouses
 - What was life like in workhouses?
 - Did they make the Irish situation any better?



British Inaction

- No check on food prices
- No embargo on food exports
- No check on mass evictions
- Not enough assisted emigration programmes

Ideology responsible for British Inaction

- Racial prejudice
- Laissez-faire
- Malthus

Discussion 1

- Discuss the following image and what it says about anti-Irish prejudice in Britain. Can you see how this image is related to Britain's limited intervention during the famine?



Discussion 2

- The Irish were called “bog trotters” (“frequentatori di paludi”). They were seen as dissolute because they had many children, and lazy because they subsisted on potatoes only. The British believed the Irish enjoyed their situation and were not interested in progress. Unfortunately, these accusations are very modern. Do you recognize them? Have you heard them used against any other ethnic group residing in your country (e.g. Romani people)?

Discussion 3

- How is prejudice born?
- Is stereotype the same as prejudice?
- Are people from other countries prejudiced against Italy?
- What are the most common stereotypes concerning Italians?
- What are the most common prejudices concerning Italians?

The Famine Year

WEARY men, what reap ye?—Golden corn for the stranger.

What sow ye?—Human corses that wait for the avenger.

Fainting forms, hunger - stricken, what see you in the offing?

Stately ships to bear our food away, amid the stranger's scoffing.

There's a proud array of soldiers — what do they round your door?

They guard our masters' granaries from the thin hands of the poor.

Pale mothers, wherefore weeping?—Would to God that we were dead—

Our children swoon before us, and we cannot give them bread.

Difficult Words

- Weary: stanco
- Reap: raccogliere
- Sow: seminare
- Corse (corpse): dead body
- Avenger: vendicatore
- In the offing: al largo
- Scoffing: farsi beffe (di)
- Array: schieramento (di truppe)
- Wherefore (poetico): perché
- Swoon: svenire

Work on the Text.

- What are the main themes in this stanza?
- Which historical facts are clearly mentioned?
- Look at the words in **fuchsia**. How does the poet describe the Irish people?
- Look at the words in **green**. How does the poet describe the English?

The Famine Year

We are wretches, famished, scorned, human tools to build your pride,

But God will yet take vengeance for the souls for whom Christ died.

Now is your hour of pleasure — bask ye in the world's caress;

But our whitening bones against ye will rise as witnesses,

From the cabins and the ditches, in their charred, uncoffin'd masses,

For the Angel of the Trumpet will know them as he passes.

A ghastly, spectral army, before the great God we'll stand,

And arraign ye as our murderers, the spoilers of our land.

Difficult words

- Wretch: disgraziato, miserabile
- Famished: affamato
- Scorned: denigrato
- Bask: bearsi (di)
- Witness: testimone
- Cabin: capanna
- Ditch: fosso
- Charred: carbonizzato
- Uncoffined: senza bara
- Arraign: chiamare in giudizio

Work on the Text

- The images in this stanza are very vivid: do you think the poet is trying to stimulate our pity?
- Look at the words in **fuchsia**. How does the poet describe the Irish? Are there any changes compared to the first stanza?
- Look at the words in **green**. How does the poet describe the English? Are there any changes compared to the first stanza?
- Look at the first two lines: can you see a connection with the gospels (*the last will be first*)?
- Why do you think the poet uses Biblical imagery?

Resources for class work 1

- About Indian corn see:
- <http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/ILN/IndianCorn/IndianCorn.html>
- Indian Corn, Important Fact:
<http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/Examiner/Archives/Nov1846.html>

Resources for Class Work 2

- About Public Works see:
 - University of Cork
<http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/famine#PublicWorks>
- About Soup Kitchens see:
 - <http://www.limerick.com/lifestyle/soupkitchen.html>
- About Workhouses see:
 - <http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/famine#FamineRelief>
 - http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/schools/4_11/tandy/projects/famine/workhouse.shtml

Additional Research Material for Teachers and students:

- University College Cork
 - <http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/famine>
- The Great Irish Famine Curriculum
 - http://www.education.ne.gov/ss/irish/irish_pf.html
- Was the Great Irish Famine an Act of Nature?:
 - Part 1:
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/gt/gif/docs/famnature.pdf>
 - Part 2:
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/gt/gif/docs/famnature2.pdf>
 - Part 3:
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/gt/gif/docs/famnature3.pdf>