

FAMINE POETRY

Irish Famine
UNIT VII

FAMINE POETRY

PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

1. The student will determine the attitude of the poet toward the Famine experience by focusing on his/her use of imagery, allusion, metaphor and refrain.

TEACHING/LEARNING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

A. Students will compare the points of view contained in the poems, and discuss the poet's ability to evoke empathy. Students will compare the attitude of stoicism versus passionate defiance.

Activity 1. Students will read a variety of poems, answer questions following the readings, and discuss the issues raised.

"GIVE ME THREE GRAINS OF CORN, MOTHER."

"FIELDS OF ATHENRY "

"THE PRATIES GROW SO SMALL "

"THE ITINERANT SINGING GIRL "

"THE BOREEN SIDE "

"FAMINE AND EXPORTATION "

"DARK ROSALEEN "

"SONG OF THE FAMINE "

"THE FAMINE YEAR (THE STRICKEN LAND) "

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FAMINE POETRY

"GIVE ME THREE GRAINS OF CORN, MOTHER."

By Amelia Blanford Edwards

Give me three grains of corn, Mother,
Only three grains of corn;

It will keep the little life I have
Till the coming of the morn.

I am dying of hunger and cold, Mother,
Dying of hunger and cold;

And half the agony of such a death
My lips have never told.

It has gnawed like a wolf at my heart, Mother,
A wolf that is fierce for blood;

All the livelong day, and the night beside,
Gnawing for lack of food.

I dreamed of bread in my sleep, Mother,
And the sight was heaven to see;

I awoke with an eager, famishing lip,
But you had no bread for me.

How could I look to you, Mother,
How could I look to you

For bread to give to your starving boy,
When you were starving too?

For I read the famine in your cheek,
And in your eyes so wild,

And I felt it in your bony hand,
As you laid it on your child.

The Queen has lands and gold, Mother,
The Queen has lands and gold,

While you are forced to your empty breast
A skeleton babe to hold-

A babe that is dying of want, Mother,
As I am dying now,

FAMINE POETRY

With a ghastly look in its sunken eye,
And famine upon its brow.

There is many a brave heart here, Mother,
Dying of want and cold,

While only across the Channel, Mother,
Are many that roll in gold;

There are rich and proud men there, Mother,
With wondrous wealth to view,

And the bread they fling to their dogs tonight
Would give life to me and you.

What has poor Ireland done, Mother,
What has poor Ireland done,

That the world looks on, and sees us starve,
Perishing one by one?

Do the men of England care not, Mother,
The great men and the high,

For the suffering sons of Erin's Isle,
Whether they live or die?

Come nearer to my side, Mother,
Come nearer to my side,

And hold me fondly, as you held
My father when he died;

Quick, for I cannot see you, Mother,
My breath is almost gone;

Mother! Dear Mother! Ere I die,
Give me three grains of corn.

FIELDS OF ATHENRY (SONG)

By Pete St. John

By a lonely prison wall, I heard a young girl calling
"Michael, they have taken you away,
For you stole Trevelyan's corn,
So the young might see the morn.
Now a prison snip lies waiting in the bay."

FAMINE POETRY

Low lie the fields of Athenry
Where once we watched the small free birds fly
Our love was on the wing
We had dreams and songs to sing
It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry.

By a lonely prison wall, I heard a young man calling
"Nothing matters, Mary, when you're free
Against the famine and the crown,
I rebelled they cut me down.
Now you must raise our child with dignity."

By a lonely harbor wall, we watched the last star fall
As the prison ship sailed out against the sky
For she lived to hope and pray for her love in Botany Bay
It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry.

THE PRATIES GROW TO SMALL

Anonymous

O, the praties they grow small
over here, over here.
O, the praties they grow small,
and they grow from spring to fall,
and we eat them skins and all,
over here, over here.

O, I wish that we were geese,
night and morn, night and morn,
O, I wish that we were geese,
For they fly and take their ease,
And they live and die in peace,
over here, over here.

O, we're trampled in the dust,
over here, over here,
O, we're trampled in the dust,
But the Lord in whom we trust,
will give us crumb for crust,
over here, over here.

THE ITINERANT SINGING GIRL

By Jane Francesca Wilde (Oscar Wilde 's Mother)

Fatherless and motherless, no brothers have I,
And all my little sisters in the cold grave lie;
Wasted with hunger I saw them falling dead --

FAMINE POETRY

Lonely and bitter are the tears I shed.

Friendless and loverless, I wander to and fro,
Singing while my faint heart is breaking fast with woe,
Smiling in my sorrow, and singing for my bread --
Lonely and bitter are the tears I shed.

Harp clang and merry song by stranger's door and board,
None ask wherefore tremble my pale lips at each word;
None care why the color from my wan cheek has fled --
Lonely and bitter are the tears I shed.

Smiling and singing still, tho' hunger, want, and woe,
Freeze the young life-current in my veins as I go;
Begging for my living, yet wishing I were dead --
Lonely and bitter are the tears I shed.

THE BOREEN SIDE

By James Tighe

A stripling, the last of his race,
lies dead in a nook by the Boreen side;
The rivulet runs by his board and his bed,
Where he ate the green cresses and died.

The Lord of the plains where that stream wanders on, -
Oh! he loved not the Celtic race --
By a law of the land cast out fellow man,
And he feeds the fat ox in his place.

The hamlet he leveled, and issued commands,
Preventing all human relief,
And out by the ditches, the serfs of his lands,
Soon perished of hunger and grief.

He knew they should die -- as he ate and he drank
of the nourishing food and wine;
He heard of the death cries of the famish'd and lank
And fed were his dogs and his swine.

That Lord is a Christian! and prays the prayer,
'Our Father' -- the Father of all --
And he reads in the Book of wonderful care,

FAMINE POETRY

That marks when a sparrow may fall.

And there lies that youth on his damp cold bed,
And the cattle have stall and straw;
No kindred assemble to wail the lone dead -
They perished by landlord law.

He lies by the path where his forefathers trod -
The race of the generous deeds,
That sheltered the Poor for the honor of God,
And fed them with bread -- not weeds.

Unshrouded he lies by the trackless path,
And he died as his kindred died -
And vengeance Divine points the red bolt of wrath,
For that death by the Boreen side.

FAMINE AND EXPORTATION

By John O'Hagan

Take it from us, every grain,
We were made for you to drain;
Black starvation let us feel,
England must not want a meal!

When our rotting roots shall fail,
When the hunger pangs assail,
Ye'll have of Irish corn your fill --
We'll have grass and nettles still!

We are poor, and ye are rich;
Mind it not, were every ditch
Strewn in spring with famished corpses,
Take our oats to feed your horses!

Heaven, that tempers ill with good,
When it smote our wonted food,
Sent us bounteous growth of grain --
Sent to pauper slaves, in vain!

We but asked in deadly need:
'Ye that rule us! Let us feed
On the food that's ours' ~ behold!
Adder deaf and icy cold.

Were we Russians, thralls from birth,
In a time of winter dearth
Would a Russian despot see
>From his land its produce flee?

FAMINE POETRY

Were we black Virginian slaves,
Bound and bruised with thongs and staves,
Avarice and selfish dread
Would not let us die unfed.

Were we, Saints of Heaven! were we
How we burn to think it -- FREE!
Not a grain should leave our shore,
Not for England's golden store.

They who hunger where it grew --
They whom Heaven had sent it to --
They who reared with sweat of brow --
They or none should have it now.

Lord that made us! What it is
To endure a lot like this!
Powerless in our worst distress,
Cramped by alien selfishness!

Not amongst our rulers all,
One true heart whereon to call;
Vainly still we turn to them
Who despoil us and contemn.

Forced to see them, day by day,
Snatch our sole resource away;
If returned a pittance be --
Alms, 'tis named, and beggars, we.

Lord! thy guiding wisdom grant,
Fearful counselor is WANT;
Burning thoughts will rise within,
Keep us pure from stain of sin!

But, at least, like trumpet blast,
Let it rouse us all at last;
Ye who cling to England's side!
Here and now, you see her tried.

DARK ROSALEEN

By Sister Anne Therese Dillen

I thirst beside the heather-laden bogs -
no samaritan for me;
no one here to see
that I shall die amidst the
plenty, in the field -

FAMINE POETRY

and that its yield
will sail to shores beyond the sea.

How can it be
that flocks of sheep can find their fill
while I lie empty and in pain?
or is it vain
to beg attention to my plight?

How can I fight
when I am listless, drained alone,
shrunken to the bone
while others eat what I have
grown in toil?

Woman of the soil -
I fade against a wall of human greed
and - sower of the seed -
I languish as it grows...

THE SONG OF THE FAMINE

By Anonymous

Want! want! want! Under the harvest moon;
Want! want! want! Thro' dark December's gloom;
To face the fasting day upon the frozen flags!
And fasting turn away to cower beneath a rag.

Food! food! food! Beware before you spurn,
Ere the cravings of the famishing to loathing madness
turn; For hunger is a fearful spell, And fearful work
is done,
Where the key to many a reeking crime is the curse of
living on !

For horrid instincts cleave unto the starving life,
And the crumbs they grudge from plenty's feast but
lengthen out the strife -
But lengthen out the pest upon the fetid air,
Alike within the country hut and the city's crowded
lair.

Home! home! home! A dreary, fireless hole -
A miry floor and a dripping roof, and a little straw
-- its whole.
Only the ashes that smoulder not, their blaze was
long ago, And the empty space for kettle and pot where
once they stood in a row!

FAMINE POETRY

Only the naked coffin of deal, and the little body
within,
I cannot shut it out from my sight, so hunger-bitten
and thin; -
I hear the small weak moan - the stare of the hungry
eye,
Though my heart was full of a strange, strange joy
the moment I saw it die.

I had food for it e'er yesterday, but the hard crust
came too late -
It lay dry between the dying lips, and I loathed it
-- yet I ate.
Three children lie by a cold stark corpse In a room
that' s over head -
They have not strength to earn a meal,
Or sense to bury the dead!

And oh! but hunger's a cruel heart, I shudder at my
own,
As I wake my child at a tearless wake, All lightless
and alone!
I think of the grave that waits, and waits but the
dawn of day,
And a wish is rife in my weary heart --I strive and
strive, but it won't depart-
I cannot put it away.

Food! food! food! For the hopeless day's begun;
Thank God there's one the less to feed! I thank God
it is my son!
And oh! the dirty winding sheet, and oh! the shallow
grave!
Yet your mother envies you the same of all the alms
they gave!
Death! death! death! In lane, and alley, and street,
Each hand is skinny that holds the bier, and totters
each bearer's feet;
The livid faces mock their woe, and the eyes refuse a
tear;
For Famine's gnawing every heart, and tramples on
love and fear!

Cold! cold! cold! In the snow, and frost, and sleet,
Cowering over a fireless hearth, or perishing in the
street,
Under the country's hedge, On the cabin's miry floor,
In hunger, sickness, and nakedness, it's oh! God help
the poor.

It's oh! if the wealthy knew a tithe of the bitter
dole

FAMINE POETRY

That coils and coils round the bursting heart like a fiend, to tempt the soul!
Hunger, and thirst, and nakedness, sorrow, and sickness, and cold,
It's hard to bear when the blood is young, and hard when the blood is old.

Sick! sick! sick! With an aching, swimming brain,
And the fierceness of the fever-thirst, and the maddening famine pain.
On many a happy face to gaze as it passes by -
To turn from hard and pitiless hearts, and look up for leave to die.

Food! food! food! Through splendid street and square,
Food! food! food! Where is enough and to spare;
And ever so meager the dole that falls, What trembling fingers start,
The strongest snatch it from the weak, For hunger through walls of stone would break
It's a devil in the heart!

Like an evil spirit, it haunts my dreams, through silent, fearful night,
Till I start awake from the hideous scenes, I cannot shut from my sight;
They glare on my burning lids, and thought, like a sleepless goul,
Rides wild upon my famine-fevered brain -- Food! ere at last it come in vain
For the body and the soul!

THE FAMINE YEAR (THE STRICKEN LAND)

By Jane Francesca Wilde

Weary men, what reap ye? -- Golden corn for the stranger.
What sow ye? -- Human corpses 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;

FAMINE POETRY

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

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.

Questions:

"GIVE ME THREE GRAINS OF CORN, MOTHER."

- Because the child/poet knows his mother has no corn to give him, is his pleading senseless? Does that make the poem more effective?
- Do you identify more with the mother or the child?
- Does the last half of the poem oversimplify the Famine story, or is it the logical way a child would view the issue: plenty vs. scarcity?

"FIELDS OF ATHENRY "

- How does the image of birds differ in this poem differ from the geese in "The Praties Grow so Small"?
- Why does the poet call it " Trevelyan's corn"?
- What can you gather about the destination of the prison ship: Botany
- Bay? Locate it in a world atlas, and try to learn more about the Irish who were sent there on prison ships.

"THE ITINERANT SINGING GIRL"

- Why does the girl's way of earning a living worsen her sorrow?

"THE BOREEN SIDE"

FAMINE POETRY

- The poet compares the starvation deaths of the evicted to the well being of the animals who replace them. How does he use it to support the implication that the landlord is not a Christian?

"FAMINE AND EXPORTATION"

- Which stanza best summarizes the poet 's chief argument?

"DARK ROSALEEN"

- How does the tone of the poem differ from "The Boreen Side" and "Famine and Exportation".
- Is the poem's tone similar to "The Praties Grow so Small"?

"SONG OF THE FAMINE"

- Which trial seem more terrifying: the physical or the emotional?
- What seems to happen to compassion when survival is at stake?

"THE FAMINE YEAR (THE STRICKEN LAND) "

- How does the poem use questions and answers to lead us from the subject of exports to the plight of starving children?
- Are those two themes carried out more effectively in "Famine and Exportation" and "Give me three grains of corn, Mother"?
- Do you think the poet finds real solace in the hope of an ultimate judgment day?