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Nation-building Uses of Famines in Margaret W. Brew's *Castle Cloyne* and Władysław Orkan's *Pomór*

Abstract. The article provides a comparative reading of Margaret W. Brew's *Castle Cloyne* (1885) and Władysław Orkan's *Pomór* [*Murrain*] (1910) in the light of Brian Porter-Szűcs's claim that peasant revolts that question social hierarchy are impossible to include in the nation-centered version of history. It discusses nation-building strategies and the politics of using 1840s subsistence crises as a community-founding event in two (Irish and Polish) famine novels. Special attention is paid to Brew's idea of the Great Irish Famine as a test of nationhood and Orkan's ironic approach towards interpreting the Great Galician Famine as a divine punishment for the 1846 peasant revolt against the Polish gentry. Brew's "double narrative" is analyzed to prove the universality of national suffering, aimed at identifying the Catholic landlords as famine victims alongside the tenants. *Pomór*'s narrative frame is closely examined with reference to Stanisław Pigoń's nation-centered exegesis of Orkan's writing and argued to convey disbelief in the possibility for the subservient to be included in the national community designed by and for the ruling classes. Parallel reading of female characters' famine biographies abridges the deconstruction of the myth of national unity in *Pomór* and *Castle Cloyne*.
Keywords: Margaret W. Brew, Władysław Orkan, famine literature, nationalism, people's history, peasant revolts

1. Famine Novels: Brew and Orkan

During "the hungry 1840s," two young women—Salka and Oonagh—leave their homes to save their sense of honor and struggle to survive (Vanhute et al. 15). As orphans and jilted lovers, they have no social safety net. During journeys through Galicia and Munster, they witness the expansion of famines, accompanying epidemics, their impact on peasant societies, and changes in the rural landscape caused by the potato blight. They become mothers: Salka gives birth, while Oonagh adopts an orphaned child. Eventually, both die as famine victims, though the latter reaches a more adult age. Their parallel stories are interwoven into two novelistic attempts

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at presenting the experience of a subsistence crisis as fundamental for the sense of national unity—or its lack.

Although with different conclusions, both Brew's *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne; or, Pictures of the Munster People* and Orkan's *Pomór*[2] evaluate the possibility of merging two histories—of native ruling classes and of native unprivileged groups—into a story of common national identity. Brew's narrative presents the Great Irish Famine (1845-52) as a moment of a God-designed test of nationhood for the Irish—both peasants and Catholic gentry, while Orkan's paints the Great Galician Famine (1847-48) as a God-sent punishment for lack of national solidarity.

This article shows how the potentially nation-building messages of the two novels are deconstructed by the very means meant to uphold them. A close reading of *Castle Cloyne* is provided due to the scarce recognisability of this particular Famine narrative. Orkan's *Pomór* is read outside the nation-centered frame designed by Stanisław Pigoń. Next, Brew's and Orkan's national unity projects are compared and situated in the context of Irish and Polish literatures, respectively. Finally, the text focuses on Salka and Oonagh as two realizations of the Famine biography to discuss class- and gender-related issues in literary portrayals of subsistence crises.

2. *Castle Cloyne*: "Ould Stock" Parallel Lives

Of *Castle Cloyne*'s three volumes, the second focuses on 1847—"one of the most melancholy periods in the sad annals of Ireland" (Brew 2: 159). The "dual plot" is divided into two threads following the fates of Oonagh MacDermott, a peasant woman, and a landlord, Hyacinth Dillon, of an Anglo-Norman family (Fegan 216). Oonagh becomes homeless because she cannot pay the rent to the Dillons after her father's death. Hyacinth inherits Castle Cloyne with debts accumulated by previous generations and immediately loses it in the Encumbered Estate Court. Both young people witness their families' rapid economic decline, multiple deaths of relatives and friends, suffer the disloyalty of their romantic partners who marry other people, and even lose their animal companions. The similarities are emphasized to accentuate their unity in suffering transgressing class divisions. The narrative argues that the landlords endured the same hardships as the peasants. Famine is presented in the novel as a universal calamity, destroying everyone equally:

> From the rich man's field of many acres down to the little patch behind the cottier's cabin, the plague had manifested itself with terrible impartiality. After all their bright anticipations, their patient toil, their many privations, cheerfully borne in the faith of a better time to come, the Irish people found themselves, in the autumn of 1847, face to face with the gaunt spectre of the great

2 This title is most accurately translated by the word "murrain," which channels the archaic quality of "pomór" as "epidemics" or "plague" and its strong association with infectious cattle disease. The author of this article translated all quotes from Polish.

> Famine, and then one loud wail, one exceeding bitter cry of desolation and despair rose up to heaven throughout the length and breadth of the land. (Brew 2: 161)

The wail of horror slithering over the infested, rotting landscape recurs in Irish Famine literature. In *Castle Cloyne*, it is used to strengthen the impression that everyone on Irish soil was similarly affected by the potato blight, reduced to the lamenting voice. The narrator attempts to prove this by noting:

> But it was not the very poor alone who suffered from the ruin caused by the blight in the potatoes, though, as a matter of course, they were the first to suffer. The farmers, and the shopkeepers, and the tradesmen, whose business was ruined for want of customers, and the great accumulation of bad debts that could never be recovered; and, lastly, the landed proprietors, whose tenants had become hopelessly insolvent, and whose lands, impoverished and untilled, were like a howling wilderness. (163)

And continues five chapters later:

> And now the time had come when the hearts of men in the stately hall, as well as in the poorest cabin, were to be tried in the fiery furnace of tribulation, for the Famine reigned supreme in the land. Scarcely anyone was exempt from the terrible visitation, which percolated through all ranks and classes with more or less intensity, though, of course, it pressed hardest and heaviest on the poor. Those who had been rich now found themselves straitened, and pinched to the utmost point of endurance, and those who had been in the ranks of the poor were now reduced to a choice between two evils, the poor-house or the grave. (256–257)

Even though the narrative recognizes the differences in class-determined famine lived experience, it still argues for the universal national suffering thesis. Every exhibit of hardships survived by the peasants is accompanied by a corresponding example from the native ruling classes. This is especially visible in famine plots related to funerals and property.

Castle Cloyne is haunted by the fear of the "poor-house," which has been prevalent in literary renditions of the Great Famine since William Carleton (1794-1869). Apart from the usual horrors of over-crowded, hostile space, Brew's characters are afraid of being buried in a "poor-house" coffin or a coffin "paid for by *charity*" (2: 162, 229, 309–310, 314). It is universally believed in the novel that a funeral that the dead's family had not funded is a dishonorable one. This mindset is signaled first after Oonagh's father's death when she sells her land lease to purchase items necessary for the funeral, "I couldn't bear to think that the bones ov my good, lovin' father wor lyin' in a coffin that wasn't paid for" (1: 213). She thus explains her irrational decision to get rid of the farm. The knowledge that she managed to provide cheap but paid-for coffins for John—her unfaithful lover—and her cousin Susie "was one of very great comfort to Oonagh" (2: 314). Later

on, Oonagh buries a childhood friend, Judy, also a victim of famine, and again, the importance of spending her own money on the funeral is emphasized (3: 37). Although it is not expressed verbatim, it seems that peasant *Castle Cloyne* characters ensure dignity for their dead in class terms. By all means possible they strife to separate their loved ones from the dehumanised "poor-house" masses, reduced to numbers of buried in one common grave or even unburied, left by the roadside.

Though all Oonagh's pre-Famine friends die, she manages to bury them "decently". Surprisingly, the only character whose poor-house death is included in the narrative is a cousin of the Dillons, Terry MacNamara, whose family were

> Irish, pure and simple, without the slightest admixture of foreign blood in their veins. They were Celtic to the core, even to their very name, for Macnamara is an Irish word, meaning literally "son of the sea". From the earliest times they had been gentry in their native county, people of large property, and possessed of all the prestige that property is sure to carry with it, when it is accompanied by good birth. It would be an impossible task to trace their pedigree, for the founders of the race were lost in the mists of antiquity. (1: 232)

As a member of the native ruling class, Terry shares the lot of his tenants, which is supposed to ultimately emphasise Irish unity in famine suffering. His death is discovered by Hyacinth's sister, Grace, who fulfils a role parallel to Oonagh's and saves his dead body from a poor-house burial (105).

However, Terry's case is weak proof for social stratification's irrelevance in Famine-caused suffering. Firstly, Terry is the only poor-house resident for whose funeral the parish priest is ready to provide money and even sell his colt. When father O'Rafferty recognises Terry, he sends for his nearest relative, Grace Dillon, to ensure comfort and company. The priest and Grace agree that "He must not be buried in a pauper coffin, nor in a pauper grave … but in Quin Abbey, where all of his blood and name have been laid to rest for nearly a thousand years. Had he died rich, it would be so, and now that he has died poor, it *must* be so" (3: 104–105). Grace's demands regarding Terry's resting place contrast starkly with Oonagh's problem with Judy's grave—"I'd like greatly to have poor Judy berrid with her people, that wor ever an' always a dacent, honest ould stock, but I'm in dhread we couldn't manage that any way. Their berrin' place is too far away, an' it would take too much money to sind her there" (34). By underlining the fact that both Terry and Judy belong to the "ould stock," the narrative ensures that the difference in how they are buried is perceived in terms of class and position in power structures (inherent not only in imperial and local politics but also in the immediate social circle of Castle Cloyne parish).

It is even more evident in the case of Dominic Dillon's and Grace's funerals. Not only do they die in friendly homes where they are cared for. They are also buried in their family's ancestral resting place, a sign of status in *Castle Cloyne*'s diegesis (2: 189–190). Every surviving Castle Cloyne tenant attends Grace's funeral, and it becomes a tribute to the Dillons' prominence. Dominic

is accompanied to the graveyard by friends, family, and even his tenants, who "would not suffer the remains of their late landlord to be taken there by horses, while they, his own people, with broad shoulders and willing hands, were there ready to carry his coffin" (190). In contrast, Judy's and John and Suzie's pauper funerals—"melancholy spectacle" of "great poverty and simplicity" (2: 315)—are carried out in an "expeditious manner," and fewer than ten mourners are present each time (3: 38).

The narrator's class-based hypocrisy towards the characters is equally evident in his approach to debts and ownership, especially of land. Because of the novel's main topic, these are connected to funeral customs. The young landlord further indebts Castle Cloyne for the expenses of his father's lavish last journey, while Oonagh sells her home to clear her father's name from accusations of owing either rent or coffin money.

Similar distinctions are seen in how the loss of MacDermott's farm and Castle Cloyne estate is narrated. On the last day before becoming homeless, Oonagh sits in an empty house— an image of desolation. She faces grief after her father's death, John's rejection, abandonment from her aunt, and separation from friends who seek employment or settle far away. An unwanted marriage proposal from Pat Flanagan enlarges the mood of displacement. Oonagh refuses because she feels she does not belong in the area anymore. Her last day at home could not vary more from Dominic Dillon's:

> the servants and "followers," whose name is legion, were all standing about to see the last of the "ould master." Some were weeping silently, and all showed in the most unmistakable manner their sympathy and regret for the fallen fortunes of the house that had so long sheltered and befriended them. (2: 183)

This fragment demonstrates the narrative's continuous insistence on harmonious communion between the ruling and the ruled in pre-Famine Irish society. Many more examples of this creed can be found: the Dillons are consequently shown as the "good landlords" who only require reasonable rent, never evict, and care for their tenants' orphaned children, while the tenants are argued to love their landlords to the point of disregarding their own survival interests.

The co-dependency of the castle and the cabins is frequently underlined. However, the only help received by the tenants amounts to clean sheets borrowed for a wake and several servings of five o'clock meals, while the landlords' family can count on, for example, the valet's (Pat Flanagan's) yearly unpaid service and the peasant-priest's full-time assistance in Terry's and Grace's hardships. Those proofs of respect and care are not comparable, especially if the difference in wealth is taken into account. Moreover, the Dillons are not concerned with their tenants' Famine trials: individual poor-house deaths, homelessness, illnesses, and difficulties in organizing acceptable funerals. They do notice changes in the general Castle Cloyne landscape and demography but do not relate it to the human beings that they had known. The reverse in this landlord-tenant relationship is, in contrast, highly personalized. It seems that the peasant

society of Castle Cloyne suffers emotional damage when the Dillons lose their estate and land. One of the "followers" who come to bid Dominic farewell laments:

> An' here's the ind ov the grand ould family that's in Castle Cloyne ever since grass grew or wather ran. … And now here is the ind of it all, an' there's the last of the Dillons lavin' out his own house, for ever an' ever. … Sweet bad luck to all the lawyers an' bailiffs, an' long life to 'em to enjoy that bad luck. (2: 173–174)

Even though the tenants are directly endangered with evictions, the narrative emphasises their regret, grief, anger and will of resistance only in relation to the Dillons' economic decline. The presentation of similar feelings in regard to their own subsistence crisis is replaced by the narrator's praises of their passivity:

> They [the peasants] were as if stunned and dazed by the magnitude of the awful calamity that had overwhelmed them; a calamity for which even the elastic Celtic nature could discover no remedy, in which it could not find the least alleviation … One feeling alone remained alive in the souls of the people, one thought that made their misery endurable, suffering with sublime endurance, and dying with patient resignation. This one sentiment was religion! The Irish peasant rarely loses his faith in God, and childlike trust in His merciful omnipotence, and it is this which enables him to endure a life of poverty and toil with patient cheerfulness, and to face death with serene composure. (162–163)

Famine is presented as a chance for each group – the ruling and the ruled – to pass the test of nationhood. The ruling class's part is to regain the ancestral land, further guide the Celtic tenant population within an increasingly more democratic British Empire, and profit from "the toilers of the soil's" work. The tenants' is to facilitate the landlords' aims (1: 169–170). *Castle Cloyne* overstates the landlords' "precarious claim to victimhood" and – allegedly in consequence – to Irishness (Fegan 215).

3. *Pomór*: Peasant Trauma as Part of National History

There are no gentry characters in *Pomór*—the entire plot is dedicated to the expansion of dehumanizing famine, accompanying epidemics, and loss of community feelings in the society of Galician peasants inhabiting the Gorce Mountains region. Since all the characters represent an isolated folk group facing their demise, reading it as a nation-building story might seem debatable. Due to the narrative frame, Orkan's novel has been deemed a depiction of peasant memory of the Great Galician Famine and its interpretation as a divine punishment for the 1846 revolt against the Polish gentry (Pigoń 288–290). This reading was outlined by Stanisław Pigoń, a literary scholar of Galician peasant descent who has been given the title of "an ideologue of folk and national culture" due to his life-long "anti-revolutionary and nationalistic cultural

[project] aiming at integrating the Polish peasantry (the people) into the sphere of national culture, understood in essentialist (primordial) terms" (Wołowiec 141). It is a base for noticing how *Pomór* might be read as deconstructing the myth of national unity due to focusing on the Famine instead of on the struggle for Polish independence.

During the Great Galician Famine two important events took place in the same year (1846)—"The events of the peasant uprising are directly connected with the nationalist uprising, or rather attempts to start it" (Rauszer, *Siła* 355). The memory of the two is interwoven – the former is said to have ruined the chances of the latter's success (355). Arson of the gentry's estates, and murders of the landlords and priests entered the national imagery as "the gentry's black legend" (Wasiewicz 152), and as symbols of the peasants' lack of national awareness (Wielgosz 26–27).

The underlying claim is that the revolt was initiated by foreign forces to more easily quench the fight for national freedom. Additionally, incorrectly deeming the people's uprising "spontaneous" and "unplanned" proves a lack of understanding regarding survival strategies and means of resistance specific to the subservient (Rauszer, *Siła* 355). This way, the struggle for subsistence is removed from the sphere of "politics," further differentiating it from the nationalist uprisings—allegedly well-organized (346-355). Thus, the members of the revolt are deprived of agency and painted as unable to even understand their class interests (similarly to the tenant population of *Castle Cloyne*). The image of peasants as a passive, easily influenced mass was crucial for the gentry's vision of Polish history and the project of a nation governed by the landed elite—"it is true that independence, the sense of freedom and in case of its loss – fighting for it, revolting, resistance and pride by no means constituted values of the peasant ethos, or instead they were not to constitute it, meaning they were not postulated and in a way exhorted to the peasantry" (Wasiewicz 153). By allowing themselves to be manipulated by the Austrians, the Galician peasantry was said to have proved unworthy of the grace planned for them by the democratic gentry: the abolition of serfdom.

The nation-centered narrative around the year 1846 insists that the peasants—whose social status in pre-abolition Polish society is often (although not without controversy) compared to at least partial slavery (it can be seen in the monograph studies of Sowa, Wasiewicz, Pobłocki, and Leszczyński)—acted against their prosperity when they rebelled against nationalist insurgents who wanted to grant them freedom. What the nationalist interpretation of Polish history does not note is the centuries of domestic serfdom, from which the landed gentry of the 1840s profited despite economic changes in the age of revolutions; the fact that the gentry's democratic intentions were mostly intentional, and that the abolition of serfdom in each partition was protested against by the Polish gentry and even seen as political repression, in terms of national martyrology (Leszczyński, *Obrońcy* 9). Nevertheless, the nation-centered narrative maintains that it was the peasant revolt that demolished national unity and required conciliation.

Consequently, the subservients' acts of armed resistance are shown not only exclusively in relation to the history of the gentry's uprising but also as antagonistic towards the armed

struggle for political freedom[3]. The latter conclusion is accompanied by a claim that the fight for independence (of a landed gentry-governed state) is much more important than life conditions (especially of murderers and thieves). This way, the agents of the people's uprising—and implicitly, peasants in general—are removed from the imagined national community. How the fight for independence and resistance against structural poverty and serfdom are evaluated and stratified in the nation-centered vision of history can be illustrated by *Pomór*'s literary criticism. Commenting on the novel's contribution to retaining the folk memory of the revolt, Poklewska presents it as if it were focused on "killing the masters," with a slight mention of famine and accompanying epidemics (72–73). In contrast, Puchalska hints at the importance of the nationalist cause in the people's 1846 revolt, not writing about the subsistence crisis at all (148).

The peasants' objectives are thus reduced to accusations of unreasonable and causeless hatred against the gentry, who had first promised abolition of serfdom and then, undeserving, were sold to the Austrian government. Detaching the revolt from the context of the subsistence crisis of the 1840s, together with the structural poverty inherent in the serfdom system, indeed makes it exaggerated at best and clueless at worst. The Famine context is virtually non-existent. Against this background, *Pomór* is a unique phenomenon in Polish literature because of all the events of the 1840s, it foregrounds the lived experience of famine. There is no mention of the nationalist uprising. The peasant revolt is related in *Pomór*— although briefly—exclusively from the people's perspective, which is a rare peasant-centered addition to the literary realizations of the elite's version of history—of 1846 and in general. The 160 remaining pages of the novel tell the story of famine- and famine-related deaths of the entire Gorce region population, following the fate of the Jamróz family. Although the peasant revolt is only referenced in the opening pages, never to reappear, it is introduced as an utmost point:

> These things were happening at the time when Vengeance went through the big houses and left behind: broken windows, damaged furniture, open barns and ashes, and corpses here and there. It was scary to look at this cruel destruction. It seemed that a spirit of doom blew the hellish sulphur at the palaces. And there was not a single big house on a significant part of the land that would survive this current. All of them stood if not utterly demolished, deteriorated … Some palaces remained, but the broken doors and windows clearly gave account that there were no people inside … from where fear and horror had expanded, now emptiness prevailed … They stood like tombs of human pride, on which war trod and which were battered by looters to wrest the riches kept by the dead. (Orkan 5)

Due to such an emphasis at the very opening of the novel, the people's revolt of 1846 is treated as an important context for the rest of the plot. The "bloody massacre" is an obligatory mention

3 For a parallel vision of Irish late 19th and 20th century history see Allen, Kieran. *1916: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*. Pluto Press, 2016. See also Daszyk et al.

in literary criticism of *Pomór*, and through it, the events of Famine are linked with the official, nation-centered version of Polish history.

Iconic images from "black legend" are reinterpreted and mingled with folk memories of the events. Using such phrases as "Vengeance went through the big houses" and "a spirit of doom blew the hellish sulfur," the narrator relocates the responsibility for the crimes from peasants to an unknown, higher force (5). This gets disturbingly close to the narrative about the foreign impact—"the perfidious scheme of the invaders," and nation-centered readings might argue that *Pomór* perpetuates the narrative created by the Polish gentry (Poklewska 70). On the next page, however, the narrator identifies "the looters" as peasants of the Gorce region and accuses them of stealing the sowing grain:

> But, it seemed, the landlords' grain didn't make it on the peasants' land, it didn't want to grow at all, and its example ruined the grain used to the barren soil, or even, who knows – maybe the time was such, such punishment. Since so much grain was squandered over the roads during the robbery! It was trod on like sand. God had to see this, too… So it was paid for in harvest time. There was nothing to gather. (Orkan 6)

and explains the crop failure (both grain and potatoes) as divine punishment,

> Whatever was sown – didn't grow, whatever was planted – rotted … And the people had different ideas in their gloomy minds. A story about the Jesuits was repeated – that out of spite for the world they had thrown a burial for the potatoes and that's why the potatoes rotted. There were some who believed this, because they had already utterly lost their reason and didn't know who to blame. But there were some who faced their conscience and looked at the sky with remorse; they felt in their hearts what this punishment came for, and they did not dare to voice their pleas for mercy. (7)

A conclusion could be reached that the people are punished with famine for the crime of "immorality and evil inherent in the people," "violation of the higher order's laws and cutting the nation's historical continuity" (Poklewska 70). The nation-centered narrative would suggest that the feeling of remorse relates to the murders of landlords, but a close reading of the three opening pages reveals that the peasant insurgents are directly charged only with grain and seed robberies and a lack of respect for food. Pigoń (289) and Poklewska (73) suggest that the passages explaining the crop failures as an expression of the harvest god's wrath are linked to pre-Christian tradition. In the context of the novel's main topic—famine—the importance of honoring food seems obvious. This way, the aspects of 1840s social history directly connected with survival dominate the potential nationalist exegesis.

In contrast to grain robbery, acts of vengeance—arson and murders—are transferred to an abstract entity. This decision could be treated as denying agency to the rioters, mindless tools in

the hands of unexplainable fate, instead of Austrians. But it is also worth noting that a narrative initially planned as consisting of a first-person account of Famine told by a peasant elder would observe anonymity as an essential security condition (Rauszer, *Siła* 50–52).

Those observations aside, the personification of Vengeance suggests that revenge for centuries of serfdom, systemic violence, and creating dehumanizing life conditions was an objective necessity or means of ensuring justice. This way, the unexplainable horror of famine is defined as a punishment for what is understood as a transgression in the worldview shared by the subservient, unrelatable for the gentry, and detached from the nation-centered version of history.

But since the Famine events are preceded by the 3-page exegesis of crop failure as divine intervention and connected with the grain robbery that occurred during the peasant revolt, it creates an impression that the famine trauma, shared by the peasant communities, can only be discussed in relation to the gentry's suffering, and through it also to national history. Even if famine is presented as a punishment for grain mistreatment, such a crime was possible only in conditions ensured by violating the existing power structures—in agrarian as well as social riots. Armed, violent questioning and repealing (even if for a time) subordination is "impossible to include in the dominant, national story" (Porter-Szűcs 57).

Pomór seems to be an attempt to achieve the goal of inserting the memory of famine into the nation-centered narrative by means of presenting it as the immediate context of the peasant uprising, not necessarily as its result (which is argued by Poklewska and Pigoń), but as its background. The narrator claims that after the destruction of big houses "austerity a hundred times worse than before nested in the cabins", but the first sentence of the novel signals the temporal co-existence of famine and revolt. After 160 pages of famine narrative, the novel rapidly ends with an image interpreted as a symbol of "conciliation" (Pigoń 310).

It is worth quoting in full because this way, its fragility as nation-building material is exposed. Having burnt his house, survived all the neighbors, and buried his wife, their four children, his sister—Salka—and a newborn nephew, mutilated the corpse of his enemy and shown all signs of insanity, the main character, Łukasz, heads to the famine cemetery to bury an old acquaintance:

> he went through the dense forest of mounds to the side he had firmly etched into his memory. Tripping over the graves, he went persistently on. Within this while he aged ten years. Hunched, he finally stopped by a bloody tomb … He was greeted by the nestlings' chirping. With hazed eyes he saw on the fresh grave his hat—in it a nest full of partridges. (Orkan 168)

The force of this fragment as a symbol is weak because of the context of famine. The novel about mass starvation ends when the main character sees potential food which can sustain him a bit longer. Puchalska has extended a suggestion of individual survival for Łukasz to an indication of the Galician peasants' ability to regenerate and rebuild the community after the famine horrors, although she remarks on the poor execution of this message (185).

The only way this scene can be used for conciliatory, nation-building interpretation is to connect it to the opening pages: to treat the destruction of big houses and Łukasz's encounter with the birds as a narrative frame. Pigoń explains that *Pomór* is structured as a tragedy, encompassing "tragic guilt, dynamically expanding suffering, finally relief" (310). Probably due to (self)censorship limitations in the 1950s, Pigoń's interpretation remains unclear when read outside of the broader context of the scholar's mission to create a "unified folk-national culture" realized in his works comprising literary studies, literary criticism, journalism, and life-writing (Wołowiec 128). Pigoń's vision of Polish literature as encompassing gentry-descended authors and self-taught artists who did not renounce their peasant heritage and were recognized as representatives of "high literature" relied heavily on Orkan's prose (126). In consequence, his reading of *Pomór* is extremely politicized and functionalized to reinvent the peasant identity as founded on Polishness. Implied is mutual forgiveness in the face of mutual suffering. First, the landlords atoned for centuries of systemic violence by becoming victims of peasant rioters, and then the rioters were punished for murders with famine.

4. National Unity: Founded on (Inferiors') Graves

Pigoń sees the full nest as a divine signal suggesting a common, peaceful future. Outside of Pigoń's nation-building frame of reference, however, the symbol of reconciliation found on a mass Famine grave is clearly ironic. Analogical themes in *Castle Cloyne* are, in contrast, overloaded with pathos and religious imagery and treated with absolute seriousness:

> And oh, dear God! how patient they [Famine victims] were! There was, in the time of the Famine, no outrage! There was no crime of more than the ordinary character, no breaking open provision stores, no burglaries or highway robberies. Peaceful travellers went on their own errands through town and country without the least molestation; and the general traffic and business of the country went on as usual … There was no disorder of any kind, no disturbance that would call for any special interference by the authorities. It was as if, when the last remnant of their food melted away before their eyes, all action and energy were crushed out of the wretched people; and as if their minds and souls were paralysed and dead before their bodies succumbed to the slow, agonising death of famine. (Brew 2: 162)

Brew's portrayal of peaceful extinction plays a vital role in her vision of the martyrs' nation. In the context of Land War fiction emerging in the 1880s, which problematized conflicts around land propriety, agrarian crime, and mass political emancipation, it provides a project of an Irish society in which no discord arises because every member knows their place. Catholic landowners must "turn to evictions" to save the ancestral houses, and the evicted, "the miserable people, starved and naked" be "driven from the poor cabins that were dear to them, for they represented home, either to beg, or enter the union workhouse, as it pleased them best to do," all in accordance with the law (166, 164). The Famine test of nationhood presented in *Castle*

Cloyne assumes and legitimizes mass death by starvation in the name of keeping the Irish land in Irish landlords' hands.

The message conveying potential unity between the peasants and Catholic landowners is also weakened by the unequal treatment of characters whose parallel lives and sufferings were supposed to illustrate unity between different social groups of the same nation (Morash 36–39). Hyacinth marries an English aristocrat and landowner, whose "old blood" is applauded several times. Oonagh never recovers from the loss of her first love—his betrayal and death—and raises his child as a single mother. Young Dillon regains his family's ancestral lands and residence, while young MacDermott never returns to her father's cabin. The last chapter focuses on Hyacinth's domestic "pleasant reality," and the epilogue describes Oonagh's tragic death (Brew 3: 284).

From the nation-centered perspective, it is worth noting that while Oonagh was traveling through Famine-driven Munster, saving lives or organizing honoring burials when she arrived too late, Hyacinth sought gold in California and then spent it in Italy. Oonagh's heroic deeds focused on the community's survival were given the same value as Hyacinth's random decisions, which led to the accumulation of wealth and ransoming Castle Cloyne from the "new blood's" hands.

With surprising consequence, the novel equates the Catholic gentry's landowning rights with the tenants' bare subsistence. This ideological declaration is by what Wielgosz calls "essentialization of subservient"—objectification of the unprivileged groups, such as plebeians, peasants, proletariat, women and inhabitants of the colonies, their exclusion from the community of citizens, stemming from the monopoly of private property (26). This monopoly is a recurring theme in *Castle Cloyne*—in each episode, the Dillons' right to land ownership is enshrined, while Oonagh's "self-denial" is shown as exemplary for her class.

By granting Hyacinth the ability to fulfill all his goals to show regeneration after the chaos of the Famine, his property right is suggested to be more important than his tenants' survival. Their passive, resigned portrayal in the narrative echoes "the passive victims of Mitchel's representation who do appear as something like beasts of burden" (Bexar 147).

Oonagh's plot could be resolved parallelly happily or be given an open, unclear ending. Still, it finishes with her death: right after she ceases to be necessary for the community and just before she can benefit from her life's achievements—and the restored order of Irish society. Her adopted son addresses her on the final page of the novel—"Oh, mother! … You have left me just when I could have helped to make you happy. The great loss is mine, but the great gain is all your own!" (Brew 3: 297). Although Oonagh's "great gain" might be convincing from the Catholic point of view, its meaning is detrimental to the novel's nation-centered message: the Irish nation only survives because of what causes the weakest's life sacrifices. As Fegan states—"Oonagh may die happy in her assurance of heaven, but Hyacinth's reward is much more immediate and substantial" (216). To convince the readers that Oonagh was awarded a lack of worldly happiness, the narrative highlights double standards for different social groups within the same nation.

Castle Cloyne's immediate literary context remains to be discussed. Brew's novel was published in 1885, in the midst of the Irish Land War. Although it describes the events happening

in the Hungry Forties, it was first received in the context of the No Rent Manifesto and agrarian outrages: arson, assassinations of landlords and land agents, cattle maiming, and boycotting (Hansson and Murphy 4). Brew's narrative positions the humble, uncomplaining peasantry of the 1840s and early 1850s as a role model for their descendants who, on the brink of "the last Irish Famine" of 1879, organized to demand land reform. The novel presents the Great Famine victims as doomed people who made the right choices and are moral victors, unlike those who rioted with the hope of improving their lives. It promotes the paternalistic view of the Irish rural working class, for example, by devoting whole chapters to convincing the reader that the peasants should choose their landlords as their Westminster representatives, and not trust outsiders. It mocks every Land League postulate and tries to uphold the Irish landowners' interests as national goals.

In *Pomór, the* deconstruction of the myth of national unity is equally radical but also intentional. Apart from Łukasz, whose more prolonged survival is only hinted at, the nation does not survive. The mountains are empty; the inhabitants were obliterated—first by riots, second by Famine. Reconciliation achieved in mass death is an ironic comment on the possibility of incorporating the peasants' descendants into the same nation with the landowners: the reverse of a nation-building narrative.

This reading of *Pomór* can be supported by Orkan's repeated destruction of community-building themes, most evident in *Drzewiej* [*In the Olden Days*], a novel completed two years after *Pomór*'s first edition. Its plot is structured on the scheme of a foundational myth but does not develop into a story of progress, survival, and reproductive success. Instead, a major disagreement divides the "first family," every character dies, and their aim of civilizing the mountains is not continued.

Orkan's insistence on killing off everyone in narratives that initially create expectations of a positive, community-forging message proves a lack of belief in the peaceful co-existence of individuals in general and not only within the frame of a hierarchized nation. The conviction that it is impossible to merge the ruled into a national community created by and for the ruling class is an important feature of Orkan's writings. This is especially evident in Orkan's commentary on post-independence Poland. His comparison of the class division in Polish post-independence society to relations between the Zulu people and the British colonizers resembles contemporary recognitions of the "two nations" syndrome—strict separation of the "cattle" ("bydło") from the "masters" as a result of systemic violence against the subservient in Polish history (Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia* 9–47). "Polish society is broken into two parts which distrust and resent each other", as Leszczyński summarizes Orkan's image of 1920s Poland (*No dno* 103). This recognition doubles the disunity between the landed gentry (the Protestant Ascendancy as well as Catholic landlords) and tenants in Irish 19th and 20th-century history (Allen).

5. Salka and Oonagh: a Shared Famine Biography

The artificial character of national conciliation in *Pomór* and *Castle Cloyne* is even more apparent in the comparative reading. Similarities in how their Famines lived experience is narrated – regardless of the exact point on the map of the 1840s subsistence crisis – make Salka and Oonagh much more united in suffering than Oonagh and Hyacinth or Salka and the gentry killed in peasant revolt. It is they and their families who die of starvation and famine-related causes. The Dillons and other landlords never want food, even if they lose generational wealth. Terry MacNamara's single example only further endorses social divisions because it is treated as an ultimate transgression of hierarchy.

A comparative reading of Brew's and Orkan's famine novels reveals the use of the same character type. Both Oonagh and Salka exemplify the trope of a self-sacrificial woman who, despite her weakness and multi-layered vulnerability, endures suffering to save others. Their famine journeys begin because they value someone else's right to property more than their safety: Oonagh decides to pay her father's rent debt. Salka tries to find and bring back her brother's cow, which was stolen by her love interest, for whose guilt she feels responsible. Securing the landlord's money and the brother's cattle is shown as a matter of Oonagh's and Salka's honor. In addition, both are characterized as chaste and detached from sexuality. Oonagh's love is only discussed in romantic terms, while Salka's pregnancy is an effect of rape and adds to her suffering twice: because of the sexual assault trauma and the feeling of obligation to give birth. Both young women are portrayed as determined to survive for the sake of their children; both voluntarily give up their own scarce rations to feed adult men; both personify Catholic morality and "self-denial" in the face of earth-shattering events.

This character type's central role in *Castle Cloyne* is consistent with depicting a starving society as compliant with the Catholic version of morality, submissive and immune to emancipatory acts of resistance. In *Pomór*, however, Salka's consequent altruism seems ill-suited to the collective portrait of individuals fighting for survival against each other, severed with grief and deprived of communal solidarity. This observation leads to the conclusion that gendered stereotypes and unrealistic expectations towards women survive even in a narrative about the destruction of community bonds.

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