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Irish in America

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In the 1800s, the country of Ireland was experiencing many difficulties. The early 19th century brought around prejudice for the Irish people after the Napoleonic Wars because of their strong Catholic faith. The mid-1800s left the Irish starving due to the potato famine that lasted for many years. Unfortunately, in order to survive, the people had to leave the country that they loved. They were forced to emigrate to the United States, which meant leaving behind family and friends. Emigrating to the United States also meant embarking on an unknown future, without job prospects, a home, or land to raise children. Those who were willing to take the risk saved their families and allowed for future generations to prosper in the United States. Faced with these circumstances, the Irish man in the poem, “Lament of the Irish Emigrant,” is willing to leave his homeland because Ireland can no longer provide for his needs. He is mourning the loss of his wife and the loss of his country. Helen Selina’s poem, “Lament of the Irish Emigrant,” details the heartfelt grieving of a widower as he bids farewell to his homeland and searches for a better life in a foreign country.

Fond memories of times spent with a loved one in a beloved country are revealed in the poem “Lament of the Irish Emigrant.” The poem begins with the speaker, a widowed man, reflecting back on his days spent with his wife, Mary. He is heart-broken as a result of his wife’s recent death. It is easy for the narrator to recall a time of luscious life with his young wife in their beautiful country. He fondly remembers her beautiful features, her warm breath on his cheek, and her soft hand clasping his own. He recalls their wedding day as he sits on the steps looking out over the land. The sun still shines as bright since she passed, but his life is forever changed. The little church was once a happy reminder of the couple’s promising future, but is now a cruel reminder of the love that he lost. His focus is now on the graveyard that lies before him where Mary is buried. Mary was his rock of strength and she gave him hope that life could overcome death. Mary’s struggle with her illness parallels Ireland’s attempt to survive the devastation of the potato famine. He laments the loss of his wife just as Ireland grieves the many lives that perished in the famine.

The man shows his love for Mary as he worked to take care of her. Mary was the mothering type who could calm his fears during difficult times. She was able to settle him when he questioned everything, even his trust in God. The man was a devoted husband who is left alone with on one to comfort him. Difficult economic times in Ireland hindered the man’s ability to develop new social relationships. The Irish were very protective of what little they had during this time. As much as he feels a sense of hopelessness, he is thankful that Mary doesn’t have to endure additional pain. The man faces the reality that he has obligations restricting him to Ireland. Though he loves his home country and the life he had, he knows he has to search for a new purpose. His decision to make the journey to America is an attempt to find a way to liberate himself from his emotions and his losses. Mary’s faith and love will always be with him, and her memory will give him strength during difficult times.

In this poem, the man shows a deep connection with his country, as well. He states, “I'll ne'er forget old Ireland” (55) as he ponders his relocation to America. The Irish are deeply connected to their homeland and their heritage, which is obvious in the many Irish ghetto areas set up in the United States during the mass emigration period. It is likely very difficult for the man to leave his country, especially with his future as yet undetermined. He must leave his home and possibly other family members. More importantly, he will be leaving his memories and the dreams he had with Mary. The man imagines a better life in America, and he justifies his leaving Ireland by saying, “They say there's bread and work for all” (53). He is depressed in Ireland as he wallows in his loneliness. Starvation and discrimination enticed many Irish, including this man, to look for new opportunities in America.

The passing and remembrance of Mary is symbolic of the man’s journey to the new land. Like his detailed recollections of his time with Mary, the speaker doesn’t want to forget his homeland of Ireland. He has many fond memories of Ireland: his childhood, his marriage, and life with Mary. Just as the speaker refers to Mary as “kind and true” (50), many people also refer to Ireland as being a loyal, true country. Despite the poor conditions he faced in Ireland, the vivid greens of the landscape have become a port of him. His high expectation for prosperity in America is merely a bandage covering the wounds of what this move will cost him emotionally. The man believes his state of life can only improve through emigration, and he states that “the sun shines always there” (54) in America. The rain in Ireland has been constant symbol of the tears he has cried over the loss of his beloved wife. This eternal sunshine of his new world represents new life, new hope. Moving to the United States will give the man the opportunity to start over, with a fresh outlook on life. He is hopeful that the burden of the dreary times will be lifted, and he can begin anew in terms of life, work, and friendships.

Ireland suffered greatly during the 19th century and her people were encumbered by her demise. The famine brought death to about one million Irish and displaced one million more. Emigration was one option that gave the Irish a bit of hope that the future could be brighter. In the poem, “Lament of the Irish Emigrant,” the narrator of the story has suffered great losses. His wife has died, and he is financially ruined. Additionally, the country of Ireland is in shambles from the potato famine. He has come to the realization that his hopes for survival lie in the great unknown of America. His somber attitude shows he is sad that he must leave Ireland, but he will never forget his beloved-Mary or the beauty of his home country. While walking in the woods, he states, “I’ll sit, and shut my eyes, / And my heart will travel back again / To the place where Mary lies” (58-60). Despite his attempt to be optimistic for his future in America, the man knows that no place on earth could take the place of Ireland in his heart.

**Lament of the Irish Emigrant**

Helen Selina, Lady Dufferin. 1807-1867

I'M sittin' on the stile, Mary,  
  Where we sat side by side  
On a bright May mornin' long ago,  
  When first you were my bride;  
The corn was springin' fresh and green,  
  And the lark sang loud and high--  
And the red was on your lip, Mary,  
  And the love-light in your eye.

The place is little changed, Mary,  
  The day is bright as then,  
The lark's loud song is in my ear,  
  And the corn is green again;  
But I miss the soft clasp of your hand,  
  And your breath warm on my cheek,  
And I still keep list'ning for the words  
  You never more will speak.

'Tis but a step down yonder lane,  
  And the little church stands near,  
The church where we were wed, Mary,  
  I see the spire from here.  
But the graveyard lies between, Mary,  
  And my step might break your rest--  
For I've laid you, darling! down to sleep,  
  With your baby on your breast.

I'm very lonely now, Mary,  
  For the poor make no new friends,  
But, O, they love the better still,  
  The few our Father sends!  
And you were all I had, Mary,  
  My blessin' and my pride:  
There 's nothin' left to care for now,  
  Since my poor Mary died.

Yours was the good, brave heart, Mary,  
  That still kept hoping on,  
When the trust in God had left my soul,  
  And my arm's young strength was gone:  
There was comfort ever on your lip,  
  And the kind look on your brow--  
I bless you, Mary, for that same,  
  Though you cannot hear me now.

I thank you for the patient smile  
  When your heart was fit to break,  
When the hunger pain was gnawin' there,  
  And you hid it, for my sake!  
I bless you for the pleasant word,  
  When your heart was sad and sore--  
O, I'm thankful you are gone, Mary,  
  Where grief can't reach you more!

I'm biddin' you a long farewell,  
  My Mary--kind and true!  
But I'll not forget you, darling!  
  In the land I'm goin' to;  
They say there 's bread and work for all,  
  And the sun shines always there--  
But I'll not forget old Ireland,  
  Were it fifty times as fair!

And often in those grand old woods  
  I'll sit, and shut my eyes,  
And my heart will travel back again  
  To the place where Mary lies;  
And I'll think I see the little stile  
  Where we sat side by side:  
And the springin' corn, and the bright May morn,  
  When first you were my bride.