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Irish in America

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Talented musicians have a way of creating a certain tone, melody, and lyric that allows them to camouflage their true feelings and emotions and invite the listener to make a judgment on the topic. Whether it’s making a political statement, or encouraging people to take action, these feelings can be effectively conveyed through music. In the mid-1980s, The Pogues were a very popular music group in Ireland, and many of their songs reflected their liberal views on life. During this time, Ireland was still experiencing hard times, and the music of The Pogues was just what the Irish needed to escape the harsh reality of everyday life. A popular song by The Pogues, “Thousands are Sailing,” depicts life in America, in good times and bad.

Since the mid-1980s, The Pogues have been a very radical, yet inspirational, music group in Ireland. While the group was originally named Pogue Mahones, literally meaning “kiss my arse” in Gaelic, the name was later shortened to The Pogues. Shane MacGowan, the lead singer, has an almost incomprehensible singing voice which disguises the emotional and political undertones of his lyrics. He is also well-known for his songwriting, which became quite popular with radical college-aged students both in the United Kingdom and in the United States. According to some of the Dublin City University students, MacGowan is still one of the most popular singers in Ireland, and the band is still going strong. MacGowan has struggled with substance and alcohol abuse, and he left the group in the mid-1990s. In 2001, the band reconciled and began playing again.

Although “Thousands are Sailing” is not the band’s most popular song, MacGowan’s raspy voice certainly reflects the harsh realities of life in Ireland and in the United States. The song does not have traditional Irish melodies or tones, as it has a modern rock beat. Although many Irish songs discuss political issues, they are much more downbeat and depressing than “Thousands are Sailing.” Although the song was composed and first performed by The Pogues, Philip Chevron (a member of the group) and Patrick Clifford (an American singer who performs Irish folksongs) also performed the song in their concerts.

During the 1980s, many Irish people were stagnating in their homeland. Ireland, as a whole, was in an economic slump. The people wanted to get out and search for a better life in other parts of the United Kingdom or in the United States. The Pogues took this opportunity to write “Thousands are Sailing” to depict the mass immigration from Ireland to the United States, and to reflect on the reality of life in the United States. When looking at the lyrics, it is evident that Ireland was in a deep depression, and the Irish people were so hopeful that America would provide them with happiness, money, and a place to call home. The United States was known as the land of opportunity, where anyone could make their dreams become a reality. In *Angela’s Ashes*, a woman states, “Oh, God, I‘d give anything to see New York, people dancing up and down Broadway without a care” (McCourt 68). New York City could be considered the land of dreams, with all of the bright lights, cultural events, and glamorous photos. Upon entry through Ellis Island, many stayed in New York, taking on menial jobs to earn any money possible. The Irish served as police officers and railroad constructors, as it is stated in “Thousands are Sailing.” The Irish immigrants were lower class citizens, and many found their dreams of striking it rich failed miserably.

Unfortunately, not all of the Irish could come over to the United States after the lottery system was established. The lottery system was put in place after the United States formed the quota system in 1921 to limit the number of immigrants allowed from each country. In speaking with Michelle Duffy for a previous essay, she explained that the anticipation of waiting to hear if you had been chosen in the lottery was very intense, as so many young people wanted a way out of Ireland. Luckily, she was chosen and found life in America better than she had intended, although not everyone’s experience was as positive as hers. Looking further at the lyrics of “Thousands are Sailing,” one can see that the Irish were very conscious of their heritage. In the song, there is mention of the Irish disassociating with their heritage upon arrival in the United States, and many dropped the O’ from their last name. These Irish immigrants wanted to appear more Americanized, in order to assimilate faster into the United States’ culture. In *Angela’s Ashes*, Frank McCourt’s mother wishes to give her son a Limerick middle name. His father is outraged and it is stated, “No son of his would have a Limerick name” (McCourt 17). It is sad to see that although the Irish are very connected to their homeland, many feel that in order to travel to the United States, they must completely assimilate with the culture.

This song is very important to Irish-Americans as it details the opportunities available in America, but also the depressing times that unite the Irish together. Since the people enter the United States through New York City, their excitement levels were “like the first man on the moon” (30). In the 1980s, immigration from Ireland to the United States was the highest it had been since the Great Potato Famine, as people were looking for a better world, full of hope and void of poverty. America was pictured a land full of opportunities, but only those with courage and strong convictions would make it here.

Irish-Americans were proudly celebrated when one of their own achieved success, but they also witnessed the dilution of their heritage. They were overjoyed about John F. Kennedy being the first Irish Catholic to be elected President of the United States. However, in Dezell’s *Irish America*, it observes “distinct Irish identity has disappeared in the United States… the Irish had made it; they moved to the suburbs and were barely distinguishable from WASPs, save their Catholicism… green beer, and sentimental songs around St. Patrick’s Day” (66). The assassination of John F. Kennedy brought the Irish together in mourning. In “Thousands are Sailing,” a reference to the death of John F. Kennedy is made, and the speaker comments “I supposed I must have cried” (42) after toasting to him. Clearly there is a feeling of loss for this promising man and a loss for the purity of the Irish culture.

Life today is very different for the Irish and Irish-Americans who currently reside in the United States. During the huge periods of immigration, the Irish felt as though they needed to assimilate into the United States culture. Today, Michelle Duffy feels as though the Irish can live their culture openly, without being persecuted for their Irish heritage. As Ireland, along with the rest of the world, is experiencing an economic slump, many Irish people still may choose to come to the United States to live and work and seek unknown opportunities. Some of the Dublin City University students have already made plans to travel to the United States after graduation, just to see what life is like here. Some may choose to further their education, while others may stay and live here. “Thousands are Sailing” portrays the United States as a country open to foreigners, a welcoming home away from home. The upbeat, rock music style of The Pogues is certainly different than the somber, almost mournful tone of the 18th century poem, “Lament of the Irish Emigrant,” but their messages are the same. Life is difficult in Ireland, and the promises of opportunities in the United States have brought many Irish over the oceans in hopes for a better life. Many Irish people fulfilled their dreams with newfound success here in the States, while others still are searching. For the gains they have made, they also realize the loss of their homeland and the loss of their culture.