

Grade level: 10-12

Lesson aim: To trace the influence of two famine anecdotes on Brendan Kennelly's poem "My Dark Fathers."

New York State Standard: Critical lens: Students will compare the treatment of the famine by two or more contemporary Irish poets.

Background. In the Introduction to his Selected Poems, Brendan Kennelly described the influence of two famine anecdotes on his poem "My Dark Fathers," a poem that describes the poet's relationship with history:

One day I attended a talk given by [Irish short story writer] Frank O'Connor about the famine that happened in Ireland in the nineteenth century and had such a harrowing effect on the Irish character. I was trying, at the time, to write a poem about that history which I had lived with since childhood. During his talk, O'Connor spoke of a traveller's (Mrs. Ansenath Nicholson's) description of a woman dancing on the Kerry shore:

This woman who danced before me, was more than fifty, and I don not believe that the daughter of Herodias herself was more gracefult in her movements, more beautiful in her complexion and symmetry, than was this dark-haired matron of the mountains of Kerry.

This image struck me immediately. The woman was the entire people, capable of spontaneous artistic expression: capable of it, that is, before the famine. But then came the terrible desolation. O'Connor made me aware of Peadar O'Laoghaire's Mo Sgéal Féin (Peter O'Leary's My Own Story) where there is the following description of the dead and dying:

You saw them every morning after the night out, stretched in rows, some moving and some very still, with no stir from them. Later people came and lifed those who no longer moved and heaved them into carts and carried them up to a place near Carrigastyra, where a big deep pit was open for them, and thrust them into the pit.

This is "the pit of doom" in my poem. There is a description of a man named Paddy bringing his wife Kate from the workhouse back to his hut:

Next day a neighbor came to the hut. He saw the two of them dead and his wife's feet clasped in Paddy's bosom as though he were trying to warm them. It would seem that he felt the death agony come on Kate and her legs grow cold. so he put them inside his own shirt to take the chill from them.

In the poem I identify this woman, dead from famine disease, her "perished feet nailed to her man's breastbone," with the woman comparable to the daughter of Herodias, dancing on the shore in Kerry. Perhaps the most frightening consequence of famine is described in George Petrie's collection of The Aneient Music of Ireland-the terrible, unbearable silence. To my mind this meant not only the silence that followed racial suffering akin to what Hitler inflicted on the Jews, but it meant that Ireland became the grave of song. I was witnessing the death of the dance:

This awful, unwonted silence which, during the famine and subsequent years, almost everywhere prvailed, struck more fearfully upon their

imaginations, as many Irish gentlemen informed me, and gave them a deeper feeling of the desolation with which the country had been visited, than any other circumstance which had forced itself upon their attention.

These images of the pit, the woman, the rows of the dead, the terrible silence, were in my mind after hearing O'Connor's talk. Shortly afterwards, I was at a wedding and a boy was asked to sing. He did so, but during the song he turned his back on the wedding party. In his averted figure I saw the woman who forgot the dance, the land that rejected its own singers (Selected Poems, ix-xi).

1. Read "My Dark Fathers." What mood does the poet create in the poem? Which words are particularly effective in creating that mood? Dark literally means "absence of light." What are some connotations of dark? What does Kennelly mean by "darkness" in his poem?

2. Kennelly says his dark fathers were "committed always to the night of wrong." Did they commit themselves or were they committed by others or by other factors? Is Kennelly poem his effort to right the wrong of the night of wrong?

3. Furze is a thorny wild plant that grows in the mountains in Ireland. It has a mustardy-yellow flower. The furze plant had multiple uses in the Irish countryside including: fences, fuel, fodder, manure, and roofs. A Kerry saying classifies soil according to what the produce: "gold under furze, silver under rushes and famine under heath (barren land); however, in the poem, the furze covered grave is associated with famine. A.T. Lucas, Furze. A Survey and History of its Uses in Ireland (1958), 186.

A spangle is a length of rope used to tie an animal's front and hind leg together to prevent it from wandering away. In what way are Kennelly's dark fathers spangled?

4. The expression "turning his face against the wall" mean that one has given up and awaits death. What brought the poet's "man" to that extreme? What is the poet's response?

HW: Compare Kennelly's poem with at least one of the following: Seamus Heaney, "At a Potato Digging," Donagh MacDonagh, "The Hungry Grass," or Richard Murphy, "Kylemore Castle." How does the famine figure in each poem? Is it the subject? Describe the poet's attitude toward the famine. How does the poet use figurative language, poetic devices and form to enhance meaning?