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MASTERARBEIT

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„Death in Children’s Literature on the Great Irish Famine:
Analysis of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-
McKenna, *Nory Ryan’s Song* by Patricia Reilly Giff, and
The Grave by James Heneghan“

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I confirm to have conceived and written this MA Thesis in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references, either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors have been truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

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HINWEIS

Diese MA Thesis hat nachgewiesen, dass die betreffende Kandidatin befähigt ist, wissenschaftliche Themen selbstständig sowie inhaltlich und methodisch vertretbar zu bearbeiten. Da die Korrekturen des Beurteilenden nicht eingetragen sind und das Gutachten nicht beiliegt, ist daher nicht erkenntlich mit welcher Note diese Arbeit abgeschlossen wurde. Das Spektrum reicht von sehr gut bis genügend. Die Habilitierten des Instituts für Anglistik und Amerikanistik bitten diesen Hinweis bei der Lektüre zu beachten.

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List of Abbreviations

ES = Electronic Source (as specified in the bibliography)

UHT = *Under the Hawthorn Tree*

NRS = *Nory Ryan's Song*

G = *The Grave*

Introduction

The theme of death in children's literature has experienced a dramatic change in its prominence throughout history. Up until the end of the seventeenth century, children and adults shared the same literature, and death was perceived as a normal and natural part of life, but by the end of the century the literature for children and for adults began to deviate (Butler 104-106). As child mortality rates were very high, the theme of death was a common subject in children's stories (Gibson and Zaidman 232). Further on, as child mortality rates have decreased, death has become a taboo, and it has only been very recently that the theme of death has appeared in children's books again (Rudman qtd. in Gibson and Zaidman 232). Nowadays, critics follow two discourses – some argue that death in children's literature should not be avoided as it is a natural part of life, others claim that the theme of death should not be given any space in children's books, as it does not belong in the world of children's literature and might cause psychological harm and violent behaviour.

This thesis will bridge the gap between children's literature on the one hand, and a topic which is seemingly incongruous with children's literature, dubiously known as the Great Irish Famine – the most horrible and crucial event in Irish history, during which over 1 million people died (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 7). The premise of this thesis is that if the children's Famine books are to educate children about the catastrophe accurately and faithfully, death cannot be omitted. A lot has been written about the Great Irish Famine in children's literature, but no research has focused on the presentation of death in these books. Therefore, this thesis will explore the theme of death in three children's novels on the Great Irish Famine, namely *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-McKenna (1990), *Nory Ryan's song* by Patricia Reilly Giff (2000) and *The Grave* by James Heneghan (2000), examining to what extent the theme of death is incorporated and 'softened' in these novels, what role death plays in them, and above all, to what extent the books are appropriate for children in relation to the way they present the theme of death.

The thesis will analyse the theme of death in the three selected contemporary novels from an interdisciplinary perspective, including a cultural, literary, as well as a psychoanalytic approach. Thus, not only will the thesis analyse the historical context of the novels, focusing on which historical facts are related in the presentation to the huge number of deaths during

the Irish Famine, and how they are presented, but it will also explore the way the authors of the novels refer to the concept of death, as well as how it is presented and discussed in the novels. Additionally, the thesis will examine theories related to the psychological process going on in an individual who experiences the loss of an emotionally important and beloved person, applying them to the three selected novels, and examining what impact this inner process of suffering loss has on the development of the individual characters, as well as on their decisions and behaviour.

In terms of literary thematology, the thesis will not only examine the theme of death itself, but also other themes that are inextricably linked to death in the novels, such as love, family, friendship, and also hunger, sickness, suffering and the struggle for survival. By examining all these issues, the thesis will attempt to determine in what way the selected novels are different or similar in their presentation of the theme of death, to what extent the theme plays a role in each, and whether this theme is presented in a way that would generally be considered suitable or acceptable for a children's audience. In addition, the thesis will examine the relationship between the extent to which death is presented in the novels, and the accurateness or conversely the distortion of historical events as portrayed in the books aforementioned.

As Butler points out, generally, children's literature has been discriminated and not considered worthy of investigation by most scholars (Butler 104). As a result, any examination and critical assessment of children's literature will be welcome. This thesis aims at bringing a new light into this discipline, by examining a very specific aspect considered a taboo in children's literature nowadays, and analysing three contemporary children's novels dealing with the most horrible and crucial event in the Irish history.

Part 1:

The Great Irish Famine, Death, and Children's Literature

1.1. The Great Irish Famine

The Great Irish Famine, also known as ‘The Great Hunger’, ‘The Great Starvation’, ‘The Bad Times’, ‘God’s Visitation’, ‘The Great Calamity’, ‘The Irish Holocaust’, or in Irish, ‘An Gorta Mór’ (the most commonly used, meaning ‘The Great Hunger’), ‘An Droch-Shaoghal’ or ‘Bliain an Ghorta’ (Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine* 1), has generally been considered the “defining event” in Irish history (Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine* 1, also see McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 284). As Klein (40) points out, “the Irish Famine of the 1840s [...] was not only the greatest social disaster of nineteenth-century Europe, but to this day proves the hardest challenge yet to the public forms of a collective national memory in Ireland”.

The Irish Famine was caused by a fungus, at that time as yet unknown fungal disease called *phytophthora infestans*, which resulted in the blighting of the potato crop (“Famine, the Great Irish”). The time span, over which the disaster occurred, varies from source to source. Because the potato blight did not spread equally over Ireland, attacking some parts of the land more than the others and disappearing from some parts sooner than from the others (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 7), it is very difficult, if not impossible, to set the final year of the famine. While some sources indicate that the potato blight lasted from 1845 until 1849 (“Famine, the Great Irish”), according to other sources, the Irish Famine was not over until 1851 (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 7) or even 1852 (Edwards and Williams vii).

Interestingly, this was not the first time that the potato crop failed in Ireland. Between 1800 and 1845, there had been sixteen food shortages caused by potato crop failures. These were, however, always regional and did not result in such high death-rates as did the potato blight of the 1840s (Powell 30).

As regards the potato crop failures of the 1840s, these were not restricted to Ireland only. The potato blight was first noticed in the USA in 1843, particularly in Philadelphia and New York. From there, it spread to the northeast and midwest of the USA, as well as to Canada (Bourke 12-21). In June 1845 the potato blight was observed in Belgium and from there, it quickly spread to other parts of Europe, such as France, the Netherlands, Switzerland or Germany, finally reaching Ireland in the late summer of 1845 (Turner 5; Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 11). However, nowhere did the potato blight have such disastrous consequences as in Ireland. This was due to the combination of two factors – the first one

being that Ireland experienced several successive potato crop failures, and the second factor being that nowhere else were people so dependent on potatoes as in Ireland (Turner 5-6) – about half of the population sustained life thanks to the potato crop (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 12). As Sir MacArthur (264) explains, three classes were absolutely dependent on potatoes – “occupiers of cabins with small holdings of from one to five acres”, “cottiers living on the land of farmers for whom they worked”, and “labourers who had no fixed employment and no land, living in hovels and hiring yearly a scrap of land from some farmer”. The reason why potatoes had become the main crop of sustenance in Ireland was simple – the potato crop, which had been brought to Europe from South America in the seventeenth century, was relatively easy to cultivate in its poor soil and damp climate. In addition to this, “[one] acre of potatoes could feed a family of four for one year”, and consequently, potatoes became the key crop for the subsistence diet of the poor Irish people (Quinn 74). As McHugh (392) points out, meat was usually eaten only at Christmas or Easter.

The potato blight came in several waves, starting in the late summer of 1845 (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 11-14). There were several theories trying to explain the emergence of this fungal disease – some people blamed the weather (fog, too much rain, too much heat, lack of sunshine, etc.), others believed that the potatoes failed because of worms and other insects (Bourke 15; ES 1). The way the potatoes were cultivated has often been seen as a contributing factor to the failure of the crop. As McHugh (394) explains, “[p]otatoes were planted year after year in the same field, with no change of seed, and thus crops and land were both weakened”. However, despite the bad methods of cultivation, the potatoes grew so well that they had become abundant in the pre-famine years. The crop flourished so much that people did not know what to do with their potatoes – they filled gaps in fences with them, burned them, or brought them to the market where most of them were left unsold. Because of this waste, some people believe even today that the potato blight came as a punishment from God (McHugh 395). Interestingly, the true cause of the blight was discovered by an amateur mycologist Abbé Edouard van den Hecke already at the time of its appearance. Van den Hecke claimed that the crop failure was caused by a fungus. However, his theory was not confirmed by others and other explanations were preferred (Bourke 15).

The first appearance of the blight on the fields was reported identically in all affected parts of Ireland – “the heavy smell of decay[,] [...] brown spots spreading on the leaves, blackened stalks slowly leaning over, the potato-pits ominously sagging”. People awoke in the morning, finding their fields “black as soot [,] [...] [seeing] a brown swath of decay spreading rapidly over a whole field and from field to field”. People tried everything they could think of to fight the blight – they cut off the blackened stalks to prevent spreading of the disease, or they walked through the fields and sprinkled them with holy water, but nothing helped (McHugh 396). The disease was spreading quickly, first appearing in the north Leinster area and rapidly reaching all the other parts of Ireland (ES 1).

As a result, hunger took over in the country. People ate everything that could be eaten, even the blighted potatoes were consumed – usually grated and made into a ‘boxty’ bread. From the grain crops, oats was most sought after. However, not every family was lucky enough to grow oats, and even if they did, most of it had to be sold for the rent. Therefore, besides searching woods for wild fruits and nuts, people were forced to turn to eating ‘gifts’ of nature, which they would never have eaten before, such as roots of ferns or dandelions, or leaves and barks of certain kinds of trees. However, instead of helping them to survive, the consumption of wild berries and other plants, such as for example nettles, often caused disease or even death. As regards the consumption of meat and other products of animals, such as eggs or milk, not everyone was lucky enough to breed some livestock. Those who did were usually forced to slaughter their animals either for food or because they had nothing to feed them. In the Famine years, bleeding cattle was a very common practice, as a very nourishing food could be made from the blood (McHugh 398-400). As McHugh (400) explains,

the blood-letter would cut a vein in the neck, would extract the blood and stop the bleeding by putting a pin through the skin across the incision in the vein and would secure it in position by lapping a few hairs from the animal’s tail around it. The blood [...] would be salted and fried, or boiled with milk, meal, vegetables or herbs, or made into such food as ‘relish cakes’, which were obtained by mixing and baking it with mushrooms and cabbage.

Although this practise was usually exercised by skilled men, this was not always the case and sometimes the animals died from unskilled or excessive bleeding. In the coastal areas, people were not so dependent on potatoes because they could get enough food from the sea. However, in the famine years, even the sea could not provide people with enough food

– crowds of people were travelling from inland, walking the coasts, hoping to fish some flukes in the shallow waters, or searching for seaweeds and shell-fish. Unfortunately, the migrants often lacked knowledge of how to eat or prepare these and consequently got sick. Besides the sea, people also fished in lakes and rivers, but in many cases the fishing rights belonged to the English landlords, who punished the illegal hunters and imprisoned them (McHugh 401). Because of the general lack of knowledge about the difficult situation, Irish people were often accused of being stupid or lazy, not making use of their “maritime wealth”. But the illegal aspect of fishing was not the only obstacle to getting something to eat from the rivers and lakes. Another reason why people did not fish was that they had no means to do so. The fishermen were often forced to sell their boats and other fishing gear to buy food and pay the rent (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 294). In addition to fishing, people were hunting and eating any kinds of animals, such as horses, donkeys, dogs, cats, frogs, rabbits, hedgehogs, rats, mice, crows, sea-birds, etc. They even climbed trees and cliffs to look for eggs (McHugh 401-402; Fegan 13).

In 1846, the situation was even worse as the blight spread more than the year before, and this culminated in the winter of 1846-1847, which presented particularly harsh times for the Irish people. Many of them did not have enough turf to keep fire, nor did they have enough clothes to keep themselves warm, and this resulted in high rates of disease and death (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 12; Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine* 75). Although the blight was not as far spread and severe in 1847 as in 1846, there was a lack of seeds to plant because of the calamities of the previous two years, and consequently, there was a lack of potatoes again (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 13). When combined with the harsh winter, the situation resulted in a calamity, which has been referred to as the most severe one in the history of Ireland. The winter of 1847 was characterised by “snow piled upon corpses laying abandoned by the roadside” (Bryan 50). As a consequence, the year 1847 has been referred to as the ‘Black ‘47’ (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 17).

In 1848 and 1849 the potato blight destroyed the potato crops again, whereby it struck as aggressively in 1848 as in 1846 (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 14).

Interestingly, in the course of the time, dying from disease became more frequent than dying from starvation as people were extremely weakened, and disease spread easily and rapidly among them (Bryan 50). The typical diseases in the famine years were typhus, relapsing fever, dysentery, scurvy and famine dropsy (Sir MacArthur 265).

Typhus and relapsing fever (also known under the terms 'the short fever', 'gastric fever' or 'gastro-purpuric fever') were known under the common term 'famine fever'. Whereas the former had not been unknown in the pre-famine years, causing problems particularly in congested and poor parts of the country, the latter was new, and doctors did not recognise it when it first appeared during the famine. The relapsing fever was spreading more quickly and easily than typhus, and the main characteristic of the disease was bleeding from the nose and other sites. In general, the intensity of the famine fever was dependent on the severity of the famine itself. People struggling for survival did not care about their personal cleanliness, and even if they had done, they would not have had the strength to fetch water into their cabins and to clean their clothes. As a result, clothes that they managed to sell to other people were an ideal site for lice to be carried over from one person to another, and these small insects carried with them the organisms of the disease. Consequently, the fever spread extremely easily. Another way for lice to spread was through the crowding together. People crowded into any cabin where there was fire or food to be shared. Where there was no food left, people were leaving their houses, taking to the roads and carrying the fever with them. Therefore, the disease has often been referred to as the 'road-fever'. The upper and more well-off classes knew very well that the starving people were carriers of vermin, and therefore, they avoided the latter not to catch typhus or the relapsing fever. However, this was not the only way for typhus to be carried over from one person to another. Another way to catch the disease was by faecal dust, and interestingly, people who got the disease this way did not pose any danger to uninfected persons (Sir MacArthur 271-280).

As regards the other famine diseases, their presence has been associated with food – dysentery was generally ascribed to bad food, scurvy to the lack of food (Sir MacArthur 284-288), and the famine dropsy to "to the lack of certain food elements which are necessary to maintain the balance of fluids in the body tissues" (Sir MacArthur 289).

As if the famine diseases were not enough, cholera broke out in December 1848. Though it had not been associated with the famine, the epidemic, spreading by contaminated water, was very severe, resulting in high mortality rates, especially in towns such as Drogheda, Galway, Belfast, Limerick, etc. (Sir MacArthur 306-307).

In certain areas there were no facilities for treatment of the sick and dying people, and even if there was a doctor, people often died awaiting him. Therefore, people in these

districts often relied on the help of herbalists. As regards hospitals, even if there were any, they were generally extremely overcrowded. Many people avoided these places as they were a “synonym” of suffering and death, and they better chose to die among their relatives or alone on the roads (McHugh 414-415). Consequently, dead bodies were lying everywhere – along the roads, in the fields, in the deserted houses - and gradually, fear of getting a disease from the dead started to spread among people. As a result, the traditional burial ceremonies were halted, cabins containing dead bodies were pulled down and set on fire, or the corpses were just left unburied (Sir MacArthur 305-309). The relatives of the dead often denied that the deceased had belonged to their family for fear of having to bury him/her and catching the fever. Corpses were left unburied as the graveyards were overcrowded and people just did not have the strength to bury them. In cases where burials took place, traditional coffins were rarely used as there was a lack of wood. For wooden coffins, people used all kinds of wood (from dressers to tables and boats), or they just wrapped the corpses in sheets, sacking, straw mats, or anything they could find. Sometimes, the corpses were carried to the graveyard in ordinary wooden coffins, taken out of them, buried, and the coffins were left there for other people to use. Near hospitals and poorhouses, huge pits emerged, having the capacity of about fifty bodies (McHugh 419-424).

Because many people died without having been to a hospital, it is impossible to tell how many people died during the famine years. As Sir MacArthur (312) points out, “there is no doubt that the deaths were far in excess of those stated in the official census, and probably reached some figure well above 500,000”.

The Irish Famine took place in an age witnessing a great expansion and thriving of British economy (Edwards and Williams viii), but also in an age characterised by a “highly charged political atmosphere” in Britain and Ireland (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 7). On 1 January 1801 the Act of Union was passed, uniting England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. With this act, Ireland lost its parliament in Dublin and instead sent 100 Irish representatives to the parliament in London. Although over 80 % of the Irish population were Catholics, the Anglican Church was officially recognised as the state church. As a result, not only the political and economic, but also the religious issues fell under the control of Britain (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 7-8), and “Ireland’s identity as

a separate cultural and political entity [got] submerged within the new United Kingdom” (Williams 26).

Interestingly, Ireland’s desire for political independence was overshadowed by that for a religious one. In 1829 a peaceful campaign was led by the Catholic lawyer Daniel O’Connell, resulting in Catholic representatives being allowed to sit in the Westminster parliament. Thanks to this success, O’Connell was termed ‘the Liberator’. Because Protestantism was the key element of ‘Britishness’, and because over 80% of the Irish population were Catholics, Ireland was distorting the image of Protestant Britain as a strong, imperial nation which had absolute power over Ireland. As a result, in the 1820s a reformation started in Ireland, aiming at converting Irish Catholics to Protestants (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 7-9). The means by which this was to be done was primarily through education – Protestant schools were being established, using the Protestant Bible as “the main tool of instruction”, and in 1831 the Board of Education in Ireland was set up (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 9). The result of the British intervention into the Irish educational system was that Irish language and history were stopped being taught; instead, Irish children learned about British history, poetry, etc. in English. Consequently, the use of the Irish language was declining, and by the end of the nineteenth century, English became the first language not only of the educated classes, but also of the poor (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 9).

The negative attitude in Britain to Catholicism and the Irish people was so strong that “some evangelical Protestants viewed the Famine through providentialist eyes, seeing it as a judgement of God on a backward and superstitious people” (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 8). Indeed, the general opinion of Irish people was based on stereotypes created by the British – that the Irish people were illiterate peasants (Klein 74), drunkards and unreliable storytellers, “unpredictable, effeminate, and childlike in their passionate nature” (Powell 6), barbarous, wild, savage and aggressive creatures (Kelsall 3) that were “suited [...] to disguise and concealment” (Brown 2), as well as people who were “superstitious, feckless, improvident [...], excitable, subservient to priests and demagogues [...], half-civilized, unstable, and unprepared to govern their own affairs”. In contrast to this, the British represented “self-control, reason, love for order and freedom, respect for the law, sobriety, and a firm dislike for enthusiasm or emotionalism” (de Nie 174). Thus, there was the distinction between Paddy (the Irish Catholic peasant of Celtic origins) and John Bull (the

Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle-class man) on the one hand (de Nie 174), and on the other hand, between Ireland, also called Hibernia, represented as a 'passive' and 'helpless' woman in need of Britain's protection (Walter 84-86), and Britain, also called Britannia – the strong warrior (Innes 13; de Nie 175). In other words, Ireland was a synonym of 'otherness' (Walter 86). As de Nie explains, the construction and maintenance of these stereotypes were crucial for the justification of Britain's construction of the image of Ireland as Britain's "sick sister, perennially racked by illness or madness, and in need of healing and recuperation. [...] Dr John Bull [was] charged with ministering to his sick sibling with measures of reform or sometimes coercion, and, even more importantly, with guiding the Irish to recovery by his moral and political example". At the core of this interpretation was the idea that the "illness was a product of [...] Irishness" (de Nie 175). The main vehicle by which the 'curing' was to be done was education – the moral and political change was supposed to come through the process of anglicanisation.

In addition to this, Britain, as Ireland's strong sister and protector, was also supposed to help the latter during the Famine. However, this was done with great reluctance and, as a consequence of the construction and maintenance of the Irish stereotypes by British politicians, writers and comic artists, it was believed that the Irish were responsible for the catastrophe themselves and, therefore, were not to expect any help from outside (de Nie 174-179; Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 20). Because of the reluctant attitude of the British government, the Irish Famine has often been compared to the Holocaust or genocide, though, as Kelleher (3) points out, such analogies might be too simplistic. O'Connor (133) even argues that "Famine is a useful word when you do not wish to use words like 'genocide' or 'extermination'".

As Pascual (264) points out, while Irish people were dying of hunger and the various diseases, suffering from "[h]unger oedema, swelling limbs, distended jaws [and] [growing] hair on the face", Ireland did not stop exporting food and other goods, but neither did it stop importing grain (Pascual 264). As Kinealy (*A Death-Dealing Famine* 5) explains, "on the eve of the Famine [,] [Ireland] was exporting sufficient corn to England to feed 2 million people, thereby earning [...] the title of 'the granary of Britain'". It has been argued that the problem did not lie in the lack of food, but rather in its bad distribution (ES 2). Pascual further argues that the Famine was a great business for Britain, as is always any catastrophe for the

donator, and that “[t]he entire famine was unnatural, [...] due not to excusable mismanagement but to scandalous indifference to human life” (Pascual 264).

The bad situation of Irish peasants was worsened by the antiquated landholding system. Most of the land in Ireland was owned by usually Protestant landlords living in England (therefore also called ‘absentee landlords’). These rented small plots of their land to tenant farmers who cultivated the land. Because most of the time the landlords were absent, they hired agents, so called ‘middlemen’, who collected the rent for them from the peasants (Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine* 34). As Pascual (264) explains, the rent was generally so high that the small farmers were forced to sell the crops they grew, and consequently, there was not much food left to feed their own families. McHugh (428) describes the situation as follows:

The general impression of the landlord is bad. His ‘rent-warners’ or spies were always on the alert for any excuse to raise the rent, so that the meat would be hastily hidden if one of them approached the house while a family was enjoying this rarity. Seasonal migration, the sale of crops, livestock, kelp or knitted goods might provide enough money to pay the rent, but claims for duty work or for ‘presents’ would add another load to the bent back of the peasant farmer. *Cíos an tailimh nó biadh an leinbh* (‘the rent or the child’s food’); the old saying conveys that sense of desperation with which so many laboured and clung to the land, their one hope of survival.

Those tenants who could not pay the rent were simply evicted and sent to a poorhouse, and their cabins were pulled down (McHugh 429-430; Quinn 75).

In 1838 the British parliament passed the Irish Poor Law, introducing a system of poor relief into the whole Ireland. This relief was based on an ‘indoor’ help— so called workhouses or poorhouses – providing housing for the destitute in exchange for work (ES 3). As Kinealy (*The Stricken Land* 12-13) explains, the working conditions were very hard, whereby men, as well as women and children, had to work twelve hours a day, usually in very cold weather and for very low wages. The work for men usually consisted in braking stones (O’Neill 249) and building roads that were often said to “[lead] to nowhere and [that] performed no useful function” (Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine* 76), whereas knitting, sewing, spinning, cleaning or helping the sick was in the charge of women. However, in some places women had to break stones as well (O’Neill 249; ES 5). As already pointed out, the conditions in the workhouses were extremely harsh – smoking, drinking alcohol or playing cards was prohibited, visits were usually allowed only once a week, and food was normally provided only twice a day. Because the workhouses were extremely overcrowded, the separation of

sexes was impossible, and there was no way to inhibit sex in these places. As a result, the workhouses were often regarded as immoral places posing danger especially for girls and women. In many cases, schools were built near the workhouses, but the level of education was usually very low (O'Neill 249-251). Because of the prison-like atmosphere, and because a workhouse was a "synonym" of disease, suffering, death and segregation from family, these places were much hated and avoided, and even if people got there, many of them committed crimes deliberately to be moved to an ordinary jail (O'Neill 249-251; Quinn 74).

Because indoor relief proved to be totally ineffective, at the beginning of 1847 the Irish Poor Law was extended under the Irish Poor Law Extension Act, providing also an 'outdoor' help (ES 4). This kind of relief consisted in the establishment of soup kitchens, where people were given soup and bread for free. Although the nutritional value of the meals provided was very low, this kind of help proved to be very effective, and the death rates declined in 1847 (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 13). In addition to providing food in the soup kitchens, Indian corn, also known as 'yellow Indian', 'yellow buck' or 'India buck', was being distributed. The Indian meal was not only very cheap, but also highly nutritive. However, in order to save and not to take life, it had to be cooked sufficiently – many people did not do that and consequently died. As a result, while some people praise the Indian meal very highly, others have cursed it (McHugh 407).

As pointed out, the outdoor relief proved to be very effective and saved many lives. However, it was to be provided only to sick and disabled people, or to widows with two or more children. "Able-bodied" people got an outdoor help only if the workhouses were full (ES 3). In addition to this, the relief of the extended Poor Law was denied to anyone who owned more than one quarter of an acre of land. As a result, if these people wanted to get help, they were forced to surrender their land (Quinn 75). This part of the extended act was called Gregory Clause, and the practice of land-clearing was known under the term "Gregoryism" (ES 4; Quinn 75).

As already mentioned, religion was the key aspect in gaining control over Ireland. As a result, " [h]unger was used to win converts " – a practice known as 'souperism' (Quinn 74). The distribution of food became to be associated with proselytising, whereby hunger forced many people to convert to Protestantism. Those who did not get persuaded looked at the converts with scorn and disdain, calling them 'souters', 'jumpers' or 'turners', and even

today many Irish people think of the distribution of food with a great bitterness (McHugh 410-411).

As Kinealy points out, although the new system of relief proved to be very effective, successful, and also more economical to operate than the system of workhouses, in August 1847 the soup kitchens were closed because “the government feared creating a culture of dependency more than it feared the consequences of hunger”. Kinealy further stresses that “the British government did possess the administrative and logical ability to feed the poor of Ireland, but ideological and political constraints meant that regardless of its success, it was never meant to be other than a stop-gap measure” (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 13).

In general, the British government has been criticised for its non-intervention (also referred to as the policy of ‘laissez-faire’) (Quinn 74) and for steps it either did take and should not have taken, or for steps it did not take but should have taken.

First of all, it has been argued that the British government should have prevented the export of grain from Ireland, especially during the harsh winter of 1846-47.

Secondly, when the government started to import the Indian corn, it has been argued that this was not distributed properly, although the Irish net of communications, including roads, was quite well developed. Therefore, there was no real obstacle in distributing food to all regions.

Thirdly, the British government has been criticised for making the relief too restrictive and for not providing help to all people in need, as well as for closing the soup kitchens after such a short time. This was, as already suggested, not to make Ireland dependent on Britain and to keep all the expenses as far down as possible.

Another point of criticism was the low wages for the relief works, as well as the fact that the British government did not help people in any way to get out of the country. It has been argued that the government could have provided free passages to the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia and other destinations (McNamara, *The Potato Eaters* 149; ES 2). Because it did not do so, people either borrowed money for the passage tickets, or they earned money through the relief works, or just surrendered their land (McHugh 431).

Finally, it has been argued that the British government could have prevented the mass evictions, which resulted in around 500,000 people being driven out of their homes (ES 2).

In spite of all that the British government could (should) have done differently, the British considered themselves to be very charitable and could not understand the Irish ingratitude (de Nie 179).

In 1847 a revolution broke out in France, and as it was quite a peaceful and nonviolent movement, the Irish took it as their ideal for their own revolution. The anti-English feeling was spreading very quickly among the Irish people, particularly among the peasantry, and this negative attitude resulted in the formation of Irish nationalist groups and movements such as Young Ireland, the Fenian Brotherhood or the Land League (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 10-19; ES 6).

In conclusion, the Great Irish Famine has had a great impact on the Irish nation, not only psychologically (causing a great trauma to the whole nation), but also politically (resulting in the formation of several nationalist groups), demographically (over 1 million people died and more than 1.5 million emigrated, and it was not until the 1970s that the Irish population started to grow) and linguistically (Kinealy, *The Stricken Land* 7-22; Klein 41). As Klein (41) explains, most speakers of the Irish language were peasants, and because this was a group that suffered most during the Famine, either dying or leaving the country, Ireland experienced a sharp decline in the use of the Irish language.

Because of all these aspects of its impact, the Great Irish Famine caused a “disoriented rupture in [Irish] cultural continuity” (Tuathaigh 47). Some scholars even argue that it was surrounded by a ‘silence’ from the 1930s to the 1970s (Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine* 1), either because, as McNamara suggests, Irish people felt a great shame for being thought of as victims of the massive calamity, or because they felt guilty for being its survivors, or both (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 284). She claims that during the period of the ‘silence’, writers avoided the topic of the Great Irish Famine, and that it was not sooner than in 1962 that the ‘silence’ was broken by Cecil Woodham-Smith and her book *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 285). Although it will be shown in the next chapter that this claim is not quite true, it *is* true that the number of writers dealing with the topic of the Great Irish Famine has been increasing since the 1970s and that it has become a “painful inspiration” for writers in Ireland and elsewhere (Fegan 2).

1.2. The Great Irish Famine in Children's Literature

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Great Irish Famine has been a great inspiration in the field of literature. Kelleher (5) stresses the importance of famine narratives, as they “encourage their readers to imagine what the experience of famine may have been like, exposing the gaps left by the historical record and offering insights into the possible as well as the known”. However, as Kelleher points out, the most significant aspect of the famine narratives is the ‘individuation’ of the calamity, that is, presenting the experience and suffering of Irish people through the experience and suffering of one single individual or several individuals (Kelleher 5-6).

As already pointed out, some scholars, such as McNamara, argue that until recently, the topic of the Great Irish Famine had been surrounded by ‘silence’, whereby the happenings of the 1840s were not much talked nor written about, and that it was not until the 1970s, and even more remarkably, the middle of the 1990s (when the 150th anniversary of the Famine was being commemorated), that the topic received considerable attention, not only among scholars, but also in the media and literature (McNamara, *The Potato Eaters* 150). However, this claim is not quite true as quite a lot of novels and stories on the Great Irish Famine were written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, *Recollecting Hunger: An Anthology. Cultural Memories of the Great Famine in Irish and British Fiction, 1847-1920* by Corporaal, Cusack and Janssen, published in 2012, brings together selections of novels and stories on the Great Irish Famine written between 1847 and 1920. Another novel published during the period of the alleged ‘silence’ is Liam O’Flaherty’s well-known *Famine*, published in 1937. In spite of this, however, it can be argued that the claim of the ‘silence’ could be true for the famine literature for children, where the first book for young readers – *The Search of Mary Katherine Mulloy* by Carole Bolton – appeared in 1974 (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 284).

But to briefly discuss the history of children’s literature in general first, Townsend (4) explains that “the prehistory of children’s literature has two branches: the material that was intended specially for children or young people but was not story, and the material that was story but was not meant specially for children”. In other other words, stories were written for adults, whereas books aimed for children comprised schoolbooks and books teaching morals and manners (Townsend 5). It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century

that literature for children began to flourish. This was not only because the period was characterised as “a generally energetic and enterprising time”, but also because the number of literate people was increasing considerably, and this development was reflected in the increasing number of published books not only for adults, but also for children (Townsend 36). However, it has only recently been that children’s literature got such a high status that the literature for adults received a long time ago already, and that it attracted the attention of academic scholars and started to be taught at universities (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 283). As McNamara (284) points out, children’s literature has been very important for shaping the young reader’s personality, as “[c]hildren are extremely impressionable, and what they read has an impact on the way they view the world”.

Nowadays, one of the most favourite topics in children’s literature is historical fiction, whereby through historical narratives, children get the opportunity to learn what it was like to live in the past through identification with the protagonists of these narratives – the young readers’ connection with the past of their nation and culture helps to create their sense of national identity. Interestingly, until the 1970s, writers of children’s historical novels seemed to be more interested in historical events such as the Holocaust or slavery than in the topic of the Irish Famine, which was avoided for a long time. As already pointed out, it was not until 1974 that this ‘silence’ in children’s literature on the Irish Famine was broken (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 284).

However, writing children’s novels on the Great Irish Famine has proved to be a difficult task as the topic does not leave much space for the typical “ingredients” of children’s books (Keenan 113), such as “humour and a light touch”, or the creation of a “complete but very different world” (ES 7). On the contrary, the children’s novels on the Great Irish Famine present a world that is too real, too serious, too full of images of suffering and death – a world that really existed and that nowadays presents the past of the Irish nation. And this might be the reason why, as McNamara (*The Potato Eaters* 150) says, the Irish Famine has not attracted as many writers of children’s books as other topics have done.

Although writing a children’s book on such a serious and challenging topic has been a difficult task, the importance of these books is very high as they “ignite a historical consciousness and provide an ideal way to help children learn about the most dominant cultural and societal event in Irish history” (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 295). Consequently, these narratives help children to construct a stronger sense of national

identity and 'Irishness' (McNamara, *The Potato Eaters* 164). In addition to this, because, as McNamara (149) explains, "[n]o other Western country has been so defined, so culturally impacted, and so radically changed from one 'food centric' event: the Great Irish Famine", and because consequently, food has become the "single most powerful signifier of Irish identity", the books on the Great Irish Famine not only have an impact on children's understanding of the poverty and lack of food in Africa and other parts of the world nowadays (McNamara, *The Potato Eaters* 164), but also, it might be argued, they have a significant effect on children's appreciation of food. Consequently, the narratives shape the way children perceive the world, and play an important role in the formation of their principles and values (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 293).

There are significant differences between novels on the Great Irish Famine that are aimed for children and those aimed for adult readers. Keenan (116) explains that while religion plays a crucial role in the "traditional" Famine literature for adults, this motif is almost completely avoided in the narratives for children. As she argues, the tension between Protestants and Catholics, as well as the practise of 'souperism', is left out completely, though subtle references to proselytising might be found. McNamara (*The Potato Eaters* 163) adds that in spite of such references, which usually occur once in the narratives and do not appear again, "[t]he characters are not ostracized or made to feel blameworthy in any way". McNamara (*The Potato Eaters* 162-163) further explains that even if the child protagonists are warned by other characters against proselytisers, or even if they are called 'souters' for seeking Protestant help in the form of a soup, there is no reference to the practice of taking food in exchange for converting to Protestantism.

Another main difference between the children's novels on the Irish Famine and those for adults is that in the latter characters are presented as either passive victims, or as active rebels fighting against the British government and its politics. In contrast to this, the protagonists of the children's novels are presented as strong, intelligent and courageous characters with a strong will to survive and to create a better world in which they would live a happier life (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 293). McNamara (*The Potato Eaters* 158) further argues that the typical character traits of the child protagonists, such as for example the capability to love, or to be gallant and loyal to each other, might be interpreted as typically Irish and thus "represent 'Irishness' to readers".

By replacing the passive victims with active characters determined to survive, the children's novels challenge the popular misconceptions, such as for example that the Irish people did not fish in the lakes, streams and in the sea because they were just too lazy, providing accurate historical information interwoven into the narrative. This way, children also learn about the practise of bleeding cows, or about eating any kind of animals that crossed one's way, such as dogs or rats, as well as any kind of plants that were at least a bit edible (McNamara, *The Potato Eaters* 152-161). As McNamara (*The Potato Eaters* 153) says, "[t]he depiction of lips green from eating grass and other weeds is a powerful image in Famine folklore and children's literature".

Another main feature of children's novels on the Irish Famine besides the quest for survival is the "initiation into adulthood" (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 292). This is usually (though not always) manifested by the protagonist's emigration from Ireland. However, it has to be pointed out that the characters develop throughout the whole story, from the very beginning until the very end, and that their personal development is shaped by what they experience and get through on their journey of survival.

Another common feature of these stories is that they open up with a description of the horrible stench of rotting potatoes, and with the subsequent effort of the poor peasants to save as many crops as possible. Typically, the authors provide an accurate depiction of the hard situation being worsened by the merciless landlords evicting people from their houses, burning the cabins or pulling them down. In addition to this, the young readers learn that the Irish corn was being exported to England while the Irish people had nothing to eat.

And last but not least, a common feature of the children's stories on the Irish Famine is the omnipresence of death (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 292-293). Even though one is dealing with literature for children here, the topic relates to the most disastrous event in the Irish history, where over 1 million people died. As a result, if these books are to educate children about the catastrophe, they have to provide accurate historical information, not leaving 'death' out. In the end, as McNamara (*It was a Life-Changing Book* 292) points out, "[t]hese are not cheery tales", as they are full of disease, hardship and suffering, and because death cannot be avoided in the narratives, it has been a challenging task to incorporate the concept into them in such a way that they could still be regarded as appropriate stories for children.

1.3. Death in Children's Literature

As Skelton (213) points out, “[o]ne of the central tasks of literature is to impose a structure on life and death, giving meaning to both”. Because death is an inevitable destiny of all people, it has always played a crucial role in the way they have perceived the world, and it has always “permeated [their] thoughts at all levels” (Skelton 213). However, as Skelton (211-214) stresses, the meaning of death and how it has been understood has been changing throughout history, and these different meanings have been reflected in literature. It is also worth pointing out that death has been perceived differently not only at different times, but also by different cultures. In this context, one could talk about the culture of children and that of adults.

As Butler (104-105) explains, up until the end of the seventeenth century, children and adults shared the same literature, and what there was to know about death, children learned from this common literature, including folk tales, ballads, legends and Bible stories. At that time, people believed in life after death and perceived death as a normal and natural part of life, and even children “treat[ed] death quite matter-of-factly” (Butler 106).

At the end of the century, the literature for adults and that for children began to separate. At that time, there were extremely high infant and child mortality rates (Gibson and Zaidman 232), and the Puritans began to publish books presenting death as something to be feared (Kissova 59), warning children against “disobey[ing] moral ‘laws’ and reform[ing] too late” (Butler 104), hoping that in this way they would save their souls from damnation. From the Puritan point of view, all children were originally born sinful, and it was only through religious education that they could be saved. The books published by the Puritans contained deathbed scenes portraying dying children who were physically weak, but spiritually very strong, having found their way to God (Pasulka 175-177). As Pasulka (177) puts it, “the necessity of breaking the child’s will in order to foster God’s will was the primary concern of Puritan religious education”.

The first book which aimed at religious education in this way and where the trope of the child death first appeared as a “repetitive trope” was James Janeway’s *A Token for Children* (1671) (Pasulka 173), of which the rest of the title reads *An Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (Gibson and Zaidman 232). In 1700 an American version of this English book with new stories

appeared, namely Cotton Mather's *A Token for the Children of New England* (Pasulka 175; Gibson and Zaidman 232). As Pasulka (175) argues, "the stories of pious, dying children were a powerful tool for accomplishing the necessary task of breaking a child's will. [Mather] was a staunch advocate of using both Janeway's British text and his own abridged version as primary texts in the education of children". Consequently, throughout the eighteenth, and even more prominently the nineteenth century, the trope of the dying child became "a major literary motif [...] of [the] popular culture" (Pasulka 174). Sánchez-Eppler (101) argues that "[t]he power that adheres in the figure of the dying child may be used to inforce a wide array of social issues", teaching the child readers "temperance, abolition, charity, chastity, and most of all piety", all this "underscored by the death of a child".

Because the child mortality rates were very high and death was omnipresent, nothing related to death was a taboo, and the texts for children tended to be quite morbid. However, though the dying child heroes suffered greatly, in their last moments they felt happiness, and this was to give religious lessons to the young readers (Pasulka 177-180). Besides the Puritan literature, the texts of the eighteenth century featuring the death of a child were focused on the parents' grief, and the child's perception of death was more or less missing (Kissova 59).

In contrast to the presentations of death in children's literature as described above, in the Victorian era (1837-1901) (ES 8) the approach to death and its effect on the reader could be described as "sentimental" (Butler 115; see also Kissova 59). The most famous examples of such texts are novels by Charles Dickens, stories by Hans Christian Andersen, such as *The Little Match Girl*, or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Butler 115; Kissova 59). As Butler (115-116) points out, "[o]ften, in the sentimental literature, the child does not die for his own sins but for the adultery of adults – his parents – and the trend here is found in adult literature as well".

Comparing the trends in children's literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century, Pasulka (192) concludes that

[t]he children of Janeway's book displayed bravery and fortitude through their illnesses and when facing death. These traits are replicated in the characters of the nineteenth-century narratives. In each century, the children are held up as models of virtue and examples of religious faith. One important difference, however, is that the earlier versions of the stories were represented as non-fiction, whereas Beecher-Stowe's [...] and Charles Dickens' [characters] are fictional characters.

She further explains that “[t]his shift represents a change in cultural attitudes toward fiction. As the nineteenth century progressed, fiction became an accepted venue for moral themes”.

As the child mortality rates declined, death ceased to be one of the major motifs in the narratives for children, and it became part of a larger context, being rather used as a plot device. In these texts, death was not presented any more as something that inevitably occurs during childhood, but rather as something that *might* possibly occur. In contrast to the death of child characters, which has been on the wane in children’s literature, the death of adults continues to play its role in the narratives, often taking the form of the death of the protagonists’ parents whose death causes that their children find themselves in difficult or dangerous situations and are forced to set off for an adventurous journey (Gibson and Zaidman 232; Kissova 59). A famous example of this is the story of Bambi in *Bambi, a Life in the Woods* (1923) by Felix Salten, in which the mother of Bambi dies and the young roe deer has to take care of himself, finding himself in many precarious situations throughout the novel (ES 9).

Gibson and Zaidman (232) point out that as the child mortality rates decreased and as death moved from homes to hospitals, death in children’s literature has been treated much more subtly than in the centuries and even decades ago, until it almost entirely disappeared so that it seems that “it became more comfortable to keep death sanitary if not invisible and never to say the word”. By avoiding the topic of death, it was (and sometimes still is) mistakenly believed that children were in a way being protected, and that this was done “in [their] best interests” (Corr 340). Masha Rudman even argues that “until very recently, books dealing realistically with the topic of death were almost in the same category as pornography” (qtd. in Gibson and Zaidman 232).

However, most critics nowadays argue that ignoring death in children’s literature is ‘unhealthy’ and that it is necessary to explain death to children and not to pretend that it does not exist. As Gibson and Zaidman explain, it was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s that death started to be discussed with children openly and honestly (Gibson and Zaidman 232), and Corr (338) adds that in the 1980s and 1990s the literature for children addressing “issues related to death, dying and/or bereavement” even started to flourish.

However, as Butler points out, too much frankness is inappropriate as well, and one has to find the golden mean as to how to discuss death with children. She argues that many contemporary texts for children, such as for example *Life and Death* (1970) by Herbert S. Zim

and Sonia Bleeker (ES 10), who explain death to children from an almost scientific point of view, have a lack of cordiality and “tend to be slight or frighteningly inhumane and impersonal” (Butler 111). Sheila R. Cole (qtd. in Butler 112) comments on the inappropriateness of such books as follows:

All of these stories were written with a didactic purpose: to give a child a way of looking at death and living with the knowledge of it [...] [,]presenting death as just another natural process. But to most adults in our culture, death is more than just another natural process. It is an occasion surrounded with mystery and deep emotions. Presenting it to a child as just another change we go through is less than candid. Adults often present a prettier reality to children than actually exists. But to give easy answers to a child’s questions about death is to deny reality and to diminish both life and death and, ultimately, to turn our children from our counsel.

In contrast to the impersonal approach discussed above stand books which deal with death in too soft a way, misleading children and giving them a wrong idea about the nature of death. Corr (345) cites Stull’s *My Turtle Died Today* (1964), where children are told that first one has to live before he/she dies, giving them the impression that children do not die because they are too young.

The golden mean to discuss death with children can be found in one of the most popular children’s novels dealing with death, namely *Charlotte’s Web* (1952) by E. B. White (Matthews 89; ES 11). In her novel, White approaches death through the idea of a “selective immortality”, whereby Charlotte, a little spider, continues to live through her children though she actually dies (Matthews 89). Similarly, Natalie Babbitt’s *Tuck Everlasting* (1975) discusses the idea of immortality through the ten-year-old heroine Winnie, who learns through the Tuck family what it is like to stop aging and to live an eternal life. When Winnie is to choose between mortality and immortality, she decides for the former option (Matthews 89-90; Gibson and Zaidman 232-233).

As Matthews (89-101) points out, though many parents are shocked that these two famous children’s books discuss death with children so frankly, such openness is very important, even though difficult to manage for adults. Gibson and Zaidman (233) explain the possible reasons why writing about death might be such a big challenge for children’s authors. They argue that most adults fear death themselves and “feel uncomfortable facing the ultimate reality of their own mortality”. In addition to this, some people consider death to be a matter as personal and intimate as, for example, sex and thus totally inappropriate to be discussed with children. Other critics, as James (2) points out, claim that discussing and

presenting death in children's books should be avoided as it is "likely to induce psychological harm" or to result in violent behaviour.

Gibson and Zaidman (233) share Matthews' point of view that dealing with death in children's literature is extremely important and that the topic "should not be avoided as too morbid or too painful". As they argue, by 'witnessing' the death of others, one learns to live better, as well as to appreciate life more. In other words, presenting death to children might help them to construct their life values and principles. Poling and Hupp (166) add that the value of such books lies also in the fact that they can "educate children about basic facts regarding life and death and cultural mourning rituals" and practices, such as for example funerals (also see Corr 351-352).

Walker (16) supports this idea, adding that dealing with death in children's literature might be even of greater importance to children who are either seriously ill or have themselves suffered the loss of a beloved person. As Walker explains, through these books, children identify with the fictional characters who find themselves in similar situations, and thus the young readers "feel less isolated". Walker further argues that "books can act as the agents that bring tears and evoke discussion of previously hidden feelings", and that through books "children gain insight into the feelings and responses of others who share it".

However, it should be kept in mind that children of different ages have different conceptions of death. In *Conceptual Change in Childhood*, Susan Carey (qtd. in Matthews 95-96) presents three basic stages in a child's understanding of death. She explains that "[i]n the first period, characteristic of children age [sic] 5 and under, the notion of death is assimilated to the notion of sleep and departure. [...] In this period death is seen neither as final nor as inevitable. Just as one wakes from sleep or returns from a trip, so one can return from death". The second stage starts to take place around the age of five when the child begins to understand the irreversibility of death. However, at this stage the child does not understand yet what happens within the body when a person dies. It is only in the third stage, taking place around the age of nine or ten, that the child starts to understand death as "an inevitable biological process". Commenting on this theory, Matthews (96-98) argues that if it is at least partly true, there is no point in discussing death with children aged under nine because they do not yet have a full and sufficient understanding of the concept of death. However, as Matthews points out, the results of some studies show that the age of a child is not the only relevant factor in his/her understanding of death.

Bluebond-Langner (166-169) examined in her study children aged from three to nine who suffered from acute leukemia and who had almost no hope of survival. Bluebond-Langner studied the different stages in the children's understanding of death, and what she found out stands in contrast to Carey's theory of the three developmental stages. She explains that the

[...] role of experience in developing awareness [...] explains why age and intellectual ability were not related to the speed or completeness with which the children passed through the [five] stages [identified in her study]. Some three- and four-year-olds of average intelligence knew more about their prognosis than some very intelligent nine-year-olds who were still in their first remission, had had fewer clinic visits, and hence less experience. (Bluebond-Langner 169)

According to these results, children who have had some experience with death might have such a good understanding of the concept of death as children who are in Carey's third developmental stage, disregarding their age. However, it should be kept in mind that these results come from a study of seriously ill children and, therefore, Matthews (100) concludes that the three developmental stages identified by Carey are relevant as far as children with a "'normal' range of experience" with death are concerned. As regards seriously ill children, for example, or children who have experienced the loss of a beloved person, such as a parent or a sibling, the age is not a decisive factor in a child's understanding of death.

Whatever the age of the child, he/she asks more or less the same questions about death, dead and dying persons, such as what happens to them when they die, whether their souls live on, how they look like when they die (like angels or like when they lived?), whether their death was unavoidable or whether it could have been prevented, whether it is "disloyal" to the dead to live on, and maybe the most common question – 'Why did someone die?'. One of the most frequent answers to this last question is 'because God loved that person' (Corr 341). However, Corr (341-343) explains that such an answer might cause confusion in children, misleading them into thinking that God does not love those who live on, or making them wonder about the strange nature of God's love.

In fact, religion and spiritual beliefs are very often used to explain death to children. Besides these, physical, or even biological explanations can be found in the books, some of them, as already mentioned, too direct, open and realistic. Although Corr (343) argues that it is good not to use too "euphemistic a language" which could confuse children about the nature of death, too much openness is not a good option either. Consequently, one might

ask what the best way to discuss death with children is. Butler (120) asks the same question and tries to provide an answer as follows:

How is it best to introduce a child through literature to the idea of death? Folk literature, the amalgam of human experience, and some of the great fantasies seem to indicate that the honest and warm human approach is best – not talking down to the child because of his age, for death knows all ages, but simply telling him what we know, what we don't know, what we fear, and what we hope. We find this approach in folk literature, [...] in which there is frequently a close and friendly relationship between life and death. The predominant attitude toward death is simple acceptance, combined very often with a belief that death is not final, that it is to be accepted, even actively embraced with the sure knowledge that through love, a resurrection will occur.

The following analysis of three children's novels on the Great Irish Famine, namely *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-McKenna, *Nory Ryan's Song* by Patricia Reilly Giff and *The Grave* by James Heneghan, will explore the way death is presented in these books, examining the differences and similarities between them. Because, as already pointed out, if the children's famine books are to educate children about the catastrophe of the 1840s accurately and faithfully, death and all the suffering that lead to death cannot be omitted. On the other hand, because one is dealing with books aimed for children here, he/she would not expect the images of death to be as harsh as in the novels on the Great Irish Famine for adults. Whether this supposition is true or not, and to what extent death plays a role as a plot device in these novels, will be explored in the following chapters.

Part 2:

Death in Selected Children's Novels on the Great Irish Famine

2.1. *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-McKenna, *Nory Ryan's Song* by Patricia Reilly Giff and *The Grave* by James Heneghan

2.1.1. About the Authors

Marita Conlon-McKenna

Marita Conlon-McKenna, one of the most successful authors of Irish children's novels, was born in Dublin in 1956 and grew up in Goatstown. She went to school at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Mount Anville, and later worked in a travel agency, bank, as well as in a family business (ES 12; ES 15), "selling hand-knitted Aran sweaters, kilts, and Irish tweed in [her] aunt's Irish Handcraft shop in Dublin" (ES 13). In 1977 she married James McKenna, with whom she has four grown up children – Amanda, Laura, Fiona and James. Currently, they live in the Stillorgan area of Dublin (ES 14; ES 15).

Conlon-McKenna has always been interested, even fascinated, by the Great Irish Famine, and when she heard on the radio one day that an unmarked children's grave from the 1840s has been discovered under a hawthorn tree, she decided to write her first book on this topic – a novel for children *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. The book was published in 1990 and became an instant success, with more than 250,000 copies sold in Ireland, and after having been translated into more than twelve languages, among others German, French, Dutch, Swedish, Italian, Arabic and Japanese, numerous more copies were sold internationally. In addition, the novel has been read on RTÉ radio and it has meanwhile been filmed for RTÉ and Channel 4 (ES 12; ES 16). Furthermore, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is on the national curriculum, being read by every Irish primary student (McNamara, *It was a Life-Changing Book* 295). *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is the first book of the trilogy *Children of the Famine* – the titles of the two other books are *Wildflower Girl* (1991) and *Fields of Home* (1996) (ES 17).

Conlon-McKenna is the author of other successful books for children, including *The Blue Horse* (1992), which received the Bisto Book of the Year Award in 1993, *Safe Harbour*

(1995), *No Goodbye* (1997), *In Deep Dark Wood* (1999), *A Girl Called Blue* (2003) and *Love Lucie* (2012) (ES 12; ES 17). Besides novels for children, Conlon-McKenna is also an author of picture books, namely *Little Star* (1993), *The Very Last Unicorn* (1994), as well as *Granny MacGinty* (1997) (ES 17).

In addition to children's books, Conlon-McKenna has written several successful novels and short stories for adults, debuting with *The Magdalen* (1999), which became a number one bestseller in Ireland, continuing with *Promised Land* (2000), *Miracle Woman* (2002), *The Stone House* (2004), *The Hat Shop on the Corner* (2006), *The Matchmaker* (2008), *Mother of the Bride* (2010), *A Taste for Love* (2011), *Three Women* (2012), and *The Rose Garden* (2013) (ES 16; ES 17; ES 18).

Conlon-McKenna has become the president of Irish PEN and has won several awards, among others the International Reading Association Award, the Oesterreichische Kinder- und Jugendbuchpreis, the Reading Association of Ireland Award, as well as the Bisto Book of the Year Award (ES 12; ES 18).

Patricia Reilly Giff

Patricia Reilly Giff was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1935 (ES 19). She graduated from Marymount College with a B.A. degree and later got an M.A. from St. John's University, as well as a Professional Diploma in Reading and a Doctorate of Humane Letters from Hofstra University (ES 21).

Reilly Giff has loved reading books since she was a small child, preferring to dive into the world of the fictional characters than to play with other kids (ES 21). However, it was only after twenty years of teaching that she decided to write her first book (ES 19). She says, "I loved teaching. It was my world. I only left because I was overwhelmed with three careers – teaching, writing, and my family" (ES 20). As she explains, it was during her teaching profession that she learned what children love to read (ES 21).

Her first published book, *Fourth Grade Celebrity*, was released in 1979 and though, as she says, the writing process was slow and far from easy, its success convinced Reilly Giff to continue with writing. As a result, by the late 1990s, she had written over sixty books for

young readers, such as for example *Suspect* (1982), *Tootsie Tanner, Why Don't You Talk?* (1987), *I Love Saturday* (1989) or *Shark in School* (1994) (ES 19).

In 1997 her first book for older readers, namely *Lily's Crossing*, was published. The novel, set in 1944 and portraying the fortunes of the fifteen-year-old protagonist living only with her grandmother as her father had to join the army, has won many awards, among others the Newbery Honor (ES 19; ES 20). *Lily's Crossing* "encouraged Giff to pursue this same line of fiction in *Nory Ryan's Song* and its sequel *Maggie's Door*". *Nory Ryan's Song* was published in 2000 (*Maggie's Door* two years thereafter) (ES 19), and it has been named an ALA (American Library Association) Best Book for Young Adults and an ALA Notable Book. As Reilly Giff explains, all of her stories are in a way based on her own experience, on the experience of her family, or on the stories of her students, and about *Nory Ryan's Song* she says, "I wrote *Nory Ryan's Song* because my great-grandparents had lived through the Great Hunger of Ireland and I wanted to know more about it, more than the stories I had heard from family and from my distant cousins in Ireland. I learned as much as I could by going back to Ireland year after year; I wanted to put it all down on paper for my children and my grandchildren" (ES 20).

Another big success came with *Pictures of Hollis Woods* (2002), which has been named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and for which she has received another Newbery Honor, as well as the Christopher Award, the Illinois Rebecca Caudill Young Readers Award and many others (ES 19; ES 22).

In addition to all the novels and short stories, Reilly Giff wrote several series, among others *Kids of the Polk Street School*, *Polka Dot*, *Private Eye*, *Lincoln Lions Band*, *Polk Street Special* or *Friends and Amigos* (ES 19).

Reilly Giff has three children and five grandchildren, and currently lives with her husband Jim in Weston, Connecticut (ES 20; ES 21). In 1990 they opened a children's bookstore The Dinosaur's Paw (ES 20).

James Heneghan

James Heneghan, one of the most famous and popular contemporary writers of historical fiction for children and teenagers, was born in Liverpool, England, in 1930 (ES 23; ES 24). He was growing up partly in Liverpool and partly on the Irish Achill Island, County Mayo, and Ennis, County Clare, where his father and mother come from respectively (ES 25). In 1957 he emigrated to Vancouver, Canada, and five years later, he became a Canadian citizen. In 1971 he got a B.A. from the Simon Fraser University. In Liverpool, he was working as a policeman, and he continued with this career in Vancouver for twelve years, being a fingerprint specialist. After so many years at the police department, he got fed up with this kind of work and decided to become an English teacher, finding a job in a Burnaby high school and staying in the profession for twenty years (ES 23; ES 25). Heneghan has four grown-up children and four grandchildren (ES 25).

Heneghan's first stories for children, which he wrote with his friend and teaching colleague Bruce McBay, later under a joint pseudonym B. J. Bond, include *Puffin Rock* (1980) and *Goodbye, Carleton High* (1983) (ES 23; ES 25).

In 1994 he wrote perhaps his most popular young adult novel *Torn Away*, for which he has received the Arthur Ellis Crime Writing Award, and which has been named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. Another success came with *Wish Me Luck* in 1997, which has brought him a Governor General's Award nomination and the Sheila A. Egoff British Columbia Children's Literature Prize, and in 2000 *The Grave* was published, which has been selected as a 2002 ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and for which he has received the Mr. Christie Silver Seal Award, the Sheila A. Egoff British Columbia Children's Literature Prize, and which has become a New York Library Pick for the *Best 100 Children's Books of the Year 2000* and a Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA) *Top Shelf Pick 2001* (ES 23). In 2002 another rewarding novel was released, namely *Flood*, earning him many awards, among others the Sheila A. Egoff British Columbia Children's Literature Prize and the Winner of the Chocolate Lily Book Award (ES 23; ES 26).

It has been argued that what makes Heneghan such a popular and acclaimed author is his

fresh approach to the genre novel for young adults and primary graders. Addressing such literature as the mystery, the YA novel, the war story, and the science fiction adventure, he writes comic fiction and action-filled stories for younger readers and deeper, more thoughtful books for teenagers [...] In addition, Heneghan's novels

often feature episodes critics find are compelling in their ability to maintain fast-paced action and suspense without sacrificing subtleties of characterization or setting. (ES 23)

James Heneghan is a member of The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, The Writers Union of Canada, The Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers, as well as of The Children's Writers & Illustrators of B.C. (ES 25).

2.1.2. Plot Outlines

***Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-McKenna**

Under the Hawthorn Tree is the story of three siblings – Eily (12), Michael (9) and Peggy (7) O’Driscoll, who are left behind by their parents during the Irish Famine and, therefore, decide to find the aunts of their mother whom they have never met, only heard about from their mother’s stories. The novel very vividly portrays their struggle for survival on their way to the supposed home of their aunts in Ireland.

The novel begins with the third-person narrator introducing the main characters – Eily, Michael and Peggy, as well as their mother and baby sister Bridget, who is seriously ill. As in the typical Irish Famine novels for children, the Irish Famine is introduced already in the first chapter, through the memory of Eily. The reader also learns that the family has been waiting for the return of the father, who went to work on the roads. For more than two weeks there has been no news about him. After the baby dies, the desperate mother decides to go to look for her husband, leaving her three children alone. Shortly thereafter, the landlord’s agent Jer Simmonds, with his assistant Tom Daly, approach the O’Driscolls’ cabin, warning the children that if their mother does not return until the next day, they will have to take the children to the workhouse. This is when Peggy gets the idea to set out to find their grandaunts Lena and Nano. As their mother does not turn up the next day, together with many other villagers, the children are taken to the workhouse. During a short break on the walk to the dreaded workhouse, Eily, Peggy and Michael manage to escape, and with the unexpected help of their neighbour Mary Kate, an old herbalist, they get back to their village. After getting a bit of rest and food in her cottage, the children set off on their adventurous and hard journey to Castletaggart, where their grandaunts are supposed to live.

On their way they suffer from hunger, struggling with it by getting food by various means, such as killing wild animals, fishing, cow bleeding or stealing fruits from other people’s gardens. With the help of their new friend Joseph, they get to a soup kitchen where they get meal for free. In Ballycarbery, they witness a rebellion by starving people furious about Irish grain being exported to England. In the great chaos, the children manage to steal some grain.

The misery of the children is worsened by the great heat, because of which they decide to walk by night, and by Peggy being attacked and bitten by one of the furious dogs that have crossed their way. After this incident, Peggy gets a fever, and because her condition is worsening and Eily and Michael are not sure whether the fever is a result of Peggy's injury or whether she has got the 'famine fever', they decide to go to the workhouse, where Peggy could get some help. First, Michael goes alone to find out how the place looks like, realising that it is a place full of suffering and dying people, and that it is as dismal a place to die as anywhere else. However, fortunately, Peggy is getting better, and finally they can set off for Castletaggart again.

Coming to the town, at first, Eily, Michael and Peggy have difficulties to find the house of their aunts and are afraid and disappointed that they will never find them. However, in the end, they find the house and meet their grandaunts, who are eventually happy to see their own blood, and, although having not much to eat themselves, they are determined to take care of the children of their niece.

***Nory Ryan's Song* by Patricia Reilly Giff**

Nory Ryan's Song is a first-person narration featuring the twelve-year-old protagonist Nory Ryan as narrator-protagonist. She lives with her father, her two years older sister Celia and four years older sister Maggie, her small brother Patch and her grandfather in a small village on Maidin Bay, Ireland, during the Famine years. Their father has been away for several weeks, fishing on the sea to earn money for the rent, which has to be paid to the English landlord Lord Cunningham, who owns all the land. People who have no money to pay the rent are either forced to give up their livestock or, if they have none, to leave the land so that their houses can be pulled down. The four Ryan children and their grandfather are left to take care of each other, being lucky enough to have two chickens, one pig and a small potato field.

It is already in the first chapter that the theme of hunger is introduced. The novel begins with Nory looking at the sea, halving a seaweed brought by her best friend Sean Mallon to be shared between them and eaten, and talking about leaving for Brooklyn one

day in the future, like his sister Mary did, imagining it like a place where there is no one ever hungry. From the spot where they sit, looking at the village, they suddenly witness that someone is being evicted. Nory knows the unfortunate family, and, wanting to help, borrows a coin from her neighbour Anna Donnelly, an old herbalist, whom she has always been scared of. In exchange for the coin, Nory promises to help the woman with gathering weeds and drying them. Unfortunately, Nory is too late, and when she approaches the cabin from which the inhabitants have been expelled, she realises that it has been pulled down already. The only thing left behind by the family is their dog, whom Nory takes home, later giving it to Anna as Nory's family cannot afford to feed her.

Shortly after the newly-wed Maggie and Francey, Sean's older brother, leave for Brooklyn, all the potatoes in the village are ruined by the potato blight. Having almost nothing to eat, the Ryans try to cook the black potatoes, but the water immediately turns black and they have to throw everything away. Coming to the beach with Sean to gather some limpets and black mussels, Nory realises that the beach is full of people, strangers whom she has never seen, looking for seafood. Having nothing to eat, the Ryans slaughter and eat one of their hens, and even though she suffers from hunger herself, Anna often gives the little of milk she gets from her cow to Nory and Patch. However, being late with the rent, Anna is forced to pay with the cow and the Ryans with their hen and pig.

Finding themselves in a desperate situation, the grandfather decides to go to work on the roads and Celia to ask Lord Cunningham for work as a cook at his house. Both are sent away, however - the grandfather because he is old and weak, and Celia is humiliated by Lord Cunningham, who sends her away claiming that she is too poor and in a short time will be out of her house.

After the grandfather and Celia decide to go to find the father, who has been supposed to be back already for a long time, Nory is left alone with Patch and Anna. Thinking about how to earn money and get some food, she gets the idea to sell her shawl, which Anna helps her to do, and she goes to the village to buy something to eat. At the sight of the village being full of starving people, aggressive and dangerous because they are hungry, Nory gets scared, and after managing to sell the shawl to Lord Cunningham's wife, she quickly buys a knob of flour and a small bag of oats, and, making sure that no one can see her, hides the precious food under her clothes. Instead of running home, however, Nory cannot resist the temptation to enter the post office and get the parcel Maggie has sent them from America,

but for which they had no money to pay. She pays for the package and sets off for home. Unfortunately, on the way, she is fallen upon by a man who has been following her from the village, and is robbed by him. She passes out unconscious, but wakes up again after having been taken to Anna's cabin.

Wanting to rescue Patch and Anna from starving, on the next days, with the help of Sean, Nory climbs the cliffs, taking the eggs of wild birds from their nests in the cracks and chinks, once accidentally killing one of the birds when defending herself from its attack, and thus bringing home not only eggs but also meat. Climbing the cliffs becomes Nory's routine until the day when Sean announces that he is going to America with his mother and that they have one extra ticket, which has been supposed to be for his grandmother, but because she has died, they offer it to Nory. However, Nory does not want to leave Anna and offers Patch to go with them, asking Sean to take care of him.

After a heartbreaking parting, Nory goes to the shrine in the old cemetery and spots something caught against the stone wall – she reaches for it and realises that it is a piece of the box from Maggie – a picture drawn by her beloved sister, featuring the whole family together in Brooklyn. Nory knows that she could not have wished for a more beautiful and precious present from Maggie.

Having heard that Anna has taught Nory to heal with herbs, Lord Cunningham sends for Nory to help him. In exchange for her help, Nory asks for food, seed potatoes and the dog she gave to Anna, which ran away and was caught with other hunting dogs.

One day, a man approaches Anna's cabin, looking for Nory Ryan and explaining that he has been sent by her father to bring her two passage tickets and to tell her to take the road to Galway where he is waiting for them. Nory believes that the reason why her father has sent two tickets only must be that her grandfather and Celia are with him already – he sent one ticket for Nory and one for Patch. Having one extra ticket, Nory pleads Anna to come with her, however, the old woman does not want to leave her home and dog, and is satisfied with the idea that Nory will bring her cures to America – a “gift to that young free country” (NRS 145). They say goodbye to each other.

***The Grave* by James Heneghan**

The Grave is a first-person narration featuring the thirteen-year-old narrator-protagonist Tom Mullen, living in Liverpool, England, who accidentally falls into a pit on the school grounds and, travelling back in time, finds himself on Achill Island, Ireland, in 1847 – the height of the Irish Potato Famine.

The novel begins in 1974 with Tom explaining that he is a loner, having been abandoned by his mother in Toys on the fifth floor of Lewis's department store in Liverpool at Christmas 1961. Since then, Tom has been moving from one foster home to another, for the last couple of years together with Brian, who is mentally slow and totally dependent on Tom. While for Brian, Tom is his best friend 'forever', for Tom, Brian is a burden of which he wishes to get rid.

It is already in the first chapter that Tom describes his falling into a pit on a construction site on the school yard where a new school is supposed to be built. The excavation has been taking place for one year already and rumours have been flying around as to the reasons why the works have been stopped. For the last couple of days, Tom has felt an urge to explore the pit and decides to investigate it with Brian one evening. Disturbed and frightened by the guard, Tom stumbles and falls into the pit, which turns out to be a gravesite.

The second chapter continues with Tom dropping through darkness, feeling as if a thousand hot needles were stitching his body, spotting a figure – like a goblin with a green light, and finding himself on a cliff. After coming to himself, Tom walks down a path, coming to the beach and spotting a group of people leaning over the body of a seemingly dead boy, who has been dragged out of the sea. The men give up trying to bring the boy back to life, and the women start to cry and moan, when Tom approaches the body and gives the boy first aid. The boy starts to cough and opens his eyes, and the spectators begin to pray, thanking God for sending them Tom, regarding him as a saint and the boy's rescue as a miracle. They take Tom to their village, and it is only then, standing face to face to the boy, whose name is Tully Monaghan, that Tom realises he is looking at his exact double – the boys look identical even to the heart-shaped birthmark on their backsides. Because of their striking resemblance, and because everyone in the village believes that Tom wrought a

miracle when he saved Tully, Tully is very suspicious about Tom, thinking that he has been sent by the shee-og, the faeries, to take Tully's place.

The Monaghans lead Tom into their cabin, where Tully lives with his mother, father, the four years younger sister Hannah, who is twelve, and the one year older brother Brendan, who is seventeen and who, because he is mentally slower, reminds Tom of Brian. Gradually, Tom learns that he is in the village of Slievemore on Achill Island, County Mayo, Ireland, in 1847, and that the horrible stench he smelled when he went down the path to the beach was the smell of the rotted potatoes. Tom begins to understand what it feels like to be really hungry, learning that there are no animals to be found in the area of the village because everything has been eaten up.

The situation is worsened when one day soldiers, armed with guns and billy clubs, enter the village and start to pull down all the cottages. Defending their homes, the villagers begin to fight the soldiers and a fierce battle arises. Within the chaos, after trying to rescue Tully from a soldier's attack, Tom gets hurt, feeling an explosion in the back of his skull, and falls into darkness.

After waking up in the pit, Tom realises he is back in Liverpool of the 1970s. He gets to his foster home and learns that he has been missing for two days. The next day, he does not go to the school classes but instead enters the library and tries to get as much information about Ireland and the Great Irish Famine as possible. One night he feels the same urge to go to the pit as before, goes there, and is dragged into its darkness again.

After opening his eyes, Tom realises that he is back in the village of Slievemore, where every cottage has been levelled. He finds Tully, Hannah, Brendan and their mother and learns that Mr Monaghan died in battle. The Monaghans decide to leave the village, hoping to get to America. Tom is doing his best to help the family, taking part in a street fight (using skills he has acquired in Kung Fu lessons back in Liverpool) and winning a cart with a horse, making their journey to the port easier. They see ragged, starving and dying people all around and are lucky enough when they come to a soup kitchen and get a meal for free. Crossing a village, they find an empty scalpeen, where they decide to stay overnight. In the darkness, Tom stumbles and falls into darkness again.

Tom finds himself in the pit again, and after getting home, he realises he has been away for a couple of days. Brian has been moved to another foster home, and expecting that his foster parents will want to get rid of him as well because of his problematic behaviour,

Tom tells the social services workers that he wants to be moved to another district, wishing to be as far away from Brian as possible. He goes to the pit and is dragged to the 1840s again.

He wakes up in a cellar, and after asking a woman on the street where he is, he learns that he is in Liverpool in 1848, and that about four months have passed since he has left the Monaghans. He returns to the cellar and meets all four of them there, realising that Mrs Monaghan is very sick. Gradually, Tom teaches Tully how to steal (a practice at which Tom is really good), and although at first Tully does not like the idea of stealing, he gradually realises that it is the only way to survive. Because Mrs Monaghan gets worse and Brendan gets sick too, Tom, Tully and Hannah decide to take them to the workhouse where they know a workhouse fever ward is. Unfortunately, a few days later, both Brendan and Mrs Monaghan die. When Tom, Tully and Hannah get to the pit where the bodies are to be buried, Tom realises that he knows the church next to which the pit has been dugged, recognising it as the church standing next to his school. After telling Hannah and Tully the whole truth and that he cannot go with them any further, they do not try to persuade him, knowing that he has come a full circle, having accomplished his mission, which probably was to save his great grandfather – Tully, so that Tom could have been born.

Back in Liverpool of the 1970s, with Brian's help, Tom drags the two Monaghans' coffins out of the pit and buries them properly behind the church in the nuns' burial ground. After all that Tom has experienced, he realises that he likes Brian and that he does not want to lose him, and therefore, when offered two options – either to be moved to another district or to Brian's foster home, he decides for the latter.

2.2. Death and Dying

The following section will explore the theme of death in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, *Nory Ryan's Song* and *The Grave*. The analysis of each novel will be divided into the analysis of the story level and the analysis of the discourse level.

The analysis of the story level will begin with a discussion of the way the potato blight is introduced in the novels and how it is related to the theme of hunger. It will be seen that the theme of hunger is the most prominent one linked to the theme of death in each novel. However, it will also be seen that there are other themes linked to the theme of death which are worth of consideration too, namely the themes of sickness, struggle for survival, but also positive ones – family, love, friendship, fellowship and in some cases faith. The analysis of the story level will further contain a discussion of references to the steps taken by the English to help the Irish people survive, namely to the establishment of soup kitchens and workhouses, and it will be explored whether the authors present this help really as a *help*, or, on the other hand, as an action which either did not have any effect on the huge numbers of deaths or which even contributed to their increase. Following this discussion, the next subchapter will explore the various circumstances which ‘accelerate’ dying of hunger and sickness in the novels. Finally, the last two subchapters will be dedicated to a comparison of the various death-scenes depicted in the novels, as well as to a discussion of the way the novels present the various ways to bury people and of the impact the Great Irish Famine had on the burial ceremonies.

The analysis of the discourse level will begin with an analysis of the way the authors of the novels refer to death and dying, and then, it will continue with a discussion of the element of the ‘macabre’. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term ‘macabre’ as ‘grim’, ‘horrific’ or ‘repulsive’ (ES 35), and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines it as being “unpleasant and strange because connected with death and frightening things” (ES 36). This thesis will explore to what extent the authors manage to create a macabre atmosphere and to evoke a grim mood which might generally be expected to be found in a novel on the Great Irish Famine.

2.2.1. Death and Dying in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*

2.2.1.1. Story Level

2.2.1.1.1. Potato Blight, Hunger and Other Themes Linked to Death

As already pointed out, typically, the children's novels on the Great Irish Famine open up with a description of the unpleasant stench coming from the rotted potatoes, and with the subsequent effort of the peasants to save as many of their potatoes as possible. This is also the case in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, where the first appearance of the potato blight is described through the memory of Eily already on the second page of the first chapter:

It was hard to believe that it was only a little over a year ago, and they sitting in the old school room, when Tim O'Kelly had run in to get his brother John and told them all to 'Make a run home quick to help with lifting the spuds as a pestilence had fallen on the place and they were rotting in the ground'. [...] Eily remembered. Father was sitting on the stone wall, his head in his hands. Mother was kneeling in the field, her hands and apron covered in mud as she pulled the potatoes from the ground, and all around the air heavy with a smell – that smell, rotting, horrible, up your nose, in your mouth. The smell of badness and disease. (UHT 10-11)

Subsequently, hunger takes over in the whole country. Conlon-McKenna portrays the situation very vividly, making it appear real to the reader by contrasting it to a dream and describing the pain caused by hunger: "Sometimes [Eily] thought that maybe this was all a dream and soon she would wake up and laugh at it, but the hunger pain in her tummy and the sadness in her heart were enough to know that it was real" (UHT 10). The protagonists learn to ignore the "normal rumbling hunger pains that [come] before sleep" (UHT 21), as well as not to ask for more food than the portion they get on their plates as they know there is no more left (UHT 12).

Despite the great hunger, which makes people aggressive and selfish and awakens their survival instincts, the themes of family, friendship, fellowship and love can be said to feature prominently in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* as the widespread suffering and hunger brings people more closely together. All the food the children get they share between them, like the "dirty old apple" Peggy gets from their old neighbour Mary Kate, carrying it "like a precious jewel safely home to be shared by all" (UHT 15). Although the old woman does not

have much food herself, this is not the only time that she is willing to help her small neighbours and gives them food, and the children accept it gratefully.

The great hunger forces people to adapt their actions and decisions to their basic needs and changes their life values and priorities. This is shown in the passage where Mrs O'Driscoll decides to go to the village to sell her shawl, dress and combs to buy some food. Eily is shocked as these are "all [her mother has] left", but her mother explains to her that there is no point in keeping these things, although they are important to her, when her family is starving:

'Listen, pet, what good is a dress and a shawl hidden away under the bed? I know they won't bring much, but maybe Patsy Murphy will trade me enough for a bag of meal and some oats or something. [...] Do you think I can't see Peggy and the eyes shining out of her head and her arms and legs like sticks? And Michael, my little man, who can hardly lift the basket of turf and hasn't the strenght to walk the few miles to the river to try and catch a bit of fish? And Eily, my darling girl, who is worn out with the worry of it all? [...]'. (UHT 28)

When Mrs O'Driscoll leaves them to look for her husband, Eily, Michael and Peggy are forced to leave their home, and after running away from the group heading to the workhouse, they find themselves on their own. Conlon-McKenna portrays the children's want and determination to survive, as well as their wit and intelligence, which they do not lose even in the hard times they go through. Although they are only children and there is hunger and starving people all around them, Eily, Michael and Peggy manage to survive by collecting forest fruits and hazelnuts (UHT 115), fishing (using a fish trap made from a bag and a branch from a willow tree) (UHT 92), by stealing vegetables from unfenced fields or fields belonging to people who died of hunger or disease (UHT 75, 90), as well as by killing animals such as rabbits, rats and hedgehogs (UHT 76-77, 121, 133), and by bleeding a cow, which they find caught in a pile of thorns. The practice of bleeding cattle was, as already pointed out, a common way of surviving in the Famine years, and Conlon-McKenna provides a detailed description of the procedure as performed by Michael:

'What are you going to do?' [Eily] hissed.

'I'm going to bleed her,' [Michael] replied.

'What?' said Eily. 'But you don't know how to, Michael.'

'I heard Father tell us stories often enough about times before the potatoes failed and he and his father bled the landlord's cattle. Come here and give me a hand.'

He was patting the cow on the neck and rubbing his hand down her front and side to find a vein. His father had told him that if you hit the main vain by mistake, the animal would bleed to death in a few minutes. He searched around until he found a

likely one. Eily passed him the blade. He made a nick in the finer skin under the neck, but nothing happened. He deepened the cut and a droplet or two of blood appeared. [...] Michael was squeezing at the opening with his fingers. The blood began to trickle and then to flow freely and spatter on the ground. Eily held the can to catch it as it fell. [...] Michael then made Eily put pressure on the vein and hold it to stop the bleeding while he mixed a paste of clay and grass and spit and smeared it on the cut. It took about ten minutes before it slowed down to a slight seepage. (UHT 129-130)

It might seem that such a description of the practice is too harsh and bloody for children, especially when usually animals are referred to in a positive sense in children's books, and suffering of animals tends to be avoided. In this novel, however, the children in a sense hurt the frightened animal with "eyes soft and gentle but yet afraid" (UHT 128), leaving it completely baffled. On the other hand, the author stresses that the children are doing this to keep themselves alive and that they do not kill the cow, only taking such an amount of blood that the animal will not suffer any consequences of it. In addition, when Michael spots the animal for the first time and realises that the cow cannot move because it has got caught in thorns, his first idea is to help the poor creature as he "hate[s] to see an animal in distress or pain" (UHT 127). It is only a moment later that he realises they can make use of its blood.

The children's wit, intelligence and strength is shown also in the passage where Peggy finds a dead rabbit and cheerfully shows it to her brother and sister. Peggy is happy to have found something to eat, but although they suffer from a great hunger, Eily manages to keep a clear head and remembers Mary Kate's warning about eating only fresh meat (UHT 74-75). Reminding Peggy about the warning, they resist the temptation and throw the dead animal away. In contrast to this, later, when eating grass and unripe blackberries turns out to provide insufficient moisture to ease their thirst (UHT 107), the children desperately turn to drinking dirty water from a ditch, taking "turns in scooping the muddy water up in their hands and sipping it [...] swallow[ing] the dirt too" (UHT 109) and disregarding the dangerous consequences this action might have.

As the story progresses, the harsh depiction of hunger and starving people intensifies. This can be seen in the passage where Eily, Michael and Peggy enter the village of Kineen, where a soup kitchen is supposed to be:

Eily could not believe the crowds when they reached the village. Hundreds of ragged starving people thronged the small main street. They queued, desperate for food. Some were so weak they could not stand, so they sat on the ground, dejected but determined to keep their place. [...] The faces – the faces – [Eily] would never forget them. They all had the same look. The cheeks were sunken, the eyes wide and staring

with deep circles underneath, the lips narrow and tight, and in some the skin had a yellow tinge. Hunger and sickness had changed these people. Now they were like ghosts. Old women clawed and tried to push their way to get further up the line. Mothers stood staring ahead as scrawny toddlers pulled and whined against their filthy skirts. This must be hell, thought Eily, for once really terrified. (UHT 79-80)

As can be seen, besides death, the passage above also contains a reference to another theme connected to death, namely sickness, which was, as already explained, a 'sibling' of hunger during the Famine years. It is already in the beginning of the novel that Mrs O'Driscoll says to her children: "'With every day we are all getting weaker and losing our strength. We must eat or we'll get sick'" (UHT 28). Indeed, the great hunger deprives people of their strength and thus makes it much easier for sickness and the famine diseases to take hold of them. This can be seen also in the passage where a description of the terrible conditions in the workhouse is provided: "From within the building came a constant moaning and crying, and a smell of disease and sickness seemed to fill the air around the place" (UHT 124). The children encounter sick people at every turn and know that getting the 'famine fever' means a certain death as the number of sick people is huge and there is lack of access to medical treatment. Therefore, when Peggy gets sick, Eily and Michael fear she has got the 'famine fever'. First, Michael asks Eily, "'Do you think she has the fever, Eily?' [...] 'Or is it something after the dog biting her arm? '" (UHT 117), and after that, Eily keeps asking herself the same question, checking the symptoms of Peggy's bad condition again and again: "Also she couldn't help wondering, would they all get the fever now. [...] Eily kept checking Peggy's skin. It was burning like fire with no sign of cooling down. However, there was no tinge of yellow to it at all. That was a good sign" (UHT 119). Indeed, it turns out that Peggy's fever is only the result of an inflammatory response to her injury. In spite of this fact, however, the author shows that the famine diseases were very closely connected to hunger and starvation and that dying of sickness was as frequent as dying of hunger during the Famine years.

2.2.1.1.2. The Establishment of Soup Kitchens and Workhouses – Prevention of Deaths?

Besides providing descriptions and depictions of hungry, sick and dying people in need of help, Conlon-McKenna also makes the reader aware that the British government set up workhouses and soup kitchens to provide relief for the Irish peasants. The purpose of these was, as already explained, to reduce the huge numbers of deaths. However, she not only describes the positive aspects of this kind of help, but also the negative ones, thus aiming at providing as accurate historical information as possible.

When Eily, Michael and Peggy learn from a boy who falls into step with them that a soup kitchen has been established in the village of Kineen, they decide to go there in hope that they will get some food, and when they enter the soup kitchen, the following scene opens up before them:

The women had begun to ladle out the soup. There were tin mugs for those who did not have anything of their own. Twice the pot was refilled before the children actually moved forward. [...] The afternoon passed and they still had not reached the top. All the children were worried about was that the soup would run out before they had their turn. Finally they got there. An exhausted woman begged one of the servers for two extra mugs for her two children, who were about half a mile back along the road. They were too weak to walk any further. She was refused, but when she took a long gulp of the hot soup from her own mug, the server quickly replaced it with a bit of a top-up. [...] Eily and Michael and Peggy and Joseph all took a big swallow of the soup too when their turn came, but no top-up was offered. (UHT 80-81)

Conlon-McKenna suggests that the help in the form of soup kitchens was very effective, saving many starving people from death. On the other hand, she does not omit to mention the fact that the nutritional value and the quality of the meals provided was very low, describing the soup the children get as “greasy”, with “globs of [rancid] fat float[ing] on its surface” (UHT 81), and causing Eily a nausea and cramps in her stomach (UHT 84). Thus, Conlon-McKenna conveys the notion that although the establishment of soup kitchens saved many lives, it is arguable that it really did more good than harm in all cases.

Another negative aspect of providing meals for free in the novel is the practice of ‘souperism’. As already explained, the ‘Great Hunger’ was used to get converts to Protestantism, and this is referred to in the novel as follows: “During the night an old man shook [Eily, Michael and Peggy] and told them to be on their way, as the heathens would try to convert them in the morning and if they took another mug of soup they may as well take

the Queen's shilling. The children were puzzled, but simply ignored him" (UHT 81-82). However, this is a very subtle and the only reference to proselytising in the novel, and, as already explained, as in other children's novels on the Irish Famine where such references can be found, no direct connection is made between taking food in exchange for converting to Protestantism.

The kind of help in the form of providing shelter and meals for free in the workhouses shows to have been both sought-after as well as hated by the poor in the novel. While some characters go to the workhouse voluntarily as they believe that it is the only way to survive, seeing the prospect of meals for free and a roof over their heads (UHT 56), other characters dread the place as they have heard that it is a place of suffering, disease and death, where people are separated from their family and die alone (UHT 49, 123). Therefore, throughout the novel, there are several references to the workhouse where the characters say that they would never enter the place as that would mean a separation from their family and a certain death, which they can await outside the workhouse as well. Michael describes it as a place where people sit in front of the building, "[...] waiting for a bed to die on" (UHT 131). When he approaches the building, the following description is offered:

Michael could not believe it when he came to the old mill. Crowds of people were waiting, sleeping on the cobblestones. They could go no further. A few of them were grouped together in families. They lay in their rags or blankets, relieved not to be on their own. From within the building came a constant moaning and crying, and a smell of disease and sickness seemed to fill the air around the place. Some people were praying out loud. (UHT 124)

Conlon-McKenna conveys the notion that usually, because of the terrible conditions in them, the establishment of the workhouses had the very opposite effect than intended – because of the suffering and the high concentration of sick people (which was an ideal condition for the fever to spread extremely easily), the workhouses could be said to have 'accelerated' dying of hunger and sickness. This, together with other circumstances contributing to worsening of the bad situation of the Irish peasants, will be explored in the following subchapter.

2.2.1.1.3. Additional Causes of Death

As already suggested, in addition to hunger and sickness, which were the primary causes of death during the Great Irish Famine, Conlon-McKenna refers also to other, secondary causes of death – circumstances which contributed to the worsening of the situation of the Irish peasants and thus resulted in an ‘acceleration’ of death from hunger and the famine diseases.

One of the most prominent additional causes of death during the Great Irish Famine was the unwillingness of the English landlords to help their tenants as well as their cruelty, mercilessness and a lack of interest in their suffering. As a result, the theme of eviction is one of the most prominent themes linked to death in the novel. When the potato blight appears on the fields and the situation is quickly worsening, the English landlord and his family leave the village and go back to England, fearing for their own lives and not caring what will happen to the tenants (UHT 16, 38). In addition to this, however, the landlord orders his agent “to check all the cottages and send those to the workhouse that have no man or means of keeping themselves” (UHT 46). In other words, everyone in the village who is unable to pay the rent is evicted and sent to the workhouse.

The workhouses were, as already mentioned, another cause contributing to the high death rates. Although they were originally set up to help people in need, the author of the novel shows that the help provided in these places was totally ineffective as people were dying here as much as they were dying on the roads. The reason for this was that the workhouses were overcrowded, which meant that the famine diseases spread very easily and people did not get proper medical treatment. In addition, for most newcomers it was impossible to get inside: “A nun, dressed in full habit, came through a small wooden door. She spoke in a loud voice: ‘This place is full. We have no space for man, woman or child, nor is there spare food. Perhaps by tomorrow when we have removed those who have died of sickness and the fever, we may be able to take a few’” (UHT 124). Thus, the workhouses, the primary purpose of which was to help people and provide them shelter and food for free, are described as places where there is no food to be given and which provide only a bed to die on (if people are ‘lucky’ enough to get in) – among another hundreds of starving and sick people (UHT 131). Besides the overcrowded conditions in the workhouses, which resulted in denied access to medication, Conlon-McKenna implies that another circumstance ‘accelerating’ death from hunger and disease was lack of access to medical treatment in

general – in the whole novel there is no reference to doctors helping the sick, nor to hospitals where people could get help (the workhouses were supposed to work as hospitals). Instead, the characters rely on the help of herbalists. This can be seen in the passage where Eily and Peggy are sent by their mother to Mary-Kate to ask for a bit of goose grease to cure Bridget's illness. However, when Peggy asks the old woman whether it will help her sister, Mary-Kate answers, "'I don't know, pet. There is so much sickness at the moment – strange sickness – I do my best'" (UHT 14-15). This excerpt implies that curing the famine diseases – diseases which were new and yet unknown, was beyond the power of a herbalist.

Another kind of 'help' by the British government besides the establishment of workhouses which could be said to have 'accelerated' dying of hunger and which is referred to in the novel are the roadworks. As already explained, people were working on building roads that led nowhere to earn money to buy food – the purpose of these pointless works was not to give people food for free – they had to 'deserve' it. However, the works were very hard and usually deprived the workers of all their strength they had left: "'Michael, lovey, the roadworks are far far away. The men are weak and the work is hard. Your father is a strong hardy man, but breaking stones is the very devil'" (UHT 39). As a result, it can be argued that the roadworks only worsened the bad situation of the Irish peasants and that they resulted in a higher probability that the Irish people would die of extreme exhaustion mixed with hunger.

Another indirect cause of death referred to in the novel is the enforced exportation of Irish corn to England at a time when thousands of Irish people were already starving:

One old man got up his courage. 'Where is that grain being shipped to?' he asked.
'England,' was the curt reply.

[...]

'Stop this folly,' [another man] shouted. 'Are ye blind? Can't you see the starving folk all around you?'

Noone answered. The men kept working and the soldiers grouped themselves together. Another cart was empty by now.

'We're starving, the hunger is on us,' shouted the tall man again, unable to hide the tears in his eyes. At once about twenty other voices joined in, until they all shouted in unison, 'The hunger is on us.'

The soldier in charge stepped forward. 'Disperse. Let there be no trouble. These goods are sold and paid for.'

'We're Irishmen, and our food is being sent away, grown in Irish soil to feed English bellies, while ours are empty and our people starve and die,' the red-haired man began. (UHT 102-103)

This passage indicates the attitude of the author to the historical events – Conlon McKenna implicitly criticises the attitude of and steps taken by the English – that Irish corn was being exported to England while the Irish people were visibly starving.

Another point of criticism related to starvation on the one hand, and abundance of food on the other hand, can be detected in passages contrasting the widespread suffering, hunger and extreme poverty with affluence, abundance of food and the vanity of the rich, such as in the following excerpt containing a description of the town of Ballycarbery:

The streets of the town were thronged. Maybe it was a market day! Hordes of filthy beggars roamed the streets, but also the normal business was taking place. Two or three crowded carriages passed. A group had formed outside a general store. There did not seem to be much sign of shortage here. Ladies and young girls made their way into the draper's store, the window festooned with bales of cotton and ribbon and two or three hatstands with gaily trimmed bonnets. Down a wide lane and back behind the shops, a herd of cattle and about twenty sheep were being auctioned. (UHT 100-101)

Similarly, when Eily, Michael and Peggy walk the streets of Castletaggart, they pass buildings and pubs where people do not seem to suffer from hunger. Peeping through the windows, they see tables set for dinner and people cheerfully chatting, as if there was no shortage of anything there (UHT 139-140). Thus, the author implies that there *was* enough food, but it was not distributed properly. In addition, similarly to the depictions of the attitude and practices of the English landlord, the author depicts also the unwillingness of the rich people to help the poor in need, as well as their lack of interest in their suffering, which might be said to have 'accelerated' dying of hunger. Because of the stark contrast between poverty and richness, the starving people, driven by hunger, become aggressive and dangerous, especially for the rich ones, falling on their carriages and begging for money or food (UHT 70, 140).

2.2.1.1.4. Death-Scenes

Under the Hawthorn Tree contains quite a lot of references to death as well as many descriptions of various death-scenes. In this context, one could differentiate between three kinds of death-scenes in the novel – dying at home, dying 'by the roadside' and dying in the workhouse.

The first reference to dying peacefully at home is related to the death of Bridget. Indeed, her departure from 'this' world can be described as very peaceful and non-violent, dying in the arms of her loving mother and surrounded by her brother and two sisters (UHT 21). Another reference to a peaceful death in the circle of the family is the death of their neighbour Mrs Collins, probably to be followed soon by the death of her son and Michael's best friend Pat (UHT 52). A more unpleasant image is evoked by the following description of the situation in the village of Dunbarra, provided by two women who cross Eily's way and say, "'Lovey, did you hear tell of the little village of Dunbarra? The poor old priest went calling on four of the cottages and found all in them dead of the famine fever and huge rats swarming the place. They had to open a burial pit a mile outside the village to throw all the bodies of those that died into it'" (UHT 89). As can be seen, the descriptions of the death-scenes are getting more unpleasant as the story progresses, which could be ascribed not only to the fact that the first death in the novel is that of the baby Bridget and the author wanted to present her dying as having been very peaceful and without any suffering, but also to the fact that the harsh conditions are worsening in the novel and the number of dead people is increasing.

As already suggested, besides descriptions of starving people awaiting death at home, there are also references to dead and dying people outside their homes – people who "have left their houses and taken to the roads, looking for work and food or just to escape the place" (UHT 36), or people who have been evicted, such as the O'Driscolls' neighbour Statia Kennedy, who was forced to leave her cabin and to go to the workhouse. However, she is old and weak and pleads the group heading to the workhouse to let her die by the road: "'Let me die here along the road, for I'll never make it to the workhouse'" (UHT 57-58). Naturally, her wish can be interpreted as being only a result of her desperate situation and of her extreme suffering and exhaustion. A similar picture is presented in the passage where Michael passes two women on his way to the workhouse, who, although being still alive, clearly have no strength to move on, and thus, it can be expected that the place where he passes them is the place where they will die: "Then up ahead he was able to make out the crossroads and the humpy bridge. Two women lay on the ground near the bridge. They were both so weak they didn't notice the young boy pass them" (UHT 124). Another, even more unpleasant scene, opens up before Eily and Peggy when they discover a dead man behind a

clump of bushes: “It was man – well, what was left of him. The skin was rotted and all different colours. He was thin, so thin that his bones already showed” (UHT 85).

The last kind of death-scene that appears in the novel relates to dying in the workhouse. Such a scene could be seen in the already quoted passage where Michael approaches the workhouse:

Michael could not believe it when he came to the old mill. Crowds of people were waiting, sleeping on the cobblestones. They could go no further. A few of them were grouped together in families. They lay in their rags or blankets, relieved not to be on their own. From within the building came a constant moaning and crying, and a smell of disease and sickness seemed to fill the air around the place. Some people were praying out loud. (UHT 124)

It could be argued that the conditions in the workhouse under which the characters die are the worst when compared with the previous two discussed above, namely dying at home and dying by the roadside, as the characters die surrounded by other sick, suffering, screaming and dying strangers (UHT 48). This way of dying, occurring on a place from which “a constant moaning and crying” comes, stands in stark contrast to the peaceful dying at home as described above. It is because of the terrible conditions in the workhouse that some characters refuse to seek help there and “prefer to die in [their] own bed and not with strangers” (UHT 123).

2.2.1.1.5. Burials

As explained in Part 1, because of the huge numbers of dead bodies, and because these numbers were increasing dramatically every day, traditional burial ceremonies were nearly halted and the corpses were often either left unburied or they were thrown into mass graves or buried in a single grave but without a coffin. In cases where funerals took place, because of the lack of traditional wooden coffins, people wrapped the corpses in sheets or they used any piece of furniture into which they could put the dead bodies. All this is realistically portrayed in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*.

When little Bridget dies, the O’Driscolls cannot bury her properly as the priest is sick and the coffin maker has died: “Father Doyle is gone down with the sickness himself and will not be able to bury the wee lassie. Already in the village a few have died of the sickness –

Seamus Fadden, the coffin maker, being one – so there are no proper funerals ...” (UHT 23-24). As a result, the O’Driscolls use a wooden chest as a coffin and bury Bridget with the help of their neighbours, who lead them in the prayers. Finally, they sing Father Doyle’s favourite hymn and go into the house where tea and some leftover potato cakes are served (UHT 24-25). Thus, although the traditional burial ceremony with a priest and using a proper wooden coffin does not take place, the characters nevertheless try to give the deceased a decent burial.

A completely different situation can be found in the passage where Eily, Michael and Peggy find the corpse of a dead man, and, although they do not bury him as they are weak and know that they could catch a famine disease from him, they consider that the least they can do for the poor man is to say a prayer for him and to make a cross from two twigs tied together with a few pieces of grass: “They stopped short a few yards away from the body. Michael pushed the simple cross into the ground. ‘What will we say?’ asked Michael. ‘An “Our Father”,’ replied Eily. When it was said, Eily asked God to remember this poor lost man” (UHT 86). This excerpt, together with the passage describing Bridget’s funeral, show the importance of another theme linked to death, namely religion. In the case of Bridget’s death, the Catholic faith helps the characters to overcome the pain from the loss of a beloved person more easily and gives them hope that life continues after death and that they will be together again one day. In addition, the religious conviction is expressed that little Bridget is in Paradise now, where life is more beautiful and without any suffering.

In addition to passages like those quoted above, describing decent burials or, at least, saying a prayer for the dead, there are also passages in the novel which refer to burying the dead bodies in mass graves. The following excerpt describes a man on a horse pulling a slide and ‘collecting’ dead bodies to carry them to a mass grave: “Then a man came by on horseback, pulling a slide. He had a piece of cloth tied around his face, his eyes stared straight ahead. On the slide were piled four or five skeleton-like bodies, their bare skin and bones showing through the rags” (UHT 69). Another passage referring to burying dead people in mass graves is the one where two women fall into step with Eily and say, “They had to open a burial pit a mile outside the village to throw all the bodies of those that died into it” (UHT 89). This excerpt implies that burying people in mass graves was a ‘quick’ practice, ‘throwing’ the bodies into the pits and having no time to say a prayer for them.

As can be seen, Conlon-McKenna attempts to provide accurate historical information on the conditions under which burials took place during the Great Irish Famine. She provides descriptions of the various ways dead people were buried during the Famine, as well as explanations why traditional burial ceremonies were stopped. Although the depictions and descriptions related to burials are often very harsh in the novel, one could even say naturalistic, for a children's audience, because the theme of the novel is the Irish Famine, if Conlon-McKenna is to provide an accurate picture of the historical happenings which play a crucial role in her novel, it might be argued that such descriptions would seem appropriate.

2.2.1.2. Discourse Level

2.2.1.2.1. References to Death and Dying

Interestingly, when the narrator or the characters refer to Bridget's death, they almost always use euphemistic, 'softened' language. When the baby dies, the narrator expresses it as follows: "It was the early hours of the morning before the coughing stopped. Then there was a sudden silence" (UHT 21). Eily, Michael and Peggy do not realise immediately what has happened, it is only after they approach their mother that they can see tears coming down her face. Then she says, "'She's gone. My own little darling is gone'" (UHT 21). After that she explains to her children, "'She was too weak to stay in this hard world any longer. Look at her. Isn't she a grand little girl, now she's at rest.' The baby lay still, as if she were just dozing" (UHT 22). Similarly, when two strangers approach the O'Driscolls' cabin, Michael tells them through the closed door, "'We buried my little sister last week,' [...] 'and half the village is dying of the fever [...]" (UHT 31). As can be seen, in all these extracts, when referring to the baby's death, the characters and the narrator never use the word 'death' or the verb 'to die'. Instead, they say that 'she is gone', 'she was too weak to stay in this hard world any longer', 'she is at rest', or that she has been buried. Interestingly, in the last example, Michael does not refer to Bridget's death directly – he only says that she has been buried. However, in the same sentence, when he refers to the deaths in the village, he says that 'half the village is dying of the fever', using a form of the verb 'to die' and thus referring

to death directly. The only direct reference to Bridget's death is in the following passage, where the narrator describes what is going on in Eily's mind: "She remembered how upset Peggy was when Bridget died and when Mother left" (UHT 48).

When discussing the death of other characters, it might be argued that both euphemistic language as well as direct references to death and dying are used.

Several times throughout the novel, the phrase 'to be in heaven' is used to refer to someone who is dead, such as in the passage where Peggy tries to find a way of escaping the workhouse: "'What about the relations?' [...] 'Not grandmother and grandfather in heaven, and we don't know about Auntie Kitty, but the aunts that made the cake?'" (UHT 49). Similarly, when Peggy has the fever and her condition is worsening, Eily is afraid of her sister's life and thinks about her mother and little Bridget, wondering whether her mother is dead too and being afraid that Peggy will join them both in heaven: "As [Peggy] dozed lightly, Eily thought about Mother and Bridget, the baby nestled into her arms. Had Mother gone to join her little one in heaven? Eily opened her heart and prayed, 'Don't let Peggy die – don't take away my little sister – keep her safe – let her get well'" (UHT 119). As can be seen, while in the first part of the quote, the phrase 'to be in heaven' is used, in the second part of the quote, the verb 'to die' is used, referring to death directly. Another example of euphemistic language can be found in the following passage, where Michael returns from his best friend's cabin: "'Teresa passed on yesterday,' he sobbed. 'I couldn't see Pat. He's sick now. He's my best friend in the whole world and I might never see him again [...]" (UHT 52). Michael uses the phrase 'passed on' instead of directly saying that their neighbour 'died'. Later in the story, when Eily, Michael and Peggy suffer from a great hunger and Peggy is sick, Eily is full of remorse at having taken the decision for them all not to go to the workhouse, where they would get some food and Peggy would not get bitten by any dog and would not be sick now: "Had she made the wrong choice and cost them all their lives?" (UHT 121). The phrase 'cost them all their lives' could be interpreted as a very mild expression of 'killed them' as Eily is afraid that her decision will lead to their death.

As already pointed out, and as could already be seen in some of the excerpts above, in addition to euphemistic expressions related to death, there are also many direct references to death and dying. When Mrs O'Driscoll returns from the village, she says to her children: "'Poor Father Doyle is very bad and hasn't stirred at all in weeks – his housekeeper Annie died a few days back [...]" (UHT 37). Similarly, when Jer Simmonds approaches their cabin,

he asks the children: ““Are your parents sick with the fever? Has anyone died in the family?”” (UHT 45). Although the main characters are children, Peggy being only seven years old, the adult characters do not make any effort to use a ‘softer’ language when referring to death in front of them. Moreover, Eily and Michael use the verb ‘to die’ and its various forms themselves when talking about dying. In the following example, Eily says to Michael and Peggy, ““I remember the time Grandmother was sick and dying and Mother went back home to see her [...]”” (UHT 49). In addition, Michael uses a direct reference even when talking about their own death: ““We’re going to die like the rest of them, aren’t we?”” (UHT 87). As can be seen, the use of direct expressions of death and dying and that of euphemisms does not depend on who is talking or to whom he/she is talking. The child characters use the expressions ‘death’ and ‘to die’ as much as the adult characters do.

It can be seen that euphemisms and words and phrases directly denoting death are used equally in the novel, irrespective of who is speaking (whether the narrator, adult or child characters), to whom he/she is speaking (whether to adult or child characters) and about whom he/she is speaking. The only exception to this statement could be found in the passages referring to Bridget’s death - in almost all the examples, Bridget’s death is referred to by using euphemisms. It could be argued that the reason for this might be that Bridget is still an infant only a few months old – “the little sister [Eily, Michael and Peggy] hardly knew” (UHT 22), and that a more direct reference to the baby’s death could be considered inappropriate for a children’s audience, although once it does appear in the novel.

2.2.1.2.2. The Element of the ‘Macabre’

In general, it could be argued that *Under the Hawthorn Tree* has a very grim and gruesome atmosphere, which Conlon-McKenna achieves through her use of language and harsh and macabre descriptions of dead and dying people, which are unusually detailed for a children’s audience.

Macabre descriptions of dying people appear very often in the novel – it is full of images of “starving people, tired and brokenhearted, who had lost everything” (UHT 101). Such descriptions can be mostly found in passages depicting the situation in towns and villages, or the conditions in the workhouses and soup kitchens:

Hundreds of ragged starving people thronged the small main street. They queued, desperate for food. [...] The faces – the faces – [Eily] would never forget them. They all had the same look. The cheeks were sunken, the eyes wide and staring with deep circles underneath, the lips narrow and tight, and in some the skin had a yellow tinge. Hunger and sickness had changed these people. (UHT 79-80)

Similarly, the workhouse is described as a place from which “a constant moaning and crying” comes, and around which “a smell of disease and sickness seem[s] to fill the air” (UHT 124). The macabre atmosphere is achieved through creating images of extreme human suffering (“a constant moaning and crying”) and, at the same time, of a high concentration of dying people in one place (“[h]undreds of ragged starving people”), emphasising the serious and horrifying situation in which people found themselves. This is supported by references to sickness and extreme hunger, and by the harsh and very realistic and often detailed descriptions of the bodily effects of starvation – “[t]he cheeks were sunken, the eyes wide and staring with deep circles underneath, the lips narrow and tight, and in some the skin had a yellow tinge”.

In addition to the depictions of dying people, the author evokes repulsive images of dead bodies lying everywhere – in cottages as well as along the roads. When the protagonists find the corpse of a dead man, an unpleasant description of the body is provided: “The skin was rotted and all different colours. He was thin, so thin that his bones already showed” (UHT 85). A similar picture is evoked in the passage where Eily, Michael and Peggy pass a man carrying corpses to a burial pit: “Then a man came by on horseback, pulling a slide. He had a piece of cloth tied around his face, his eyes stared straight ahead. On the slide were piled four or five skeleton-like bodies, their bare skin and bones showing through the rags” (UHT 69). In both examples, the devastating effects of hunger are emphasised, using references to showing bones and skeletons. The decomposition of human bodies is stressed by describing the skin as “rotted and all different colours”, and by indicating that a horrible stench is coming from the bodies (“[the man] had a piece of cloth tied around his face”). A similar reference to the stench of a rotting corpse appears shortly before the protagonists find the dead body of a man: “They had stopped for a rest when they became aware of a smell – more like a stench. Even worse than the time the potatoes had rotted” (UHT 84). Another very unpleasant image is evoked when the two women who cross Eily’s way say, ““The poor old priest went calling on four of the cottages and found all in them dead of the famine fever and huge rats swarming the place”” (UHT 89). Here, the

image of rats swarming the cottages is used to underline the macabre and gruesome mood evoked by the passage.

The descriptions of the country also contribute to creating a grim atmosphere of the novel: “Nothing stirred in this bleakness, not a bird or an insect or a bee or an animal. It was too quiet. Fields of what had been gorse and heather and pasture had been laid bare. ‘Are we in hell?’ asked Peggy” (UHT 108). Here, the grim mood is evoked by references to ‘bleakness’, ‘silence’, ‘bareness’ and ‘hell’, all of which have negative connotations.

2.2.2. Death and Dying in *Nory Ryan's Song*

2.2.2.1. Story Level

2.2.2.1.1. Potato Blight, Hunger and Other Themes Linked to Death

In contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, where hunger is presented as an immediate result of the blighting of the potatoes, in *Nory Ryan's Song* the characters suffer from hunger already before the potato blight first appears on their fields. This is shown at the very beginning of the first chapter where Sean approaches Nory and gives her a piece of dulse to be shared between them, and Nory thinks, "I was so hungry I could almost feel the taste of it on my tongue" (NRS 1). Another reference to the harsh living conditions caused by the lack of food appears in the fourth chapter, where Maggie leaves for America and says, "'There's never enough to eat. When I'm gone there will be that little bit extra'" (NRS 20). The hunger inevitably also affects animals – when Nory approaches the spot where the Neelys' cabin used to stand and where only stone walls are standing now as the family has been evicted and their cabin has been pulled down, she spots their dog, tied to the trunk of a tree, and she notices how skinny the dog is: "I could see how thin she was, how easily you could count her ribs" (NRS 10). It could be argued that the author's intention was to depict the harsh living conditions of the Irish peasants even before the potato blight first appeared on their fields and thus to stress how hard it was to survive the 'Great Hunger'.

It is only at the end of the sixth chapter that the first indication of a trouble connected to the blighting of the potatoes is addressed. This happens in the passage where Devlin, Lord Cunningham's agent, approaches the Ryans' house to warn them that their rent will be due soon and that a trouble with the potatoes, which appeared in Sligo and which might come to their village too, will be no excuse for not paying the rent:

'There is talk of trouble in the fields.'

'What fields?' Granda asked, his voice stronger than I had heard it in a long time.

'What trouble?'

Devlin spread his hands. 'The potatoes are black. In Sligo.'

'A long way away,' Granda said, but I could see the fear in his eyes. I knew what he was thinking; it was the story of the potatoes failing when Da was a boy. Everything else had gone to pay the rent, and there was no food. People had starved, even one of Da's brothers. A thump of fear in my chest. Could it happen to us?

'Sligo is not so far after all,' Devlin said, and stood up. (NRS 35)

The first sign of the potato blight in Nory's village appears when Nory walks along the edge of a field and notices a bad smell in the air:

The potatoes grew strong, the leaves large and flat. I pictured roots swelling under the ground, the tubers round by now. My mouth watered. I had a headache because I had given half my breakfast to [the dog]. [...] I lifted my head. There was something in the air. A strange smell. I tried to think of what it was, but the wind blew across the field, tangling my hair and pulling at my petticoat. By the time I straightened myself out, the smell had drifted away. (NRS 37-38)

When Nory comes to Anna's cabin, they both hear a wail, and Anna, suspecting the worst, approaches her small field and says, "'I can smell it,' [...] 'I've smelled it before. Years ago.' [...] 'Yes. Something poisoning the potatoes'" (NRS 40). They start to dig and realise with great relief that Anna's potatoes are fine. After that, Anna sends Nory home to check their own potatoes. Nory takes a shortcut across the Mallons' field, where the Mallons have already started to dig out their potatoes, realising that they have been blighted: "It was everywhere. A leaf lying back against a stem as if it had no strength to stand up by itself. Another stem seemed to lose colour in front of our eyes. I backed away, stepping on one plant, shaking the edge of my skirt where the plant had left a smear of brownish ooze. I tried not to take a deep breath because the smell was stronger now" (NRS 45). Nory runs home and tells her family the bad news, and after that they go to check their own potatoes, finding them fine. However, when Nory wakes up at the horrible smell in the night and realises that her grandfather, as well as her brother and sister, have woken up too, they go to their field, start to dig and find their potatoes completely rotted (NRS 49-54).

It is only now that the real struggle for survival begins. Because the Ryans have almost nothing to eat, they decide to eat once a day only (NRS 56), and gradually, they get used to going to bed with headaches and stomachaches caused by hunger, listening to Patch's crying (NRS 63). Their meals consist of "the few fish [they have] managed to poach from Cunningham's stream and once in a while a wild onion or an old potato" (NRS 90). Besides fishing in the stream, which proves to be a difficult and dangerous task as Lord Cunningham punishes everyone who has been caught fishing in 'his' stream (NRS 16-17), the children try to help to bring some food into the house by gathering limpets and mussels. In addition, Celia goes to ask Lord Cunningham for work as a cook at his house, though unsuccessfully, and Nory, with Anna's help, finishes knitting her shawl to sell it (NRS 84, 103-109). However,

nothing of this proves to be sufficient means to get food and gradually, hunger leaves visible marks on the appearance of the characters so that Patch looks like “there [is] nothing to him but a small fold under the clothes”, and his “hand against his cheek [is] nothing but bones” (NRS 118). Similarly, Sean looks like “something [has] happened to his teeth” because they look “huge in his face”, but then Nory realises that it is not Sean’s teeth that have changed: “[...] his teeth weren’t different but his face had changed. His cheeks were sunken and flat like Granda’s; his eyes were deep in his head. He looked at me and I knew he was thinking I looked terrible too” (NRS 119). The situation is worsened when Nory and Sean realise that one of their most important supplies of food – limpets and mussels – becomes endangered by crowds of starving people looking for seafood:

I stopped at the end of the path, my mouth open. The strand was filled with people. People I never saw at the water’s edge. People I saw only during the time of the fair. They had walked a long way to get here. Some gathered seaweed and the others looked for limpets and mussels. Our mussels. Our *fuafar* limpets. Sean and I looked at each other. ‘Hurry,’ he said. We began to run, the sand dragging at our feet. At the water’s edge we started to dig, getting into everyone’s way, splashing, the sand under our nails and crushed shells biting at our feet. Around us people called to each other. (NRS 67)

The passage illustrates the real situation during the Great Irish Famine – that crowds of people were travelling from inland, walking the coasts and searching for seaweeds and shellfish, and it suggests the idea that those who are quicker will survive. In addition to this, the growing despair and determination to stay alive forces people to eat anything that can be eaten, such as for example grass, which is shown in the following passage:

I sank down next to Patch on the wet ground and watched the people. Some of them had circles of green around their mouths. I wondered what it was. I wondered how I could get some. And then I knew. ‘They are eating grass,’ I told Patch. ‘Me,’ he said. ‘I will have grass.’ [...] He leaned against a rock, and I leaned back with him. We lay there, sucking on the blades of grass. (NRS 90)

As already mentioned, lips green from eating grass is a common, as well as a very powerful image in the Famine literature for children as it stresses the desperate situation in which people found themselves. There are several descriptions of ragged, starving and dying people, especially when Nory comes to Ballilee: “I stood up at last, feeling dizzy, hungrier than I had ever been, and started up the street, walking around the groups of people. I had never seen so many before. Some of them lay against the walls of the shops, looking as if they’d never get up, their eyes sunken in their heads. They were almost like skeletons” (NRS

112). However, in comparison to *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, the number of such descriptions is smaller and they are not as detailed and harsh as in the first novel.

Often in the novel, the great hunger brings people closer together, which can be seen, for example, in the passages where Anna gives Nory and Patch her milk or an apple (NRS 59, 71, 92, 108), or when Nory brings Anna the limpets she has gathered and which Anna refuses to take with the words that Nory and Patch need them more (NRS 72-73), or when Nory leaves two morsels of the small hen they cooked for Anna (NRS 99). Similarly, when Nory gets the idea to climb the cliffs and gather the eggs of wild birds (which was a common practice during the Famine), Sean decides to help her, and they divide the 'food' between them (NRS 124-129). Thus, family, friendship, fellowship and love between the characters play a crucial role in their chances to survive as they are important elements in the characters' desire and determination to keep each other alive.

On the other hand, the great hunger awakens people's survival instincts and makes them aggressive, leaving them with one single desire – to stay alive:

[Mr Brennan] looked out the window at the people gathered in front of the bakery. They were begging, yelling for food. Someone threw a rock through the window, and the people climbed in over the broken glass. The baker, a cut on his cheek, slipped out his door. Then he was outside, running down the street, away from his rolls, and his bread, and his penny buns. In a moment everything was gone. The shelves were bare, and outside the people tore loaves of bread into chunks, fighting over them, trampling each other. (NRS 78)

Left with this only desire – the desire to survive, people become dangerous for each other, disregarding whether an adult or a child is standing in front of them. Consequently, when Nory goes home with the packages of food she has bought for the money she got for her shawl, she is attacked by a man who tears the packages from her hands and runs away: "By the time I heard the footsteps it was too late. I felt a hand on the back of my neck, felt the push. I threw my hands out to stop myself from falling, but it didn't help. There was a sudden pain as I went down and a rock tore open my forehead. I looked up to see the man running with my packages under his arm, his hair streaming out in back of him" (NRS 115).

As regards references to the diseases connected to the Irish Famine, in the whole novel there are only few – one of them can be found in the passage where Nory enters Anna's cabin and finds her lying in bed with fever (NRS 119), or when she approaches the Mallons' cabin: "Sean looked back at the door of his house, a quiet house without the sound

of his mother's scolding. Was she lying in her bed, as sick as Anna?" (NRS 123). Another one can be found in the following passage:

I had to tell Anna. [Devlin] hadn't forgotten about that cure after all.
 'Broken bones,' said Devlin. 'And wens.'
 'And the fever people are having in Ballilee,' I said, taking a guess about what might be wrong with the landlord. (NRS 138)

However, in none of these examples does the author explain the link between the fever and the Famine, nor does she discuss the probability in which the fever might lead to death.

2.2.2.1.2. Additional Causes of Death

In contrast to the authors of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*, the author of *Nory Ryan's Song* does not address two important issues related to the prevention of deaths or, on the other hand, in some cases to the 'acceleration' of dying, namely the establishment of soup kitchens and workhouses. However, she does address the other additional causes of death which are referred to in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*.

As in the previous novel, one of the most prominent additional causes of death addressed in the novel is the hostile attitude of the English landlord to his tenants – his cruelty, mercilessness and lack of interest in their suffering. As a result, the theme of eviction is one of the most prominent issues linked to death in the novel, and it is given even more space here than in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. The reader learns that everyone in the village suffers from the lack of food and that the situation is worsened by the English landlord Lord Cunningham, who evicts everyone who is not able to pay his/her rent. At the end of the first chapter, Nory witnesses her neighbours – the Neelys – being expelled from their house and decides to help them by borrowing a coin from Anna. Unfortunately, she is late and learns that the Neelys will probably be sent to the debtors' prison in Australia (NRS 4-9). Throughout the novel, Reilly Giff portrays the cruelty of the English landlord, who forces the poor peasants to pay high rents with money for which they could otherwise buy food. Those with no money at all are forced to leave their cabins, which increases the probability that they will die of hunger, exposure to coldness or exhaustion on the roads. Nory remembers one day when she was hiding in the reeds along the stream, watching Lord

Cunningham talking to Devlin: “[Lord Cunningham] waved his hand at the fields and the cliffs above. ‘I’d like to get rid of all of them. Filthy hovels, filthy people. I would tear down the houses and let sheep roam among the rocks.’ I had wondered where the filthy hovels were. I had wondered about the filthy people. And then I knew. I was one of the filthy people who lived in a filthy hovel” (NRS 15). Similarly, later in the novel, Anna explains to Nory: “‘The English want us out of here.’ She raised one shoulder. ‘They want our land for sheep, they want it for themselves. You will see. They will offer little help when we starve this winter. They will put us out on the road without a care’” (NRS 72). Those with no money to pay the rent are forced to hand over their livestock (NRS 96-101) and other possessions which could help them survive, such as currachs, which are necessary for sea fishing (NRS 68). In addition, it has already been pointed out that the landlord punishes everyone who is caught fishing in his river, which challenges the popular misconception that the Irish people did not fish in the rivers and brooks because they were lazy. The depiction of the cruelty of the English landlords might be interpreted as the author’s implied criticism of the hostile attitude of the English colonisers to the suffering of the Irish peasants.

Another issue which could be said to have ‘accelerated’ dying of hunger and which is referred to in the novel are the roadworks. When Nory’s grandfather announces that he will set out to find work on the roads and Celia asks him for what reason, he says, “‘For no reason. The English will have us build roads that go nowhere. They will give us money but in the end they want nothing to be better’” (NRS 82). Thereafter, he continues, “‘The money will help feed the three of you. It will buy milk or a piece of salmon if there’s any to be had in Ballilee. You won’t have to worry about me’” (NRS 83-84). Unfortunately, because he is old and weak, and because the roadworks are hard, he is sent back home. In contrast to him, Nory’s friend Sean, who is tall and strong, is allowed to work on the roads, “breaking up huge chunks of rock” to help his family survive (NRS 82). However, when he comes home, his palms are “red and purple, bruised, cut, and blistered”, so that he is unable to bend his fingers (NRS 120). Consequently, the roadworks result in the hungry and weak peasants to become even weaker, thus lowering their chances of surviving the Famine.

Another point to be mentioned in the context of circumstances ‘accelerating’ dying of hunger and disease in the novel is the lack of access to medical treatment. Although the novel does not contain any references to the overcrowded workhouses, hospitals or to the lack of doctors, it could be argued that people are dying in the novel also because of the lack

of medical treatment. This suggestion can be supported by the fact that when the landlord has health problems (although it is never explained in the novel what kind of health problems and whether they are related to the Famine), he asks for Anna's help (NRS 137-138), although a man in his position could afford proper medical treatment if it were available. However, in the harsh times of the Irish Famine, even landlords were 'forced' to rely on the help of herbalists.

The terrible situation of the Irish peasants is worsened in the novel by their animals and food being exported to England: "At the dock in the noise and the rain, I saw Anna's cow and her pig, and men whipping animals onto planks of wood that led to a ship. It was a ship filled with food that was going away from us forever" (NRS 101). When Patch happily exclaims that they will go to Anna to get milk, Nory explains to him: "'No. The cow is gone. Gone with Muc and Biddy to England. They will be English animals now, not Irish'" (NRS 104). Later in the novel, when Nory suffers from such hunger that she feels pain in her forehead, she thinks about their hens which they had to give up for the rent: "I thought of Biddy and her sisters laying warm brown eggs in their baskets, Muc to have piglets one day. All gone down to the harbor and across the sea to the English" (NRS 118).

Another point of the author's implied criticism related to starvation on the one hand, and abundance of food on the other hand, can be found in the following passage, where hunger and extreme poverty are contrasted with affluence, abundance of food and the vanity of the rich:

[People] stood in front of the bakery, waiting, coughing, holding each other up. Others were at the hotel, hands out, swaying a little. Their eyes were huge in their bony faces. And even though the day was cold, some of them wore almost no clothing, just pieces of rags. One woman had only her petticoat. *They must have sold whatever they could, I thought, to buy a bit of food.* I pushed through them to the door of the hotel, and I waited too, looking through the lobby window. Inside, women were sitting in front of the hearth. One of them wore a ribboned hat that dipped and bobbed as she spoke. A woman with a brooch and rings sparkling as she moved. Lord Cunningham's wife! She was holding a thick piece of brack to her mouth. [...] I stood there for a long time watching her take delicate bites of the brack, wondering how it must be to have so much food. (NRS 110-111)

The above passage conveys the notion that the terrible suffering and hunger could have been prevented or made more bearable if the rich people had been more merciful and helped the poor and starving ones.

2.2.2.1.3. Death-Scenes

Although *Nory Ryan's Song* is a novel on the Great Irish Famine, there are very few references to death and to people dying of hunger and sickness. In those that do occur, the author avoids presenting death-scenes, mentioning death only marginally. As a result, when Sean's grandmother dies, the reader learns this only from the sentence "'Granny's gone.'" (NRS 120), and when Anna laments the bad situation, she says, "'They are starving to death in their houses'" (NRS 118). Although both examples refer to dying at home, no death-scene is actually depicted. The only image of dying peacefully at home is presented in the following passage, although the situation described is purely hypothetical – happening in Nory's mind and related to her fear that they will all die: "It came back to me, as Patch moved again, whimpered. I had lost everything. Patch was going to die, and Anna. We were all going to die, the three of us, here in the straw, warm and cozy, but without food" (NRS 117).

In addition to these subtle references to dying at home, there is one single reference to dying on the road, and this is, again, made to a purely hypothetical situation. This reference can be found in the following passage, where Nory wonders what might have happened to her father: "The ship might have foundered. He could have starved on the road. He could be sick" (NRS 97).

As regards references to dying outside on the streets, it could be argued that there is quite a subtle one, when Nory enters the village and the following scene opens up before her: "I stood up at last, feeling dizzy, hungrier than I had ever been, and started up the street, walking around the groups of people. I had never seen so many before. Some of them lay against the walls of the shops, looking as if they'd never get up, their eyes sunken in their heads. They were almost like skeletons" (NRS 112). Although there is actually no reference to death or dying, the passage suggests that many of the people are dying as they are looking "as if they'd never get up". However, except for the references mentioned above, no death-scenes are presented in the novel.

2.2.2.1.4. Burials

In contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*, *Nory Ryan's Song* does not contain any descriptions of traditional burial ceremonies, nor of any other funeral or burial, such as throwing the dead bodies into mass graves. The only reference to a funeral can be found in the passage where Nory learns that Sean's grandmother died: "'Granny's gone.' [Sean] raised one hand toward the cemetery. I shook my head. 'But we didn't pray over her.' No wake, no funeral. And then I thought about it. No money for the food and the *poitín* at the wake" (NRS 120). A wake could be described as "the traditional Irish way of celebrating one's life and ensuring that they had a good send off", looking more like a party than a funeral as a lot of drink and food was being served, practised up until the 1970s (ES 33). In contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, where Bridget could not be buried properly as the priest as well as the coffin maker died, the only explanation for having no funeral for Sean's grandmother in *Nory Ryan's Song* is the lack of money and food necessary for the usual ceremony. Thus, it could be argued that the author 'hides' certain historical facts (not explaining all the reasons why the traditional burial ceremonies did not take place) to avoid referring to death.

2.2.2.2. Discourse Level

2.2.2.2.1. References to Death and Dying

As regards the way death and dying are presented and discussed in the novel, in contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*, there are not many references to death. Furthermore, the references which do appear in the novel do not always denote death as connected to the Famine. For example, there are several words and phrases referring to the death of Nory's mother, as well as of Anna's husband and son, who all died long before the Famine began. When talking about her mother's death, Nory, as the narrator, always uses indirect references, such as in the passage where she mentions for the first time in the novel that her mother is dead: "And [Anna] hadn't saved my mam the day

my little brother, Patch, was born" (NRS 5). Another way to refer to the fact that her mother is dead can be found in the following passage, where Nory makes a reference to her mother's grave: "Next I stopped at Mam's grave and said a quick 'May the angels lead thee into Paradise.' [...] And now mam was under the grass and Maggie would be off to America" (NRS 22).

Besides the death of Nory's mother, there are several references to the death of Anna's husband and son:

I looked across at my mam's grave. She'd know what to do about potatoes and coins.
 'My husband is there.' Anna pointed her toe at a bit of ground.
 Anna had a husband?
 'My son with him,' she said.
 A little boy?
 I must have said it aloud because Anna shook her head. 'A man, grown.' (NRS 60)

In this example, Nory learns that Anna had a husband and a son, and, at the same time, it contains the first reference in the novel to their death. As can be seen, the information about their death is provided indirectly – Anna only points to their graves, without explicitly saying that they 'died'. In the following passage, the reader learns how her son Tague died:

[Anna] looked at me, eyes narrowed. 'My son, Tague ...'
 'He was the cliff fisherman,' I said, suddenly realizing.
 'He would go down on the strand and bring back ...'
 I leaned forward to listen, thinking about the story of Tague. A rope slung around his waist, whipping out and out and down. And because he reached out too far, the wind had pulled him off the cliff. (NRS 73)

Besides the above allusions to Tague's death, the euphemism 'to be gone' can be found in the following passage: "'[Tague] was always singing, never still. And after he was gone the whole world seemed quiet.' [...] 'But then,' she said, 'years later, I began to watch someone, a small child backed up against a wall, her mother dying, and there was nothing I could do'" (NRS 106). In addition to the reference to Tague's death, the excerpt also contains a reference to the death of Nory's mother, and here, interestingly, and in contrast to Nory's remarks about her mother's death, Anna uses a form of the verb 'to die', talking about Nory's mother's death directly and openly, without any 'softening' of the language. Similarly, when Sean talks about the way Tague died, he uses the phrase 'to be killed', which is more expressive and has a more negative connotation than the verb 'to die': "'You can't go down on a rope,' he said. 'Tague was killed that way. You know that'" (NRS 121).

Besides the references to death and dying described above, there are also a few which do not result from the Famine and which are made to talk about death in general, such as in the following example: “‘I’m sorry for your trouble.’ I bit my lip. I didn’t know why I said it. It was something Da and Maggie whispered at wakes, when someone had died” (NRS 46). In all these cases, when the characters talk about death and dying in general, the verb ‘to die’ is used.

As regards the presentation of death and dying as immediate results of the Famine, this does not occur often in the novel, whether death is referred to directly, or by using euphemisms and other indirect expressive means. The latter case can be found in the following example, where Sean announces that his grandmother died: “‘Granny’s gone.’ [Sean] raised one hand toward the cemetery” (NRS 120). First, Sean uses the euphemism ‘to be gone’, and then, to support and stress what he is saying, he points to the cemetery, indicating that his grandmother is buried already. Another way to express the concept of death indirectly is by using no words at all, such as in the following example, where a man approaches Anna’s cabin, looking for Nory and explaining that her father has sent him to bring her two passage tickets and to tell her to take the road to Galway where her father is waiting for her. Seeing the opportunity to get some information about Patch, Celia or her grandfather, Nory starts to ask the man whether he has seen them:

He started for the door, but I took his sleeve. ‘Did you see a cart along the road? A little boy ...’
 He shook his head. ‘I’ve been so tired. I’m sorry.’
 ‘And at the docks. My sister. My grandfather.’
 He raised his hands, thinking. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I just don’t know.’
 I closed my eyes.
 ‘It doesn’t mean ...,’ Anna began, and stopped. (NRS 143)

In the last sentence of the excerpt, Anna expresses her belief that Patch, Celia and the grandfather are not dead, although she actually does not finish the sentence and does not articulate the words ‘they are dead’. Similarly, when Nory and Sean go to the cliffs to gather some eggs, Sean says,

‘If you’re in trouble,’ he said, ‘the rope will tighten against me. Otherwise it will be slow and steady, and you will give a tug on it once in a while so I know you are still ...’
 ‘Alive.’ I tried to grin at him. (NRS 127)

As in the previous example, three dots are used to express the idea of death, dying, or staying alive, without the characters actually saying it aloud. Sean avoids saying that Nory is

to give a tug on the rope once in a while so that he knows that she is not dead. However, Nory finishes the sentence for him, using the word 'alive', which is another way of saying 'not being dead', thus avoiding the word 'dead' completely. The word 'alive', used in this context, appears in the novel several times, such as in the passage where Celia leaves with their grandfather and says to Nory, "'Stay alive.'" (NRS 100), or where Nory wonders whether Celia and her grandfather are still 'alive' (NRS 119).

In contrast to all these examples, there are a few passages in the novel where death and dying are referred to explicitly. For instance, when there is the first suspicion of the potato blight, Nory gets scared and remembers the stories of her father, who experienced a famine when he was a boy: *"Think about good things. What else? A red wedding dress. Number 416 Smith Street in Brooklyn. Think about ... Stories of famine, people dying in their houses. Da's little brother"* (NRS 40-41). Another example can be found in the following passage, where Nory temporarily gives up any hope that they will survive and everything will be fine one day: *"It came back to me, as Patch moved again, whimpered. I had lost everything. Patch was going to die, and Anna. We were all going to die, the three of us, here in the straw, warm and cozy, but without food"* (NRS 117). At the end of the same chapter, however, Nory gets new energy and hope and is determined to survive at all costs: *"Do you think I'm going to die for want of food," I asked, 'when it's there on the cliffs waiting for me?'"* (NRS 121). Besides these three examples, where dying of hunger is referred to directly by using the verb 'to die' and its forms, there are two passages in the novel where the characters use the phrase 'to starve to death'. The first one can be found in the part where the Mallons find all their potatoes blackened, and Granny Mallon says, *"Without potatoes we will starve to death"* (NRS 45). The other example occurs later in the story when Nory, Patch and Anna suffer from a great hunger, and Nory has a conversation with Anna: *"We had to have something to eat. Something more than water with roots and leaves Anna had saved. We had to have real food. Anna spoke without opening her eyes. 'They are starving to death in their houses,' she said. 'Yes,' I told her, a tap of pain in my forehead"* (NRS 118). However, these are the only examples in the whole novel where death as connected to the Famine is referred to directly.

Considering the results of the above analysis, it might be concluded that although death is not a taboo in the novel, the author does not discuss and refer to the theme as openly and directly as do the authors of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*, and as

openly and directly as one might have expected in a novel featuring a historical event where over 1 million people died.

2.2.2.2.2. The Element of the 'Macabre'

It could be argued that not only are there very few references to death and dying as immediate results of the Famine, but also the atmosphere of the novel is not gruesome and macabre when compared with *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*. Indeed, the only passage in the novel which could be described as evoking a macabre mood is the following one: "I stood up at last, feeling dizzy, hungrier than I had ever been, and started up the street, walking around the groups of people. I had never seen so many before. Some of them lay against the walls of the shops, looking as if they'd never get up, their eyes sunken in their heads. They were almost like skeletons" (NRS 112). Here, an allusion to death is made by describing the people as skeletons, "looking as if they'd never get up", and by referring to the large numbers of them. However, it can be argued that except for this passage, the author does not create as grim and macabre an atmosphere as one would expect to find in a novel on the Great Irish Famine.

2.2.3. Death and Dying in *The Grave*

2.2.3.1. Story Level

2.2.3.1.1. Potato Blight, Hunger and Other Themes Linked to Death

As already suggested in the chapter on the plot outlines of the novels, *The Grave* differs from the other two novels in that Tom's present overlaps with the past. As a result, the potato blight is introduced only after Tom travels back in time and finds himself in the 1840s – in the middle of the Irish Famine. It is shortly after he comes around that he realises a bad smell: "Then I noticed a foul smell, something rotten, which reminded me of Brian's socks on the floor by his bed at night. [...] I looked around but couldn't see anything different, just the rain drumming on the ground" (G 20). A little bit later, when he enters the village, he looks around him and reports, "The village, like the landscape, had a clean, bare, windswept look to it. But then I caught a whiff of that foul smell from earlier and guessed it was coming from the rows of plants, most of their leaves blackened, growing in heaped furrows in terraces along the lower slopes of the mountain behind the cottages" (G 33). Tom realises that the situation is getting worse and that the potato blight is spreading very quickly:

The morning was dry and bright. A cold west wind blew away most of the smell of rotting vegetation, but occasionally I got a whiff. Stinko! On the side of the hill a few stick figures of men and women dug weakly in the terraced potato rows, searching for potatoes, throwing blackened stalks and leaves onto a bonfire. A woman crouched over freshly dug potatoes, halving any firm ones with a knife, potatoes that hadn't yet melted into foul-smelling rot, searching for rare ones unstained with the black blight. (G 56)

Gradually, Tom learns what it "[feels] like to be hungry, really hungry" (G 126) and why there are no animals in the village, when Tully explains to him, "'[...] Did you not notice? There are no cats and dogs. There's not an animal left in the village; anything with the bit of meat on its bones is eaten long since'" (G 55). Tom realises that what he has known as hunger in Old Swan is not real hunger when compared to what he experiences here, and he admits that it is almost impossible to get really hungry in Old Swan because there is always

the possibility to get food by illegal means: “Back home in Old Swan it didn’t matter so much if you were sent to a rotten fozy that didn’t feed you right because you could always nick stuff from shops; no-one ever needed to go hungry. But here it was different: I didn’t know how Tully and Hannah and Brendan kept going on nothing; and Ma, she never complained either” (G 150). Tom compares the food situation in Black Swan of the 1970s and in Ireland of the 1840s very often, thinking about “the big shops in Old Swan – Sainsbury’s, Iceland, Hanbury’s, Kwik Save, their counters and shelves piled high with food while the Irish in 1847 were slowly starving to death” (G 104), and about the “beef pies, heaps of apples and plums and bananas [...], just waiting to be nicked”, while “there was nothing in [the] small starving town [of Newport] to nick” (G 123). Before leaving their village, the Monaghans, like the rest of the villagers, keep themselves alive by getting food from the sea, searching the tide pools for crabs and shellfish (G 61) and fishing, which gradually becomes their only source of food (which was the case of many Irish people during the Great Irish Famine):

‘It’s the sea that keeps us going, right enough,’ said the father to me, ‘with the occasional fish or seabird. But the fishing is hard.’ He coughed. ‘And the curragh is too light a craft for heavy weather. What with the winds driving you into the rocks, and the high cliffs like the devil’s own trap, it’s not worth your life to be out in it most of the year. And you cannot – didn’t I tell Tully this morning—’ a bout of coughing ‘— wait for the better weather.’ (G 42)

Unfortunately, not everyone in the village is lucky enough to get something to eat from the sea, and the number of people dying from hunger and disease is gradually increasing (G 57-58, 63).

Tom does his best to help the Monaghans survive, travelling with them, suffering with them, starving with them, and gradually, a strong friendship and love arises between him and the Monaghan family. When he is in Liverpool of the 1970s, he cannot stop thinking about Hannah, Tully, Brendan and their mother (G 177), being “more alive and real to [him] than [the] dead jerks in the present” (G 159). In addition, Tom feels that the Monaghans are his real family and that as they are important to him, he is important to them, and he realises that they need him and that he has travelled back in time to help them survive: “They didn’t have a clue. Babes in the wood. They were in a city full of food and they didn’t know how to get it. But stealing was alien to the Monaghans; they’d never stolen. Yet there was one thing I was certain of: without food they’d die. They needed me again” (G 198). Thus, the themes of struggle for survival, family, friendship, fellowship and love are very closely linked to the theme of death in the novel.

As in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, and in contrast to *Nory Ryan's Song*, the suffering is presented as being a result not only of poverty and hunger, but also of sickness. As already said, in *Nory Ryan's Song*, the author avoids referring to the famine diseases, while in *The Grave*, Heneghan presents many images of sick people dying of the 'famine fever'. When Tom walks the streets of Liverpool, the following scene opens up before him: "I looked in some of the other cellars along the way and saw dying people, all Irish immigrants by the sound of them, their swollen faces black with disease, limbs puffed up like balloons, a few of them like raving lunatics, twitching and shouting and screaming. The smell was the worst; I held my nose and retreated back up the steps" (G 192). This description is very realistic and rather detailed, showing the reader the physical effects of the disease and hunger, such as swollen face and puffed up limbs. Such descriptions appear several times in the novel – another one can be found in the passage where a woman brings Tom and the others to her place – a hole dug in the ground: "Inside, there was a man asleep. With Tully and Hannah, I took a closer look at him: stick-thin like a skeleton, he lay without a sound, the joints of his legs and arms swollen up like balloons and a bad smell off him worse than a boozier's puke" (G 148-149). Heneghan provides very realistic descriptions of what bodily effects hunger and the famine diseases had on people – the novel is full of limbs "puffed up like balloons", swollen faces, horrible smell, hair growing on the face, and of comparing human bodies to skeletons, such as when Tom passes little children sitting "on the roadside in a silent stupor, every rib starkly visible, no hair on their heads but thick downy hair on their faces that made them look like monkeys" (G 124). As can be seen, Heneghan does not avoid including children into the harsh depictions of suffering and hunger, and their presence in the misery is stressed in the following passage: "People sat by their fires or moved about in slow motion like they had iron balls and chains clamped to their bony legs. Many were sick, or dying, especially little kids, who were the ones hunger seemed to hit the hardest. One woman was wailing over the stiff body of a baby" (G 149). The last example even contains a reference to the death of children.

In addition to the themes of hunger, struggle for survival, love, family and friendship, which are, as already pointed out, very closely connected to the theme of death in the novel, religion and the theme of faith play an important role in this context too – references to religious faith can be found throughout the whole narrative, such as for example already in the very beginning when everyone thinks that Tully is dead and they start "talking and

keening and wailing and asking God's mercy, calling on the angels and saints to help them in their troubles and forgive their sins" (G 24), turning to God in the time of their great loss and grief, and when Tom saves Tully's life, they call him a "'holy angel'" sent by the Lord to bring Tully back (G 26). As regards the way Tully's 'death' is referred to by the characters, a woman says to Hannah: "'The sea is draining out of him, Maggie, but his soul is fled. God rest him now, for there's not a thing that mortal man can do. [...] Tully is gone, child. [...] It's only the Almighty can help him now'" (G 21-22). Thus, the theme of faith is very closely connected to the theme of death in the novel.

2.2.3.1.2. The Establishment of Soup Kitchens and Workhouses – Prevention of Deaths?

Similarly to *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, *The Grave* contains references to the soup kitchens and workhouses set up by the British government to provide relief for the Irish peasants. However, like *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, the novel shows not only the positive aspects related to these kinds of relief, but also the negative ones.

While soup kitchens were set up to provide assistance to the starving people and to give them food for free (food of very poor quality and tasting like a "toilet cleaner" (G 127)), Heneghan implies that this was done only in exchange for converting to Protestantism. The following passage illustrates the situation, implying that those who want to survive have to listen to a sermon held by a Protestant minister:

Across the street was Hannah's schoolhouse. Tents for the homeless had been set up beside and behind the mission house. We joined a queue for soup and had to take it inside and listen to a sermon from a bad-tempered minister named Nangle who went on and on about popery and sin and other stuff I didn't understand. As we came out, a bunch of old biddies were standing in the street yelling at us, calling us Soupers. I was too tired to ask Hannah what the fuss was about. (G 118)

The passage contains a reference to 'souperism'. However, as is the case in many children's novels on the Irish Famine, the reference to proselytising is very subtle and does not occur again in the novel. In addition, although the characters are called 'Soupers' in the passage quoted, there is no direct reference to the practice of taking food in exchange for converting

to Protestantism. Interestingly, although Tom does not know what the term ‘Soupers’ denotes, it is never explained in the novel and it does not occur in the narrative again.

Another kind of supposed help provided by the British government and which is referred to in the novel is the establishment of workhouses, set up to provide shelter, meals for free as well as medical treatment for the poor (G 125, 214). In contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, where mostly the negative aspects of this kind of relief are stressed and where most of the characters avoid going to the workhouse, *The Grave* shows that the workhouses *were* intended to help people in need and to reduce the huge numbers of deaths, and that it was not just a place where people got a bed to die on, but a place where doctors did their best to save as many lives as possible, although some of the famine diseases, such as the relapsing fever, were new and therefore, they did not know how to cure it: “The doctor shrugged sadly whenever Tully asked him if he could save his brother. ‘It’s the relapsing fever,’ he said. They were all doing their best, he said” (G 221). Similarly to *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, however, there is a lack of these places and those which are there are overcrowded and do not take in most of the newcomers so that in the end, people are denied access to medical treatment and, consequently, it could be argued, this results in an ‘acceleration’ of dying of hunger and sickness. This, together with other additional causes of death, will be explored in the following subchapter.

2.2.3.1.3. Additional Causes of Death

As in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Nory Ryan’s Song*, one of the most prominent additional causes of death addressed in the novel is the hostile attitude of the English landlord to his tenants – not only his lack of interest in their suffering, but also his mercilessness and extreme cruelty. Consequently, as in the previous two novels, the theme of eviction is one of the most prominent ones linked to death in the *The Grave*. Heneghan makes the reader aware that the great hunger was not the only cause for the huge numbers of deaths – the natural disaster is worsened by the merciless behaviour of the English landlord. Mr Monaghan explains to Tom:

“‘England is demanding higher taxes from its landlords. The more tenants and subtenants the landlord has on his land, the more he must pay in taxes. So the

landlords are getting rid of their tenants. Our landlord's man is Mr Begley. Begley sent eviction notices out months ago for everyone in the village to be gone by the end of September.' [...] 'Every living soul. But we're still here, for there's no place for us to go. We fear the military will drive us off. It has happened in other places, people run off their land by the peelers, the police, their homes tumbled to the ground'" (G 53-54).

Indeed, it happens shortly after Mr Monaghan expresses his fear for their fortune that the landlord sends soldiers to the village to pull down the cabins of the poor villagers, who are unable to pay the rent. In the great struggle that arises between the soldiers and the villagers defending their cabins, many villagers die, among others Mr Monaghan (G 113). Those who survive the struggle are forced to leave the village and take to the roads, which increases the probability that they will die of hunger, exposure to coldness or exhaustion on the roads. It could be argued that these events in the story show the author's implied criticism of the practice of eviction by the English landlords and of them worsening the situation of the tenants. It also suggests that if the landlords had been more merciful, the death rates might not have been that high.

Another additional cause of dying of hunger and sickness referred to in the novel is denied access to medical treatment. There are several references to doctors refusing to help the poor, staying away from them for fear of catching the famine fever. When Mrs Monaghan and Brendan get sick, Tom and Hannah search for a doctor to come to them, knocking on the doors of medical houses, but in vain – no one is willing to come:

'My ma is sick, ma'am,' said Hannah. 'Could the good doctor –'
 'The doctor is out.' The woman closed the door firmly. The same thing happened in Brownlow Hill, and in Rodney Street.
 'It's no good, Tom,' Hannah sighed, the breeze tossing her hair about. 'They'll not come. There's too much talk of the Irish famine fever spreading.' She shook her head. 'The good Dr Adams himself was struck down in Achill, God rest his soul, just before we set out, and there's no cure for it. The doctors have a right to be fearful, for it is swamping Liverpool. It doesn't seem to matter whether you catch the black fever or the yellow, for they both carry you off.' (G 205-206)

The only help they can get is in a workhouse. However, as already pointed out, these places are extremely overcrowded and most of the newcomers are refused to get in:

The workhouse was a large brick building with steps up to a heavy front door. A bunch of miserable, starved, sick people sat on the steps. Brendan was still carrying the sick boy. I helped the mother of the boy up the steps. Voices in the crowd said, 'There's no room,' and, 'They'll not let you in.' A notice on the door printed in Irish and English said PUBLIC WORKHOUSE FULL. Tully knocked on the door, but there was

no answer. He started to turn away, defeated, but I thumped a couple of heel kicks at the bottom of the door and kept striking until a big angry man came out and bellowed at me in Irish. [...] Then he slammed the door in my face. I kicked on the door again and this time when he opened the door his eyes were jumping from his head in anger. 'Couldn't you make room for just one more?' I asked him, pointing to the woman and her kid. 'These people are sick.' He looked at them and I watched the anger leak out of him like air from a balloon. He said nothing for a while, and then: 'I don't know where I'll put them, but come in, missus, and I'll see what I can do.' (G 125-126)

Later in the novel, when Tully, Hannah and Tom manage to get Mrs Monaghan and Brendan into a workhouse, they notice that there are no beds to be had and that people are put out in sheds and tents on the grass (G 215). As a result of the extreme overcrowding, the famine diseases spread very easily and the characters do not get a proper medical treatment, which might be said to 'accelerate' dying of hunger and sickness in the novel.

Another circumstance worsening the terrible situation of the Irish peasants and 'accelerating' dying of hunger in the novel is the enforced exportation of animals and Irish corn to England:

'There's no shortage of food here,' [Tom] said to Tully and Hannah. Tully was angry. He pointed to the stick figures lining the road, some collapsed and unconscious. 'You don't think these poor people are hungry?' Then he pointed toward the harbour. 'Lookit! There's ships waiting to steal the food from Irish mouths! Every animal you see in those carts and every sheaf of corn is going to England!' 'But what about all those well-fed farmers?' 'They're the landlord's men. I'm ashamed to call them Irish,' said Tully.

This passage implies the author's critical attitude to the historical events – that Irish corn and animals were being exported to England while the Irish people were visibly starving, which contributed to a great extent to the huge numbers of deaths.

Another point of criticism related to the idea that there was enough food and the Irish people were nevertheless dying of hunger can be inferred from the passages presenting the stark contrast between the widespread suffering, hunger and extreme poverty on the one hand, and affluence, abundance of food and the vanity of the rich on the other hand, such as in the following example: "Westport was big and rich, and all hustle and bustle. There were the usual number [sic] of starving, homeless people, but there were also many shops and solid-looking houses, and fat, red-faced farmers, and carts rattling along the main road full of sheep and pigs and corn" (G 125). Similarly, when Tom takes part in a street fight, he looks around him and realises the contrast between the two groups of people surrounding him:

“Mostly men, there was a sprinkling of well-fed farmers, but the rest were a pretty sorry-looking lot, thin, starved, shagged; there wasn’t one of them could punch a hole through a wet *Liverpool Echo*. The knot of men over at the betting booth were farmers or tradesmen who had never missed a meal in their lives by the looks of them” (G 131). A similar contrast strikes Tom when he appears in Dublin:

I walked to the end of the street and looked up at the sign: Paradise Street. The cross street was Hanover, cobblestoned, noisily busy, people hurrying, not all of them poor in this district, some well dressed, with chimney-pot hats, heavy coats, carrying umbrellas, and stepping daintily through horse manure as they crossed the street. A clattering commotion of horses and carts, horse-drawn carriages with well-dressed women and kids inside, the pong of horse dung poisoning the cold air. Beggars sitting cross-legged outside many of the shops, hands out or hats or caps in front of them on the pavement, most of the shops run-down and empty. (G 189-190)

As in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Nory Ryan’s Song*, the author implies that there was enough food, however, it was not distributed properly, and that the huge numbers of deaths could have been smaller if the rich people had been more merciful and helped the poor and starving ones.

2.2.3.1.4. Death-Scenes

Because death is referred to very often in *The Grave*, and because it contains many descriptions of dead and dying people, a variety of death-scenes can be found in the novel, most often depicting people dying at home, dying outside and on the roads, as well as dying in workhouses and in the cellars of buildings.

There are several depictions of people dying at home – one of them can be found in the passage where a woman takes Tom and the Monaghans to her place – a hole dug deep in the ground, where a dying man sleeps: “Inside, there was a man asleep. With Tully and Hannah, I took a closer look at him: stick-thin like a skeleton, he lay without a sound, the joints of his legs and arms swollen up like balloons and a bad smell off him worse than a boozier’s puke” (G 148-149). Although the man is obviously suffering from hunger, sickness and exposure, he sleeps, which suggests that his departure from ‘this’ world will be very peaceful. Similarly, when they pass a village, they notice burrows and scalpeens inside of

which people “[sit] by their fires or [move] about in slow motion like they had iron balls and chains clamped to their bony legs. Many [are] sick, or dying, especially little kids, who [are] the ones hunger [seems] to hit the hardest” (G 149).

Some characters in the novel await death outside their houses, like the “living skeleton of a man sitting outside one hut whose eyes ha[ve] disappeared back into his skull and his shoulder bones [are] up around his ears” (G 123), others leave their homes for good, having been evicted or taking to the roads to look for work or just to escape the terrible situation in their villages, dying from hunger, sickness and exhaustion on the roads: “‘[...] And yonder’s the bit of skin and bones of a lonely wandering woman found early this morning on the road, God rest them both’” (G 58).

There are also several depictions of people who have come to big towns and harbours in hope to either get food or a passage ticket to England, and who have found a shelter in the cellars of buildings, where they are dying in cramped conditions with other strangers: “[Tom] bent and peered at the sleepers in the cellar. [He] counted four bundles of rags-and-bones, including two small kids, all asleep, or sick, or dying, or [he] couldn’t tell which” (G 188). A similar picture is offered a little bit later, when Tom is looking for the Monaghans:

Tom turned [his] back on the docks and traipsed back up the hill, [...] avoiding the puddles of filth and the heaps of smelly rubbish, through the squash of people and past alleys and cellars crowded with starving, sick people, heading in the direction of the squatters’ cellar. [He] looked in some of the other cellars along the way and saw dying people, all Irish immigrants by the sound of them, their swollen faces black with disease, limbs puffed up like balloons, a few of them like raving lunatics, twitching and shouting and screaming. (G 191-192)

In contrast to the previous excerpt, where people are silently dying, the passage above depicts the terrible suffering of people who, although being weak and dying, are screaming and shouting.

A similar scene opens up before Tully when he enters the workhouse and sees “people crying and moaning like banshees” all around (G 215). The reference to a banshee is worth pointing out in the discussion of the theme of death as it is a mythological figure associated with death in Ireland – the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines a banshee as “a female spirit who gives a long sad cry as a warning to people that somebody in their family is going to die soon” (ES 37).

In contrast to the passage above, when Tully, Hannah and Tom come to the workhouse the next day, “[n]ot one person move[s]; they [look] like they were dead” (G 216). Similarly, when Brendan is dying, he is passing away very quietly:

We took a look at Brendan. [...] ‘Hannah?’ He struggled to speak. ‘Will you stay with me, Hannah?’
 ‘Of course I will, Brendan. I’ll be here. I won’t go away.’
 ‘And Ma? And Tully?’
 ‘I’m here, Brendan.’ [...] ‘Ma is fine, don’t worry.’
 ‘And Tom?’
 ‘He’s here, too,’ said Hannah. (G 222)

Thus, the author suggests that the extreme suffering of dying people becomes even more painful when they are dying alone, without their friends and relatives, but with many strangers, surrounding them with constant moaning, crying and screaming.

2.2.3.1.5. Burials

In contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and especially *Nory Ryan’s Song*, *The Grave* contains very detailed descriptions of burials, and therefore, it can be argued that one of the valuable aspects of the novel is that it educates children about Irish mourning rituals and their tradition. In the beginning of the novel, Heneghan provides very detailed descriptions of the mourning rituals and funerals as they were held under normal circumstances:

The coffins were put down beside the open graves and several of the old biddies, seated on the flat tombstones, bent their foreheads to the stones and started wailing in high-pitched voices, one of them taking the lead, and then another, so that it sounded like two barrels of tortured cats, one group answering the other. All around the burial ground wrinkled old women swayed and murmured and cried with grief. More people came and still the wailing went on, other women joining in. Every so often the wailing died down and then it would start up again as a different old biddy took the lead against a background chorus of wails and chants. The blankets were removed from the coffins before they were lowered into the graves, and then the priest came and said a prayer while everyone kneeled, and still the keening went on in the background. All this time the men did nothing but bow their bared heads. (G 58)

The ritual of ‘keening’ – a practice similar to wailing performed in Ireland at funerals (today dying out), or “a controlled use of high-pitched singing of laments performed by women who are trained in this art”, performed after the wake (ES 34) – is finished by lowering the coffins

into the graves, after which jugs with poteen – a “home-made whiskey that’d rot your stomach” – are passed around, and then people start to sing (G 59).

However, in the course of the novel, as the number of dead and dying people increases to such an extent that the characters encounter death at every turn, the practice of burying people changes as well:

As we drew into the church grounds I could see several other carts piled high with coffins. A couple of men were unloading and stacking them near the piles of dirt. They wore work gloves and their mouths were covered with handkerchiefs against disease and the smell of death. I jumped out of the cart and looked down into [the] mass grave [...] The grave was big. Including a large area where many people were already buried, it measured like, what, fifteen feet wide? Twenty-five long? Down in its depths a gang of six men were digging, working furiously as though they couldn’t dig fast enough to accomodate all the coffins being delivered, filling barrows with dirt for other men to wheel quickly up wooden ramps to ground level to empty them and nip back down for the next load. There were already many hundreds of coffins in the grave, stacked sixteen high at one end, leaving a space of a few feet for soil to cover the topmost ones. [...] When all the coffins were in, the men paused in their digging and removed their cloth caps and wiped the sweat from their brows while a tired, grey-faced Snoozy’s priest muttered a prayer and sprinkled holy water into the grave over the latest batch of coffins. The brief ceremony over, the men went back to work. (G 236-238)

In contrast to the beginning of the novel, where every deceased person is given a decent funeral by the bereaved, here, all the corpses are put into a mass grave and the priest says a quick prayer as people have no energy and time to bury the deceased properly. As can be seen, the image of men on horses pulling carts piled with corpses and wearing a piece of cloth tied around their faces against the horrible “smell of death” and disease does not seem to be unusual in children’s novels on the Irish Famine, as a very similar picture could be found in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. The passage above also supports the argument that there is a strong link between death and religious faith in *The Grave*, whereby although there is no time to bury people properly and the rituals described in the beginning of the novel are left out, the characters always find time to say at least a quick prayer for the deceased.

2.2.3.2. Discourse Level

2.2.3.2.1. References to Death and Dying

As could be seen in the previous subchapters, there are many references to death in *The Grave*. As regards references to death as connected to the Famine, the very first mention of a dying person can be found in the sixth chapter when Mrs Monaghan looks into the cottage next door and says, “‘The widow Mahone will live alone no longer,’ [...] ‘She is resting in the arms of the Holy Mother above’” (G 57). In this example, dying is referred to indirectly, using the phrase ‘will live no longer’. In contrast to this, when a neighbour of the Monaghans says, “‘Didn’t [Dan O’Herlihy] up and die in the night from the famine fever’” (G 58), he mentions death directly, using the verb ‘to die’. Moreover, when pointing to the corpse of a woman found on the road, he uses even more unpleasant words: “‘[...] And yonder’s the bit of skin and bones of a lonely wandering woman found early this morning on the road, God rest them both’” (G 58).

As the story develops, more and more references to death and dying can be found, as could be seen already in many of the passages quoted in the previous chapters. Interestingly, when the characters talk about the death of Brendan and Mrs Monaghan, they use predominantly euphemisms and other indirect references to death: “The next day the young Irish nurse met us at the tent entrance. She said to Tully, ‘Your poor mother was too far gone. She passed away in the night. Father Grogan gave her the last rites.’ She laid a hand on his arm. ‘She is in heaven this very minute, resting in the loving arms of Jesus’” (G 221-222). First, the nurse uses the phrase ‘to be too far gone’, meaning that Mrs Monaghan was ‘near to her end’ – in other words, dying. Then, to announce that Mrs Monaghan died, she uses the euphemism ‘to pass away’, and to refer to the state of being dead, she uses the phrase ‘to be in heaven’. The excerpt also contains a reference to religion when the nurse says that Mrs Monaghan is ‘resting in the loving arms of Jesus’, which is used to console the family and to encourage them to believe in an afterlife. Similarly, when Brendan dies, the nurse whispers, “‘The boy slipped quietly away from us, without any pain or fuss. God rest him’” (G 226-227). Not only does the example contain another reference to religious faith when a character dies, but it also shows another way to refer to dying indirectly, using the phrase ‘to slip away’. However, there are also a few examples in the novel where the death

of the above mentioned characters is referred to directly, such as in the following excerpt where Tom says, “‘I was trying to get back home. I didn’t want to stay any longer and see Brendan ... die’” (G 228). In addition, there are passages where the death of the Monaghans is referred to directly and then, a few sentences later, indirectly, and vice versa, such as in the following example: “Tully said, ‘The future. Ha! Brendan’s death has addled all our heads, I think, but yours more than mine.’ [...] ‘It’s true you saved my life, but what of Da and Ma? And Brendan? With them gone we’ve nothing left’” (G 231). Here, Tully first uses the word ‘death’, and then the euphemism ‘to be gone’. Similarly, when Tully has an argument with Tom, and accuses him of having been sent to deprive them all of life, both direct, as well as indirect references to death, dying and causing one’s death/ killing are made:

‘You were sent to destroy us!’ Tully moved away from me.
 I said, ‘That’s crap, Tully.’
 ‘First my da, then Ma, and now Brendan.’ Face cold and hard. Accusing.
 ‘That’s not it—’
 ‘And we’re to be the next, I suppose—’
 [...] ‘I had nothing to do with their deaths, Tully, and you know it. Why I’m here I don’t know. I think it was an accident if you really want to know the truth, something to do with being in the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time, I don’t know, but I wasn’t sent to destroy you. [...]’ (G 229)

First, Tully uses the verb ‘to destroy’ to say that Tom has been sent ‘to kill’ them, saying that he and his sister are going ‘to be the next’, meaning that they are the next ones who are going to be ‘deprived of life’ by Tom. In his response, Tom refers to the death of the three Monaghans directly, using the word ‘deaths’, and then repeats Tully’s indirect expression for ‘to kill’ – ‘to destroy’.

As regards references to the death of other characters, many euphemisms and ways of referring to their death and dying indirectly can be found, such as for example when Tully talks about the hard situation of the “poor starving Irish wretches living in cold, overcrowded cellars or doorways without the helping hand of charity” and says, “‘There’s only free transportation to a pauper’s grave when all the suffering is over’” (G 219-220). In addition, it is not unusual to come across the phrase ‘to keep going’ throughout the novel, expressing the opposite of ‘dying’ and referring to the struggle for survival of the characters. The phrase can be found for instance at the beginning of the novel, where Mr Monagan explains to Tom, “‘It’s the sea that keeps us going, [...]’” (G 42), or when Tom, as the narrator, says, “I didn’t know how Tully and Hannah and Brendan kept going on nothing” (G 150).

Besides euphemisms and other indirect expressions of death and dying, direct references are used very frequently, such as in the following passage:

As I stared at the people I couldn't help thinking they were all dead now, every one of them, *now* being my own time. But it was probably still 1847 – I'd have to ask someone – and they were all alive, living as though they didn't know they's soon be dead. It was weird: I thought of millions of people living and dying, and always there were new people coming, who lived and died, and then more new people who lived and died, and so on for ever and ever, world without end, Amen. (G 190)

It is very interesting that while the narrator talks about death and dying directly, using the adjective 'dead' and the verb 'to die', the phrase "and so on for ever and ever, world without end, Amen" shows that he keeps his humorous tone as if to lighten the serious and sad mood evoked by the passage. Indeed, the humorous style of the narrator presents another difference between *The Grave* and the other two novels, namely that the serious and sad topic of the Irish Famine is lightened by the funny and informal language of the narrator and by his jokes, which occur throughout the whole narrative. Through the constant shifting from jokes to a more serious attitude of the narrator and vice versa, the otherwise sad story, especially the parts which are set in the past, gets a lighter touch.

Besides the presentation of death as a result of hunger and disease, it has already been pointed out that the presentation of death as a result of the struggle between the villagers and soldiers in the beginning of the novel is relevant in the discussion of the presentation of death as connected to the Irish Famine too, as the attitude of the landlords played an important role in the question of survival of the Irish peasants. When a soldier fires his gun and Mr Monaghan falls to the ground, Tom travels in time 'back' to the 1970s and does not know for sure whether Mr Monaghan and Tully, who tried to protect him, are dead or not. However, he fears the worst and expresses his worries as follows: "My next thought was of the rumble in the village, Tully's father shot down, Tully attacking the killer, [...]. Had the mission been accomplished and I wasn't needed any more? Or had the mission failed when the soldier shot and killed both Tully and his father?" (G 76). In this excerpt, first, the expression 'shot down' is used to express the idea that Mr Monaghan fell down to the ground because a soldier shot at him, however, it does not contain the information whether he died or not. It is only later in the text that the soldier is referred to as 'the killer', which implies that Mr Monaghan has died as a result of the injury. However, because Tom disappears from the scene and does not know what really happens thereafter, it is only four chapters later that the reader learns with certainty that Mr Monaghan died: "[Fergus] shook

his head. It was an effort for him to speak. 'Most have taken to the road, or gone to the mission house. God have mercy on us. Wasn't Thaddy just buried this morning, let him rest in peace, so the missus is not yet gone; they're below in what's left of the house.' He pointed. The father dead, but the others still here" (G 113). Here, the Monaghans' neighbour Fergus tells to Tom that Mr Monaghan died by saying that his body has been buried, however, he does not say directly that 'he died' or that 'he is dead'. Such a direct expression is used only by Tom as the narrator in the last sentence of the excerpt, when he says that "[t]he father [is] dead". In addition to the references to Mr Monaghan's death, there are also those made to the death of Tom himself. When Tom disappears from the scene, no one knows where he is and, therefore, the villagers believe that he is dead. Consequently, when he appears in the village again, Hannah 'attacks' him because of her worries about him and explains, "'Every living soul was out till dark looking for you. I thought you were dead.'" (G 114-115), Mrs Monaghan says, "'Weren't we worried you were killed.'" (G 115), and Gerry, Tully's friend, exclaims, "'We thought we'd lost you, Tom Mullen, that you were killed. [...]"' (G 116). As can be seen, while Hannah uses a direct reference to death – the adjective 'dead', Mrs Monaghan and Gerry use a word with an even more negative connotation – 'killed', which means 'deprived of life by someone else'. In contrast to this, before using the word 'killed', Gerry uses an euphemistic phrase, saying, "'We thought we'd lost you [...]"'.

As could be seen, there are many references to death and dying as a result of hunger, disease or the mercilessness of the English landlord. However, there are many more references throughout the whole novel which are not connected to the Irish Famine, but which further demonstrate that death and dying are not a taboo in the novel. For instance, from the beginning of the novel, Tom gradually discovers his past to the reader, mentioning again and again an old couple – the Feinbergs, whom he liked most, although they have never been his foster parents. The reader learns that "[c]ancer took [Ms Feinberg] quick before she knew what hit her" (G 171), and that shortly thereafter, Mr Feinberg died too, whereby Tom "was with him till he died" (G 172). He remembers every detail of the conversation which he had with his neighbour, Mrs Sampson, the day Mr Feinberg died:

'He's gone, Tommy,' Mrs Sampson said, face like a spaniel, sad eyes looking at me.
'What do you mean, gone?'
'It was a heart attack. I'm sorry, but it was quick and he didn't suffer.' (G 175)

Interestingly, as can be seen in the above passage, Mrs Sampson uses the euphemism 'to be gone' as she is speaking to a small boy, and when he asks her what she means, she is not

able to tell him directly that Mr Feinberg died, explaining only the reason and circumstances of Mr Feinberg's death. In contrast to this, when Tom as the narrator recounts these happenings, he uses the language of a thirteen-year-old boy who has some experience with death already and thus refers to the concept directly.

Another example of referring to death as not an immediate result of the Famine can be found in the part of the story where Tom and Tully take part in the street fight. At first, when Tully gets the idea to fight the prizefighter winning every fight, Tom tells him, "Tully, you can't. That bruiser'll murder you" (G 131). However, when Tom realises that the men organising the fights are cheating and that Tully will not get the prize he deserves, full of anger, he decides to fight too. As with Tully, the man turns into a 'beast' with one single intention – to kill Tom: "He was mad. He wanted to kill me" (G 137). In both examples, the prizefighter is described as a man trying to deprive both Tully and Tom of life – in the second example, the verb 'to kill' is used, whereas in the first one, the verb 'to murder' is employed, which has an even more negative connotation as the former, meaning 'to kill someone intentionally'. A completely different expression for 'to murder' can be found in the following example, where a metaphor is used, carrying the same meaning as the verb 'to murder', however, without such a strong negative connotation: "O'Gorman, ignoring Clancy, stood, bunched fists, and came after me, thirsting to thrash the life out of me" (G 139).

Considering the results of the above analysis, it can be concluded that death is not a taboo in *The Grave* and that the narrative contains many references to death and dying, both direct ones and euphemisms. In addition, it could be seen that death and dying are not referred to only in those parts of the story set in the 1840s, but also in those set in the 1970s when the protagonist refers to the death of his neighbours etc., which only confirms the claim that the concept of death is treated as any other concept in the narrative. Consequently, it might be concluded that *The Grave* definitely contains many more references to death and dying than *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Nory Ryan's Song*, and that the author discusses these concepts very openly and directly, thus making the novel the opposite of *Nory Ryan's Song* in this respect. Although such openness might be expected from a novel on the Irish Famine, a tragic historical event where so many people died, it remains questionable whether openness to such an extent is appropriate for the target audience, which are children of about thirteen years of age, as this is the age of the protagonist.

2.2.3.2.2. The Element of the 'Macabre'

While the author of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is more successful in creating a macabre atmosphere than the author of *Nory Ryan's Song*, Heneghan manages to evoke even more grim, ghastly and macabre scenes in *The Grave* than Conlon-McKenna does in her novel. Besides the references to death and dying as described in the previous subchapters, a very important technique for creating a macabre atmosphere is addressing the reader's senses by providing detailed descriptions of the dreadful stench emanating from the dead bodies and dying people, as well as of the screaming and shouting from suffering of people faced with death and despair, and by providing very realistic, even naturalistic depictions of dying people and of the bodily effects of hunger and the famine diseases.

Throughout the whole novel, the narrator calls attention to the horrible smell of dead and dying bodies, such as in the following example: "With Tully and Hannah, I took a closer look at him: stick-thin like a skeleton, he lay without a sound, the joints of his legs and arms swollen up like balloons and a bad smell off him worse than a boozier's puke" (G 148-149). Using the same technique – addressing the olfactory sense – a grim and macabre mood is evoked also in the passage where Tom looks into the cellars, looking for the Monaghans: "I looked in some of the other cellars along the way and saw dying people, all Irish immigrants by the sound of them, their swollen faces black with disease, limbs puffed up like balloons, a few of them like raving lunatics, twitching and shouting and screaming. The smell was the worst; I held my nose and retreated back up the steps" (G 192). Besides the olfactory sense, the quotation addresses other senses too – the auditory as well as the visual ones, describing dying people with "swollen faces black with disease" and "limbs puffed up like balloons", expressing their terrible suffering (signifying that death is 'coming for them') through shouting and screaming. Another detailed description of the physical appearance of a dying person, as well as of the stench coming from him, is provided in the following passage:

Some [huts] had dead or dying people inside, and were stinky like you wouldn't believe, worse than the pong in our Derby Lane bathroom after Percy's been sitting in there after a night of boozing and stuffing garlic pizza down his gob with his mates from the Cygnet. The smell in the village was from disease or dead bodies, or both; we didn't hang about to find out which. We hurried past a living skeleton of a man sitting outside one hut whose eyes had disappeared back into his skull and his shoulder bones were up around his ears, his skinny chicken neck having collapsed into his chest. He looked like something out of a horror flick. (G 122-123)

This passage presents a picture of dead and dying people in rather realistic terms. In addition, together with the passage quoted earlier in this subchapter, it shows another feature of creating a macabre atmosphere in the novel, namely the constant referring to dying people as ‘skeletons’ – a word commonly associated with death, and used in the other two novels too. Interestingly, the sadness evoked by this passage is ‘disturbed’ by the narrator’s humorous style when he describes the bad smell of death and disease in the huts, which “were stinky like you wouldn’t believe, worse than the pong in our Derby Lane bathroom after Percy’s been sitting in there after a night of boozing and stuffing garlic pizza down his gob with his mates from the Cygnet”. However, such lightening of the mood is not always the case in the narrative, and sometimes the descriptions are very harsh, without any humour, such as in the following example, where Tom looks down at a pit: “But this was no clean, solid mountain: this was a grave filled with hundreds of decomposed bodies, human skeletons, and I was a worm crawling among them. [...] I avoided looking down and was soon at the top and out of the pit of death” (G 77).

Besides descriptions such as the one above, evoking unpleasant images of “decomposed bodies” etc., there are passages referring to the death or suffering of little children, which might be considered to evoke even more unpleasant feelings in the reader as they contain depictions of dead or dying children: “Many were sick, or dying, especially little kids, who were the ones hunger seemed to hit the hardest. One woman was wailing over the stiff body of a baby” (G 149). Another, even more unpleasant description, emphasising the devastating effects of hunger and the famine diseases, is provided in the passage where Tom passes little children sitting “on the roadside in a silent stupor, every rib starkly visible, no hair on their heads but thick downy hair on their faces that made them look like monkeys” (G 124).

All these devices, together with direct references to dead and dying people, result in creating a very grim, ghastly and macabre atmosphere. Although it could be argued that such a mood is inappropriate for a children’s novel, it contributes to a great extent to providing an authentic ‘picture’ of the historical events.

2.2.4. Conclusion

The above analysis of *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, *Nory Ryan's Song* and *The Grave* has shown that although the novels deal with the same topic, namely the Great Irish Famine, there are similarities, as well as differences between them in the importance they put on the theme of death, as well as in the way death is dealt with and presented in them.

The analysis of the story level has shown that in all three novels the primary theme linked to the theme of death is hunger. However, a difference between the novels has been shown to become manifest in their depiction of the early stage of the 'Big Hunger'. In *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, hunger is presented as an immediate result of the blighting of the potatoes, which is described already in the beginning of the first chapter. In contrast to this, in *Nory Ryan's Song*, the characters suffer from hunger already before the potato blight first appears on their fields, and the impact of the blight is depicted only at the end of the sixth chapter. The reason for this might be that the author wanted to depict the harsh living conditions of the Irish peasants even before the potato blight first hit their fields and thus to stress how hard it was to survive the 'Great Hunger' in a country affected by poverty and British oppression. In *The Grave*, the first indication of the potato blight appears only after the protagonist travels back in time to the 1840s – to the middle of the Irish Famine.

The analysis has further shown that other important themes linked to death in all three novels are the struggle for survival, as well as love, family, friendship and fellowship, as the widespread suffering and hunger, and the great effort to keep each other alive bring the characters more closely together. An interesting finding related to the themes linked to the theme of death is that while sickness plays quite an important role in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and a crucial role in *The Grave*, which contains many references to dying of the famine diseases, the theme plays no role in *Nory Ryan's Song* as there are only few references to sickness. In addition, Reilly Giff does not explain the link between the fever and the Famine, nor does she discuss the probability with which the fever might lead to death. A similar conclusion can be drawn about the theme of faith, which plays a role in the discussion of death in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, and even a more important role in *The Grave*, but which plays no role in *Nory Ryan's Song*.

Another big difference between *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* on the one hand, and *Nory Ryan's Song* on the other hand, is that while in the latter there are no

references to the relief provided by the British government for the Irish people, namely to soup kitchens and workhouses, in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* they are referred to quite often. As could be seen, Conlon-McKenna and Heneghan address not only the positive aspects of these supposed kinds of relief measures, but also the negative ones. In both novels, the reader is made aware that as the soup kitchens provided meals for free, many lives were saved. However, both novels also contain a subtle reference to 'souperism' and proselytising, although no direct connection is made between taking food in exchange for converting to Protestantism. Thus, in both novels, the notion is conveyed that those who want to survive have to convert to Protestantism, although this is never explicitly stated in the novels.

As regards references to the workhouses, it could be seen that in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, mostly the negative aspects are emphasised, such as for example the separation of families or the high rate of sick and dying people, which was a consequence of the fever spreading quickly in the confined space of the workhouses. In *The Grave* the author shows that the workhouses were not only places where one got a bed to die on, but also places where doctors did their best to help the sick. In both novels, however, the workhouses are overcrowded and therefore, in most cases, it is impossible for newcomers to get in and get help.

Together with the depiction and description of other circumstances, the overcrowding of the workhouses and the subsequent lack of access to medical treatment in the novels could be said to have led to an 'acceleration' of the rate of people dying of hunger and sickness. Among the other circumstances which can be said to have contributed to the huge numbers of deaths during the Great Irish Famine and which are referred to in all three novels are the hostile attitude of the English landlords to the suffering of their tenants. The theme of eviction is thus of crucial importance in the discussion of death in all three novels, as well as the badly managed distribution of food and the unwillingness of the rich people to help the poor, and their lack of compassion and willingness to alleviate the suffering of the Irish peasants. Another point of criticism addressed in all three novels is the ongoing exportation of Irish corn, food and animals to England while the Irish people were visibly starving, as well as the lack of doctors and their unwillingness to help the poor, which could best be seen in *The Grave*. Finally, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Nory Ryan's Song* contain references to the roadworks, which could be said to have resulted in the hungry and weak

peasants becoming even weaker and thus in lowering their chances of surviving the Famine. Although it is not always explicitly expressed in the novels, all these circumstances ‘accelerated’ people’s dying of hunger and sickness, and contributed to the huge number of casualties during the Great Irish Famine.

Another interesting difference between *Nory Ryan’s Song* on the one hand, and *The Grave* and *Under the Hawthorn Tree* on the other hand, has been found in their presentation of death-scenes. While *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* contain a lot of references to death and thus also a variety of death-scenes, the most common ones being dying at home, dying outside on roads and in the fields, as well as dying in the workhouses and cellars of buildings in towns and harbours (the last one appearing only in *The Grave*), thus demonstrating the seriousness of the situation and that people were dying in huge numbers and everywhere, *Nory Ryan’s Song* does not contain any depictions of death-scenes, only a few short and subtle references to dying people at home and on the streets. As a result, it could be argued that Reilly Giff avoids depicting dead and dying people, almost treating it as a taboo.

A similar conclusion can be drawn about the descriptions of the various ways to bury people and of the impact the Great Irish Famine had on traditional burial ceremonies. In contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*, *Nory Ryan’s Song* does not contain any descriptions of funerals – the only reference to a funeral is made when the protagonist wonders why no traditional burial ceremony took place when her neighbour died. In addition, the only explanation for this provided in the novel is the lack of money and food necessary for the wake, while in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* the reader learns that burials were affected by the fact that too many people were dying and that priests and coffin makers were no exception to this. In addition, in contrast to the other two novels, *Nory Ryan’s Song* does not contain any reference to mass graves, which, again, might be interpreted as the author’s attempt to avoid mentioning the huge numbers of deaths – a fact which is very closely connected to the practise of burying the dead in mass graves. Another difference between the novels is that *The Grave* contains many more detailed descriptions of the burial ceremonies – both of the traditional ones as well as of burying people in mass graves. Because in the beginning of the novel, Heneghan provides very detailed descriptions of the mourning rituals and funerals as they were held under normal

circumstances, it could be argued that one of the valuable aspects of the novel is that it educates children about the traditional Irish mourning rituals.

The analysis of the discourse level has shown that as regards the way death is referred to, the three novels considerably differ from each other. While *The Grave* definitely contains the largest number of references to death, presenting and discussing the theme very openly and directly, *Nory Ryan's Song* is its direct opposite, containing rather few references to death and dying, whereby a large proportion of those references which do appear in the novel is not connected to the Famine. *Under the Hawthorn Tree* could be put somewhere in the middle between *The Grave* and *Nory Ryan's Song* as the author does not avoid referring to death, presenting and discussing the theme quite openly, but in a rather sensitive way.

Another big difference between the novels has been found in their use of the element of the 'macabre'. While the authors of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* manage to create a very grim and gruesome atmosphere through their use of evocative language and harsh and macabre depictions of dead and dying people, whereby these descriptions could be said to be more graphic and more detailed and naturalistic in *The Grave*, it could be argued that *Nory Ryan's Song* contains only a single passage which could be described as evoking a macabre mood, and consequently, it can be concluded that the author does not wish to create as grim and macabre an atmosphere as one would expect to find in a novel on the Great Irish Famine. In contrast to this, although one could say that the macabre mood in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* is inappropriate for children's novels, it contributes to a great extent to providing an accurate 'picture' of the historical events.

Such a difference between the novels in the way they approach the concept of death is very interesting. It is especially the striking contrast between *Nory Ryan's Song* and *The Grave* that is worth attention as the protagonists are approximately of the same age, Nory being twelve and Tom thirteen. Because readers generally identify most easily with protagonists of the same age (ES 27), the target audience of the two novels might be children of about twelve or thirteen years of age. Consequently, it is surprising that while in one novel death is rather avoided, in the other novel, dealing with the same topic and meant to be read by children of approximately the same age, death is presented and discussed very openly, including rather detailed descriptions of suffering, sickness, and of starving and dying people. In addition, because the protagonists of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* are seven, nine and twelve years old, with the average age of around nine and thus a bit younger than the

target audience of the other two novels, it could generally be expected that the novel would not contain more, but rather fewer references to death than *Nory Ryan's Song*, and that if death should be avoided in one of these two novels, it would be expected to be in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*.

Because all three novels deal with the serious and tragic topic of the Irish Famine, during which more than one million people died, and if the authors are to provide a truthful image of the historical events, even though in a simplified manner, the theme of death is inevitably at the centre. Although the theme of death is not a taboo in *Nory Ryan's Song*, the author avoids referring to death and dying, not discussing it as openly as the other two novels do. Consequently, it might seem that the novel misses something essential in its portrayal of the situation in which Irish peasants found themselves, and that it 'hides' a crucial aspect of the Irish Famine – namely the high death rates. In contrast to this, *The Grave* contains many more references to death and many more detailed descriptions of dead and dying people than both *Nory Ryan's Song* and *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, which might be considered a result of the author's endeavour to provide a more truthful image of the historical events. On the other hand, however, it might be regarded as not quite appropriate for a children's audience, although the author tries to alleviate the tragic mood of the story by repeatedly using a humorous language. Thus, considering all three novels, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* might be regarded as the golden mean of how to present death as it does not avoid the theme of death, discussing it openly and directly, and providing an authentic portrayal of the suffering and human tragedy of the Irish Famine, though rendered in a sensitive way so that it might still be considered appropriate for children.

2.3. Death and Character Development

The following section will explore the way the main characters of *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, *Nory Ryan's Song* and *The Grave* react to death in general, and how they grieve and mourn for their dead relatives and friends in particular, and how their experience with death influences their character development.

Grief can be described as “a strong emotional response to [the] loss” of a beloved person (ES 32), while mourning could be defined as the outward expression of the anguish, and it might include “apathy and dejection through to an entire loss of interest in the outside world” (ES 38). Both grief and mourning occur during bereavement, the period of feeling pain of the deep loss which “may or may not be outwardly expressed at all” (ES 39).

As will be seen, there are similarities as well as differences in the way the characters cope with death, in some cases depending on their age, in others on their gender. In all cases, however, death, be it the death of their relatives or friends, or of people whom they do not know, has a great impact on their personal development – not only in a negative sense, but also, and above all, in a positive one.

2.3.1. *Under the Hawthorn Tree*

2.3.1.1. Bereavement, Grief and Mourning

As has been shown in the previous section, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* contains quite a lot of references to death as witnessed by the main characters. This chapter will provide an analysis of how these characters react to death in general, as well as how they cope with the death of their relatives and close friends, and how this experience influences their behaviour and character development.

It has generally been argued that children and adults cope with death and show their grief in a different way. While adults often withdraw and do not talk about their loss, children tend to talk about the death of their relatives etc. to other people to see their

reaction and to get a clue as to how they should react to death themselves. On the other hand, children might not show their grief and sadness as openly as adults (ES 28). When little Bridget dies, at first, the reaction of Eily, Michael and Peggy, and that of their mother are very similar – both Mrs O’Driscoll and her children cry:

Then there was a sudden silence. Mother was kissing the baby’s face and each little finger one by one.

‘God let the sun come up soon and let this terrible night end,’ the children begged. Suddenly they became aware of their mother’s silence. They got up and went over to her. Large tears slid down her cheeks.

‘She’s gone. My own little darling is gone.’

Peggy started to cry. ‘I want Bridget back,’ she wailed. ‘I want her.’

[...] Mother told them to kiss her, and one by one they kissed the soft cheek and forehead of Bridget, the little sister they hardly knew. (UHT 21-22)

In this passage, Mrs O’Driscoll kisses her dead baby and tells her children to do so as well as if to give her the last goodbye. The next day, their neighbours come to express their condolences and to help the O’Driscolls with the burial: “Mid-morning they were all surprised when Dan Collins and his wife Kitty arrived. Kitty ran straight to Mother and kissed her. Their eyes were full of tears and unspoken words. ‘Margaret, we are so sorry. Poor little Bridget,’ whispered Kitty” (UHT 23). This excerpt supports the argument that although adults do not speak very much when experiencing a great grief, they show their sadness and suffering quite openly. The adults’ ‘inability’ to speak about their loss and their withdrawal can be seen also in the following passage, which contains a description of Mrs O’Driscoll’s “strangely calm” behaviour (UHT 22) the next days after Bridget’s death: “For the next few days, Mother stayed in her shift with the shawl wrapped around her, and barely bothered to do anything. Eily and Michael fetched the water, swept out the cottage and searched for food” (UHT 25). As their mother is unable to do anything around the house, Eily and Michael take over the ‘parental role’, taking care of them all, thus being of great support for their mother – here, the author stresses the importance of family support when a loss occurs within a family, although the mother provides almost no support for her children in turn. It could be argued that this is because one is dealing with a children’s novel here, and thus, the author wants to put the children into the foreground of the action, emphasising *their* strength rather than that of their mother.

Bridget’s death has shaken the whole family, and although she was “the little sister they hardly knew” (UHT 22), they long for her and wish she would come back, despite the fact that they are all old enough to understand the irreversibility of death. This could be seen

in the already quoted passage where Peggy cries, “‘I want Bridget back,’ [...] ‘I want her.’” (UHT 21-22), or when Eily “couldn’t help but remember a porcelain French doll she had seen in a shop window in the town once. It stood stiff in a white lace dress with a starched petticoat and long curling real hair. How she had wanted to hold and have that doll. Now she felt the same longing, but much worse. She ached to hold Bridget and never let her go” (UHT 23). Their longing for Bridget does not express the children’s ignorance of the nature of death – that dead people cannot come back to life, but the great pain of her loss and their wish that she had never died.

While it has been argued that children may not show their grief as openly as adults, it has also been found that they “may seem to show grief only once in a while and for short times [sic]. This may be because a child is not able to feel strong emotions for long periods of time. A grieving child may be sad one minute and playful the next” (ES 28). When Bridget dies, one moment Eily, Michael and Peggy are very sad and want their little sister back (UHT 21-22, 23), and at the other they seem to have forgotten what happened and are tempted to play outside: “Outside it was a beautiful warm morning. [...] It was tempting to stay outside and play, but they dared not disobey Mother” (UHT 29). Particularly Peggy’s mood and behaviour is changing from one minute to another, once crying for Bridget, “huge sobs rack[ing] her body” (UHT 25), and at other times being playful, or, on the other hand, bored, cross, cranky, angry and sulking (UHT 29).

In contrast to his sister, Michael seems to make a great effort not to cry in front of the others, always appearing with red eyes indicating that he was crying when he was alone: “Later, Michael set off, his face pale and his eyes red-rimmed” (UHT 22). Similarly, when he comes back from a visit of their neighbours, Eily and Peggy can see that he had been crying before he came home. However, when he starts to explain the situation of their neighbours, he cannot help not to cry: “At last Michael came back and they could see he had been crying. ‘Well, what happened?’ asked the girls. ‘Teresa passed on yesterday,’ he sobbed. ‘I couldn’t see Pat. He’s sick now. He’s my best friend in the whole world and I might never see him again’” (UHT 52). As is often argued, society has always taught boys not to cry and to be strong in every situation, while girls are ‘allowed’ to cry, even comforted when in such a situation (ES 29). Although Michael is a male character, he is still a child, and while he makes a great effort not to cry in front of his sisters, this is not always possible for him, and sometimes he becomes overwhelmed by his strong emotions. In addition, it might have

been the intention of the author to suggest to the reader that when faced with the death of a beloved or close person, it is absolutely normal to cry, disregarding the gender of the bereaved person.

Bridget's death is only the first one of the many deaths Eily, Michael and Peggy encounter, however, the only one that causes them a real grief. What they experience throughout the novel, seeing all the dying people and dead bodies, makes them shocked, angry, sick, afraid, sorry and also sad, but not in such a way that they would grieve for the people, although the horrible sight of death often brings tears to their eyes, such as in the passage where Eily and Peggy find a corpse:

Eily could feel pinpricks of sweat across her brow and her stomach turning. Peggy had screwed up her eyes and was pulling at her dress. Almost in unison they got sick in the bushes. Once their stomachs were empty and the heaving had stopped, they galloped back to Michael. One look at their faces and he knew something terrible had happened. 'What is it girls? What is it?' he kept on. In between tears and sobbing, they managed to tell him. 'That poor soul,' cried Eily. 'To die all alone in the middle of nowhere, starved and with no family or friends.' (UHT 85)

In addition to feeling sad and sorry for the dead and dying people whom they see all around and whom they do not know, as already suggested above, the sight of death also evokes anger in the children, particularly in Michael, who feels hatred for God for letting so many innocent people suffer and die. This can be seen in the passage where Michael approaches the workhouse and is horrified at the sight of so much suffering and death:

Michael began to run – he did not know where the energy came from – down past the bridge and back the way he had come. Tears coursed down his face. He could feel a pain in his chest and knew that his heart was broken in two and his childhood gone forever. He slowed down, he had a long and miserable way to go. There was no God, and if there was he was a monster. (UHT 125)

As Corr (353) explains, anger at God is a common response by children who experience the loss of a beloved person. However, Michael's anger at God is not caused by one single death of a person close to him but by the innumerable deaths which he has been witnessing at every turn. Consequently, Michael's anger does not result from his personal loss and suffering, but from his inability to grasp why God lets so many people suffer and die, as well as the unfairness of the whole situation – innocent and honest people, including children, having to struggle for their lives (in so many cases unsuccessfully) only because they are poor.

All these tragic events – losing beloved persons and finding themselves on their own, as well as encountering dead and dying people at every turn – has a great impact on the character development of the three child-protagonists. The essence of this impact will be analysed in the following chapter.

2.3.1.2. Death and Character Development

As already suggested, the experience of death has a great impact on the character development of the three child-protagonists in several respects. It could be argued that the most prominent aspect of their personal development is related to the idea of a lost childhood. This is clearly demonstrated in the passage where Michael runs away from the workhouse, horrified at the sight of so many sick and dying people, and “feel[ing] a pain in his chest and [knowing] that his heart [is] broken in two and his childhood gone forever” (UHT 125). The idea of a lost childhood is contrasted with the fact that the protagonists of the novel are still children in need of their parents – scared and desperately longing for their presence and protection. From the beginning of the novel, when their mother leaves and does not come back any more, Eily, Michael and Peggy are scared that they will never see their parents again as they fear the worst – that they have both died. Although Eily, as the oldest one – the ‘little Mother’, tries to hide her fear and to appear strong before her brother and sister, she is only a child too and sometimes becomes overwhelmed by fear and hopelessness:

As soon as he left, Eily ran in to the cottage and flung herself on the bed. Tears flooded her face and she could hardly breathe, as wave after wave of misery washed over her. Peggy and Michael stood watching her, round-eyed and terrified to see their big sister lose control. Sensing their fear, she tried to calm herself. Mother and Father must both be dead – the awful thought pounded in Eily’s head. (UHT 47-48)

Like Michael and Peggy, who “moan[s] and crie[s] for Mother again and again” (UHT 125), Eily “[cannot] stop herself longing for Father and Mother and wondering what might have happened to them” (UHT 70) – the idea of them being only children who still need their parents, and, at the same time, of a lost childhood and finding themselves on their own, appears throughout the whole novel, such as for example in the following passage: “They

remembered past times playing hide-and-seek in the woods near home – now they did not have the energy even to run. [...] A total sense of hopelessness washed over [Eily]. Oh how she longed for Mother to come and take care of them all, or Father to tell them what to do” (UHT 87). It could be argued that the only thing that keeps the children alive is that they have each other. Indeed, the support of family is of crucial importance when a child experiences the loss of a beloved person (ES 28), and although Eily, Michael and Peggy never learn for sure that their parents died, their grief over the loss of their parents, as well as their fear and sense of hopelessness and loneliness, can be said to be as great as if they knew that their mother and father died. Eily, Michael and Peggy have only each other now and the importance of this fact is emphasised throughout the whole narrative, such as in the following example: “‘We’re still alive. We’re tired and hungry and on our own, but we have each other and we can still walk and forage’” (UHT 88).

Together with family, the concept of survival gets on the first place in the novel. From the children’s memories, the reader learns that there was a time when they happily lived with their parents and all they had to care about was playing outside in the nice weather – now, they are alone, hungry, scared, and encountering death at every turn. The omnipresence of death and the almost unbearable situation have taught the children to reduce their needs to the most basic one – survival: “They had lost their squeamishness by now and knew that all that mattered was their survival” (UHT 133). The more dying and dead people they see, and the worse their own situation is getting, the more they are aware of the fragility of their own lives and of the fact that ‘death’ does not differentiate between young and old people when taking one’s life. Consequently, seeing all the suffering and dying around, gradually, Michael, once having been a cheerful child with plans for the future, loses all hope of survival: “‘We’re going to die like the rest of them, aren’t we?’ [Michael] whispered. He was scared. He had always had so many plans for when he was older” (UHT 87). Thus, while at one time, the sight of so many dead and dying people gives the children strength to escape death themselves, at other times they become overwhelmed by fear and start to lose hope that they will/can manage to survive.

The great hunger and the omnipresent danger of death forces Eily, Michael and Peggy to do anything to survive, from eating rats and hedgehogs (UHT 133), or food usually reserved for animals (UHT 90), to drinking muddy water from puddles and ditches (UHT 109). Consequently, the child protagonists have come to appreciate any kind of food that

can keep them alive, having learned to ignore its taste or primary purpose, and their everyday struggle for survival has taught them to appreciate life as such more, not taking it for granted. The same can be said about family – naturally, the experience of having lost beloved persons has resulted in the protagonists' getting even more closely together, and in them regarding the possibility to stay together as a 'privilege'.

In the course of the novel, despite their young age, Eily, Michael and Peggy transform from children into strong, independent beings who have been forced to learn to survive on their own. The great suffering and hunger, and the omnipresent danger of death have strengthened their sense of family and their need of each other, and although survival and finding their great-aunts becomes their only aim in the course of the novel, in the end, when they manage to achieve both, they know that their hearts will always belong to their home – the place where they happily lived with people they loved most and whom they have lost (probably forever) – their father, mother and little Bridget: "Eily relaxed at last, knowing they would be safe in their new home with Nano and Lena. But, at the same moment, she knew their hearts would always belong to the little thatched cottage with the flat stones outside, and the small overgrown garden, and the fields around it with the breeze blowing softly through the hawthorn tree" (UHT 150).

The protagonists' experience with death and struggle for survival has resulted in a paradox – being children who have lost their childhood; children in need of their parents who have been left alone and who had to learn to take care of themselves; children who, instead of thinking what games to play, have to think about how to survive. Their terrible experience has also resulted in them losing all their squeamishness, deciding to survive by all means, as well as appreciating life more and recognising the true value of family.

2.3.2. *Nory Ryan's Song*

2.3.2.1. Bereavement, Grief and Mourning

As could be seen in the section on the presentation of death in *Nory Ryan's Song*, the author of the novel makes very few references to death, and those which do occur in the novel are mostly made to the death of persons who did not die of the Famine. Indeed, there is one single reference to the death of a character who dies of the Famine – the grandmother of Sean Mallon, and consequently, it could be argued that death, as resulting from hunger and the famine diseases, does not have any influence on the character development of the protagonist Nory Ryan. On the other hand, the death of her mother, who died years ago, after giving birth to Nory's brother, and thus, her death had nothing to do with the Irish Famine, could be said to have had a great effect on Nory's personal development.

Throughout the whole novel, Nory's thoughts turn to her mother again and again, and although many years have passed since her mother has died, Nory remembers her mother very vividly, missing her very much and feeling a great pain of her loss:

Next I stopped at Mam's grave and said a quick 'May the angels lead thee into Paradise.' I remembered Mam tossing hay in our field with Da one fall day. [...] And now Mam was under the grass and Maggie would be off to America. [...] I saw Sean coming, looking for me. He must have heard the news. I stood up quickly, wiping my eyes, and in my hurry ripped my toenail on a stone. (NRS 22-23)

Psychologists claim that mourning is "a process that continues over years in children" and that "[f]eelings of loss may occur again and again as the child gets older" (ES 28). This argument can be applied to *Nory Ryan's Song* as many years have passed since Nory's mother has died, and still, looking at her mother's grave and the vivid memories of her bring tears to Nory's eyes. It can be argued that the pain of having lost her mother and the loneliness she feels without her are intensified by Maggie's leaving for America, as well as by her father's absence:

The room seemed so empty without Maggie. I closed my eyes, remembering when Granda taught me my first song: 'Wee Falorie Man.' The room was filled with all of us: Granda and Da, Mam and Maggie, Celia and me. [...] 'What are you thinking about?' Celia asked.

‘Mam,’ I said. ‘And Maggie.’ (NRS 30-31)

Although Nory has lost one parent only, she finds herself in a similar situation as the main characters of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* – despite them not knowing what has happened to their parents, their fear, sense of loneliness and grief can be said to be as great and strong as if they knew that they have died. Similarly, although Nory, Celia and Patch have not been left alone completely, having their grandfather to take care of them, Nory’s sense of having no parent at all is getting stronger with every day that her father does not turn up. She is missing him so much that she feels a pain in her chest every time her thoughts turn to him (NRS 83, 102), imagining what might have happened to him, fearing that he is dead:

‘If only Da were here.’ Celia lowered her head. ‘Was he ever this late in coming?’ He’d always come by this time, I thought. ‘If he could be anywhere, he’d want to be here.’
 ‘I know that,’ she said. ‘Do you think something has happened?’
 I didn’t want to answer. The ship might have foundered. He could have starved on the road. (NRS 96-97)

Gradually, Nory loses all hope that her father will come back one day and starts to believe that he is dead (NRS 135). Having no parent to take care of them, the grandfather being too old and weak, Nory takes over the parental role. Although every one of them tries to help to bring some money or food into the house, it is Nory who feels the responsibility to keep them all alive, remembering Maggie’s words:

‘You will take care of Patcheen and the others.’ [Maggie] stopped.
 It was hard to swallow. ‘Celia is older.’
 [Maggie] smiled. ‘Celia is loyal and true, and between the two of you, you’ll see, Da will find his home and warm hearth the way he left them.’ (NRS 26)

The death of Nory’s mother has had a great impact on Nory’s personal development, and when Maggie, who, as the oldest one, has become a quasi-substitute for their dead mother, leaves, it is Nory who takes over her role. Psychologists argue that after having lost a parent, “[c]hildren in [the] age group [of 9-12 years] may [...] try to assume the role of the mother and father” as “the family ‘structure’ [changes] and the family members who are left [...] regroup and sort out their rules” (ES 30). This is also the case of Nory’s character, who, although being a child herself, becomes Patch’s ‘second mother’, taking care of him, taking him with her almost everywhere she goes, and staying with him when Celia and her grandfather leave.

When Maggie leaves for America, it breaks Nory's heart, although she is determined not to let Maggie see her sadness and pain and to appear strong: "I told myself I'd never let Maggie know how terrible I felt. I could do that, couldn't I? Sing and pretend to be happy until she took the road to Galway" (NRS 23). Nory has experienced the loss of several of her beloved persons, and this behaviour can be interpreted as a way of coping with her despair and grief – hiding her sad emotions might help herself to feel stronger and to persuade herself that what she shows she also feels. Nory can be described as a strong character, which might be a result of losing her mother when she was a small girl. When Maggie leaves, she says to Nory, "I don't even know why I tell you that. You will know what to do yourself. You are a great girl, *a stór*" (NRS 27). On the one hand, Nory is a twelve-year-old girl, a child who is scared to go out in the dark because she believes in the *sídhe* – the fairy beings "sneaking up from their fairy ring and dragging the boy children down" (NRS 33-34) – as well as in ghostly men able to "[make] themselves into wisps of fog, ugly and unfriendly to humans" (NRS 86). On the other hand, the experience of losing her mother and believing that her father has died too, and not knowing whether she will ever see her eldest sister again, has contributed to Nory's growing into a strong and independent being able to take care of herself and of the others, and to survive the harsh conditions of the Irish Famine. It could be argued that it is exactly because of this challenging experience that Nory has grown as strong as to manage to keep herself and the others alive.

2.3.2.2. Death and Character Development

Although Nory never witnesses death in the novel (except of seeing dead animals), she knows that death is lurking everywhere and that if she does not bring home any food, they will all starve to death. Consequently, as regards death of hunger and the famine diseases, it can be argued that what influences Nory's character development is not death itself but the possible danger of dying. Nory's fear that they could all die results in her strong determination to survive at all costs. In the course of the story, Nory comes to appreciate any kind of food that can keep her and her family alive – food which she had either hated or which she had never thought of as being edible before the potato blight appeared, such as

for example, grass or limpets, the taste of which she hates but knows that they can keep them alive. The contrast between her dislike and her want and need of them is depicted in the following passage, where she goes to the beach to gather some limpets and realises that it is full of people looking for the same: “I stopped at the end of the path, my mouth open. The strand was filled with people. People I never saw at the water’s edge. People I saw only during the time of the fair. They had walked a long way to get here. Some gathered seaweed and the others looked for limpets and mussels. Our mussels. Our *fuafar* limpets” (NRS 67). Nory is shocked and horrified by the scene that opens up before her – people gathering *her* limpets. Nevertheless, she calls them ‘fuafar’, which means ‘hateful’ or ‘disgusting’ in Irish (ES 31), stressing how much she hates them, although the situation in which she is placed has taught her to appreciate their value in the hard times.

Another aspect of the development of Nory’s character connected to her determination not to die is her change from an ordinary twelve-year-old girl needing her family into a brave, independent and self-sufficient being able to keep herself, Patch and Anna alive. At first, when she gets the idea to climb the cliffs and look for the eggs of wild birds, she needs Sean’s help to hold her on a line, and, after asking him for help and considering everything, she starts to doubt whether she can do it and imagines her father, grandfather and Celia coming back and saving them all, questioning her own ability to survive without their help (NRS 120-121). Later in the novel, when Sean announces that he leaves for America, Nory knows that she does not need his help anymore (NRS 135), continuing climbing the cliffs again and again and bringing eggs and dead birds to Anna’s cabin to be eaten by them all.

Another interesting point to be made about Nory’s character development relates to her relationship with Anna. In the beginning of the novel, Nory describes Anna as an old herbalist with magical powers, a witch who Sean and her have always been frightened of (NRS 4-5, 7-8). In the course of the story, however, as Nory gradually gets to know her better, and as hunger and struggle for survival makes them help each other and brings them closer together, Nory’s relationship with Anna changes radically – gradually, Nory comes to love Anna, who later even becomes her best friend in the half empty village, and this strong bond results in Nory refusing to leave her at the end of the novel:

‘We belong here together.’

[Anna] frowned, deep creases appearing on her forehead and around her mouth. ‘I belong here,’ she said. ‘But you belong in America, Nory Ryan. And you’ll bring

something with you. My cures. My medicine. A gift to that young free country.’ (NRS 145)

When they part, Nory says to Anna – to the very same person she was so much afraid of in the beginning – “‘I love you, Anna Donnelly,’ [...] ‘I will think of you singing. I will think of you happy, and without hunger.’ [...] ‘The day will come,’ [...] ‘when I have money. And I will send what I have to you.’ [...] ‘I will remember you’” (NRS 147-148). The author very nicely portrays not only the negative effects that hunger, suffering and the constant danger of dying can have on people and human relationships, but also, and above all, the positive ones, such as the strengthening of old and emergence of new friendships, as well as of solidarity and love .

Another point to be made in relation to the character development of the protagonist is the idea of a lost childhood, which can be found also in this novel, although it is never expressed as explicitly as in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. One indication can be found in the following excerpt, where Nory remembers her past life before the potato blight first appeared: “I am Maeve, I thought, remembering the day I had twirled over the rocks singing, with nothing to worry about, with Maggie still home and the potatoes growing green in the field” (NRS 124). At that time, Nory had “nothing to worry about”, now, her days are full of worries about how to escape death – the constant danger of dying has changed Nory’s everyday life, and with it, her values and priorities – playing outside has been replaced by struggling for survival.

The everyday struggle for survival has a great impact on the development and attitude to life of all the characters, which is best described in the following passage: “[Celia] blinked, trying not to let the tears fall. ‘I always worried,’ she said. ‘Worried when it rained that the thatch would leak, worried when the sun was hot that the thatch would burn.’ She brushed the back of her hand over her face. ‘But if we live through this, I’ll never worry about things like that again’” (NRS 88). This excerpt best summarises the impact of the Irish Famine on the characters and the way they have changed the angle from which they look at life – their harsh experience and struggle for survival has taught them not to care about unimportant things and to value life as such, being grateful for every single day they can spend with their most beloved persons. Thus, although Nory has lost her childhood, having been forced not to care what games to play but how to survive, the sad experience has had a positive effect on her and on the other characters too – the experience of the Great Irish Famine has

changed their life values and priorities, having taught them to value life as such and that family and being all together is the most important thing they can have.

2.3.3. *The Grave*

2.3.3.1. Bereavement, Grief and Mourning

This chapter will provide an analysis of the bereavement, grief and mourning of the main characters of *The Grave* – of the protagonist Tom Mullen, as well as of the characters of Tully, Brendon and Hannah Monaghan, and of the way they cope with the death of their beloved relatives and friends. Thereafter, the analysis will focus on how death in general, and their personal loss in particular, influences their character development.

In comparison with the protagonists of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Nory Ryan's Song*, the main characters of *The Grave* have to cope with the death of a larger number of beloved persons – while Nory Ryan in *Nory Ryan's Song* has lost 'only' her mother (years before the Famine began) and the author offers the prospect of her seeing the rest of her family soon, and whereas Eily, Michael and Peggy O'Driscoll in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* have to cope with the death of their baby sister 'only', never learning what has happened to their parents and whether they have died or not, although the author does not offer any prospect of them seeing their parents again one day, the characters of *The Grave* have to cope with a much greater loss – first, Tully, Brendan and Hannah Monaghan lose their father as a result of the shootings in their village, and later Tully and Hannah lose their mother and brother as a result of a famine disease. Consequently, the novel offers more space for an analysis of grieving, mourning and coping with the death of beloved persons of the main characters than the other two novels do. Another important point to be made already in the beginning of the analysis is that it will primarily focus on the grief of the Monaghans as it is within this family that the deaths mentioned above occur, although they do have a great impact on the protagonist Tom Mullen too.

When Mr Monaghan dies, there is not much space given to the description of grief of his children and wife. Nevertheless, it can be said that Mrs Monaghan and her daughter Hannah express their grief and cope with his death in a totally different way than Tully and Brendan do. Here, one could argue that it is not the age that plays a role but gender. When Tom learns that Mr Monaghan is dead, Mrs Monaghan says to him, "Welcome and God bless you, Tom Mullen. You're a sight for sore eyes. Weren't we worried you were killed.'

[Thereupon, Tom says,] 'I'm sorry about Mr Monaghan,' [...]. She shook her head and her eyes grew teary" (G 115). As can be seen, Mrs Monaghan cannot hide her pain and grief, being unable to fight back her tears. In addition, she explicitly expresses her grief, saying that Tom is "a sight for sore eyes", suggesting that her husband's death has caused her a great pain and cry. Similarly, when Tom spots Hannah, he can see that her face is "smudged from crying" (G 114). However, she tries not to let her grief show openly, fighting back her tears. At the same time, her pain gets mixed with anger at the soldiers who have shot down her father: "[Tom] said, 'Sorry about your dad.' She stood back, eyes flashing. 'Murderers! It's not enough that we starve but they have to shoot us down, too!' she said bitterly, fighting back tears" (G 114). Psychologists argue that often, grief of children over nine gets mixed with other strong emotions, such as guilt, shame or anger (ES 28). The last one is Hannah's case, who is angry that her father died an 'avoidable' death, being a victim of the English landlord's cruelty. A little bit later, however, when she calms down and her anger slowly passes away, she feels only pain and longing for her father, releasing her emotions through crying and talking: "[Tom] woke up once and she was crying. She missed her father, she whispered, and was worried about her mother making it all the way to Dublin" (G 119). As can be seen, besides feeling grief over the loss of her father, she is concerned about her mother, fearing that she is too old and weak to make it to Dublin and that consequently, she could lose her too.

In contrast to their mother and sister, Tully and Brendan cope with the death of their father in a completely different way. While Tully expresses his grief primarily by excessive drinking of alcohol (G 116), and while he does not cry nor talk about the death of his father to anyone and thus, seems to suppress his pain and grief, Brendan's grief, who is, to a certain extent, intellectually disabled, becomes hardly articulate in the novel. There is no indication that he can grasp what has happened to his father, as he does not cry nor mention his death in any way, except of him putting his arm around his mother when tears fill her eyes by the mentioning of her husband's death (G 115).

In comparison with the death of Mr Monaghan, the deaths of his wife and son seems to 'touch' Tully and Hannah even more, which might be a result of the fact that their grief over the loss of their mother and brother mingles with that over the loss of their father. Consequently, while the death of their father meant that they have lost one loved person and that each of them still has another three beloved persons next to him/her, the death of

Mrs Monaghan and Brendan makes them aware that they have lost too much and that they have only each other now. Therefore, it is even before Mrs Monaghan and Brendan die, when they are sick and lying with the fever, that Tully and Hannah start to grieve, expecting the worst – Hannah being “no longer eager and happy”, looking like a “wounded bird” and having little to say (G 221), and Tully looking for the doctor’s comfort and confirmation that they will get better, asking him again and again whether he can save them (G 221). This kind of grief, called ‘anticipatory grief’, “occurs when a death is expected, but before it happens”, and it is different from the grief which occurs after the death (ES 28).

When their mother dies, both Tully and Hannah cry, although the reader learns this only from a description of “their eyes [being] red from weeping” (G 222), and they look for each other’s comfort, whereby the importance of family and friendship in such hard times is stressed. However, the importance of family and friendship is emphasised not only in relation to the grieving people, but also in relation to the dying ones – when Brendan is dying and probably feels that he is nearing the end of his life, he makes sure that every one of his loved persons is fine and that they will stay with him:

We took a look at Brendan. [...] ‘Hannah?’ He struggled to speak. ‘Will you stay with me, Hannah?’
 ‘Of course I will, Brendan. I’ll be here. I won’t go away.’
 ‘And Ma? And Tully?’
 ‘I’m here, Brendan.’ [...] ‘Ma is fine, don’t worry.’
 ‘And Tom?’
 ‘He’s here, too,’ said Hannah. (G 222)

Although it has been suggested that Brendan was not able to grasp the death of his father, the above excerpt shows that Tully and Hannah keep the information that their mother died for themselves, fearing that telling Brendan the truth would worsen his condition, and thus, it is suggested that Brendan *would* understand the seriousness and consequences of the sad ‘event’.

Because Tom loves the Monaghans as if they were his own family, it is extremely difficult for him too to cope with the deaths, especially with the death of Brendan, who has become as close and important to Tom as if he were his brother. Consequently, when he realises that there is no help for Brendan and that he is going to die, Tom feels a great sadness and hopelessness, and, not being able to look at Tully and Hannah and their sad faces, and needing to spend some time alone to cope with his own grief, he “walk[s] the streets until [his] legs [ache], fists pushed down inside the pockets of [his] jacket” (G 223).

In spite of the fact that the author does provide descriptions and depictions of the individual characters' ways to grieve and mourn for Mr and Mrs Monaghan, it is only after Brendan dies that a detailed description of their behaviour related to coping with his death is provided:

Tully kneeled and said a prayer. Hannah kneeled beside him, holding on to Brendan's hand, but she didn't pray. [...] Hannah and Tully had only themselves now. And me. [...] Hannah sat in the squat, dull-eyed, often tearful, refusing to come out, eating nothing. Tully couldn't help her because he had started acting crazy, coming and going without a word. He looked like a wild man, with burning eyes and grim mouth. I tried following him but he shook me off, losing me in a maze of foul alleys with names like Rotten Row, or disappearing in the crowds of filthy beggars, rag and rubbish-pickers, carts, and truck horses that thronged the dock road. I pleaded Hannah. 'You've got to help each other now. Tully needs you.' But talking did no good; it was like there was no-one home. The next day Tully woke late and when I asked him to let me help he growled angrily like a dog, then started to cry. It was the first time he had cried since his brother's death. I sat on the floor beside him, my arm round his shoulder. Then Hannah came and put her arm round his shoulder and cried with him. After that they began to talk. And eat. (G 227-228)

As can be seen, quite a lot of space is given to the description of Tully's and Hannah's behaviour after their brother dies, and the way they show their grief and cope with their brother's death considerably differs from the way they grieved for their father and mother shortly after they had died. This big difference can be attributed to the fact that although the death of their father and mother might have touched and hurt them as much as that of Brendan, especially after their father's death, they still had a long way to go before them and were struggling for survival, and it could be argued that it was because of this fact that they tried to be strong and not to let their grief and pain deprive them of all their strength and determination to survive. However, when Brendan dies, they have nothing left but each other and Tom, and their determination to survive gets much weaker. In addition, it could be argued that Brendan's death results in them having lost almost all hope of survival, as well as in the culmination of all the emotions related to the loss of their beloved persons, and in them not being able any more to suppress these emotions. When Brendan dies, Hannah's behaviour and that of Tully considerably differ from each other. While Tully prays over the dead body of his brother, Hannah does not, which might be interpreted as a demonstration of her anger at God, which, as already pointed out, can often be seen in children who experience the loss of a beloved person. Another difference in their behaviour is that although both of them seem to withdraw, not talking to anyone, Hannah shows a strangely

calm behaviour – she is dull-eyed, looking at nothing, not coming out nor eating anything, ignoring what is going on around her and often crying, while Tully becomes aggressive, behaving like a ‘madman’, with “burning eyes and grim mouth”, refusing any company, and in contrast to Hannah, often going out to be alone. The above excerpt supports the argument that besides pain and grief, a bereaved person often feels anger at having lost a beloved person, as well as that he/she often displays an impulsive and ‘regressive’ behaviour – the “loss of interest in outside activities”, as well as a change in his/her eating habits (ES 28). Although Tully successfully suppresses tears the whole time, in the end, something ‘breaks’ inside him and he bursts into tears. This is the moment when both Tully and Hannah let all their emotions out, start to speak and provide comfort to and support for each other again. Here, not only the importance of family support is stressed, but also that of friendship – during the time when Hannah and Tully are not there for each other, each closed up in their own world and with their own grief, Tom tries to be and *is* of great help and support for them, trying to bring his friends back to ordinary life.

In spite of the fact that Tom is a first-person narrator and the reader has access to the fictional world through his point of view, the reader does not gain much insight into how Tom *himself* copes with the deaths of the Monaghans and what their deaths mean to him, when compared to the information on how Tully and Hannah grieve and mourn, which he provides to the reader in much greater detail. Despite this fact, however, the reader does learn that the Monaghans have become very important to Tom, becoming his ‘real’ family, and that the death of Mrs Monaghan and Brendan causes him great pain, although he might not show this openly – when they are burying their corpses, Tom, as the narrator, says, “I couldn’t pray either, though my heart was bursting” (G 237). This sentence describes in very few words all the pain that Tom feels over the loss of his newly found mother and brother.

2.3.3.2. Death and Character Development

As could be seen so far, *The Grave* contains a lot of descriptions of death and dying people – not only people close to the main characters but also minor characters whose death contributes to the creation of the macabre atmosphere of the novel. As a result, the

character development of the main characters is influenced not only by their personal loss of people they loved, but also by death surrounding them in general – death of people whom they do not know, an experience which nevertheless has a great impact on the way they perceive the world and on their personal development.

First of all, the general suffering and death lurking everywhere results in the growth of solidarity, fellowship and cooperation between people. It could be argued that the great suffering and harsh times have made the main characters better persons, having taught them that cooperation and providing help to each other are necessary conditions for surviving the Famine. In spite of the fact that they are tired, weak and hungry themselves, the main characters help other people in need of help as much as they can – Brendan helps a woman to carry her small son to the workhouse (G 125), and when in Liverpool, he is helping new immigrants, fetching water and finding blankets for them (G 196). In addition, when the Monaghans get to Dublin on the cart driven by a horse which Tom won in the streetfight, picking up many other weak people along the way, they give the cart to a man who promises “‘to bring more hungry souls out from the west’” (G 197). Another example of solidarity and help can be found in the passage where Tom and Tully steal a chicken from a restaurant and, bringing it to the cellar where they are staying with the Monaghans and other people, they share the food among all (G 208).

The widespread suffering and death all around change the main characters to a great extent. Tully’s experience has an effect on his physical appearance – he does not have “the same sulky, childish face” as before, but looks “harder and wiser, more culpable” (G 239-240). Similarly, his sister Hannah, “as affectionate as ever, but no longer eager and happy as she had been in Achill” (G 221), has been very much influenced not only by her own, personal loss of people she loved, but also by seeing strangers starving, sick and dying all around. This experience, together with the fact that she is one of these people, starving and struggling to escape death, has a great impact on her attitude towards life and self, as well as on her life values and priorities:

‘That’ll be some day,’ said Hannah, her nose in the air. ‘Dressed in fine linens and long silken gowns and fine petticoats that flounce to the ground, and smart bonnets, with my own horse and carriage and my own coachman to drive me to the shops. And I will always give money to help the poor. What do you think of that?’ [...] ‘Or perhaps I’ll be a doctor, a brilliant doctor, renowned throughout the land for my cures, who always comes when called, no matter how rich or poor the people are, no matter how sick they are.’ (G 213)

It can be argued that if Hannah were not one of the poor people denied help from the rich ones and doctors (being denied help for her sick mother and brother, the doctors being too scared to catch the famine fever (G 205)), she would never understand their unbearable situation and would never have dreams and a prospect of her future life such as those described above. Her bad experience has resulted in her wish and determination to spread goodness and help people in need.

Despite the fact that the Great Irish Famine and the number of deaths resulting from it have had a great impact on the character development of Tully and Hannah, it is the protagonist Tom Mullen who becomes influenced most and whose attitude toward life and to the people around him changes completely. This can be best seen in his relationship with Brian, whom he dislikes since he has known him, calling him a “big, helpless baby” (G 100) unable to take care of himself and totally depending on Tom. Tom’s negative remarks about Brian and about how much Tom wishes to get rid of him occur throughout the whole novel (e.g. G 97, 100, 102, 109, 160, 166, 170-171, 185), and it is only at the end of the narrative, when he realises that Brian reminds him of Brendan, whom he loved like his brother and whom he has lost forever, that Tom changes his attitude and realises that he actually likes Brian and that he needs Brian as much as Brian needs him (G 245-246). Throughout the novel, every time that Tom is wrenched back to the present, he wishes to get back to the past and to the Monaghans – back to the world where “[he] was free. And [he] belonged – was needed; [he] was important; [he] could do things; [he] was a somebody. The Champion of Mayo! [In the present of the 1970s, he] was nothing” (G 159). However, when Brendan dies, Tom realises that he *wants* to go back to the present and to Brian: “Watching Hannah drive away had been hard; parting from her had been a terrible wrench, the hardest thing I ever did. But I knew I had to return and I was ready for it. The funny thing was I wanted to go back. Don’t ask me why: I don’t know, except since Brendan died I’d been thinking quite a bit about Brian, wondering if he was OK (G 241)”.

However, it is not only Tom’s relationship with Brian that changes in a positive way – Old Swan, a small suburb of Liverpool where Tom lives and which has always been a place which Tom hated, a place which made him feel depressed when thinking about it (G 155), changes to a place which he calls his home at the end of the novel: “Made me feel like I was home. I’d never thought of Old Swan as home before” (G 243). Because of what he has experienced, having lost friends and witnessing almost unbearable human suffering,

starvation and death, Tom comes to appreciate not only the importance of friendship, but also life as such, having learned to be grateful for every single day and noticing and appreciating small and seemingly unimportant things which he has never noticed before and which can make life beautiful, as well as ignoring things that are not worth worrying about: “Old Swan isn’t so bleak any more. Maybe it never was; maybe I was the bleak one. Anyway, I can live with it: life is too short to worry about stuff” (G 265). It even looks like Tom cannot understand how he could miss or ignore all the beautiful things before: “October, Monday morning, and the school yard full of yellow leaves. I seemed to be noticing things more: trees and leaves and colours, stuff like that. Autumn colours, vivid and sharp. Were they always like that?” (G 261). Tom is aware that he has changed and he likes this change as he believes that this was the purpose of him travelling back to the past: “Just as I said that, I felt something odd, something sudden and important, a click of recognition, like my wobbling mollies had righted themselves once and for all. There was a certainty to it, a moment of truth, you might say, like my life had changed and there was no going back and nothing from now on would ever be quite the same. It was a good feeling” (G 255). The experience of the Great Irish Famine has taught Tom to become a better person, and the Monaghans have taught him to become an honest man – while Tom has taught Tully to steal in order to survive, explaining that there is nothing wrong about stealing as far as it is done with the purpose to survive and to keep his family alive (G 201-202), Tully has taught Tom how to be an honest man and not to steal, and Tom passes this philosophy on to Brian:

I’ve stopped knicking stuff; there’s no need to because the fozy food is fine. Besides, I can’t forget what Tully said about an honest man being the noblest work of God. His dad, Thaddeus Monaghan, told him that. So I try to stay honest. I don’t let Brian nick stuff either. As I said at the beginning, it all started when I fell into the grave. It finished when I found out who I am. (G 265)

2.3.4. Conclusion

This section has provided an analysis of *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, *Nory Ryan's Song* and *The Grave* in terms of how the main characters react to death in general, and how they grieve and mourn for their dead relatives and friends in particular, and how the experience of death and losing beloved persons influences their character development.

It could be seen that the three novels differ from each other not only in terms of how and whether at all dead and dying people are depicted in them, but also in terms of in what relation the deceased were to the main characters, as a consequence of what they died, as well as what impact their death has had on their character development.

While Eily, Michael and Peggy O'Driscoll in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* lose 'only' one person as a result of the Famine – their baby sister Bridget, and similarly, Nory Ryan in *Nory Ryan's Song* has lost one person – her mother, and not as a result of the Famine as she had died years before the potato blight appeared on the fields of Nory's village, the main characters of *The Grave*, namely Hannah and Tully Monaghan, lose three beloved persons – their father, who dies for the cruelty of the English landlord, and their mother and brother, who die of the famine fever. Although in the beginning, these people are strangers to the protagonist Tom Mullen, he comes to love them as if they were his real family (which actually proves to be the case in the end as Tom becomes convinced that Tully is his great-grandfather) and he grieves for them as much as Tully and Hannah do.

Despite the fact, however, that death deprives Eily, Michael and Peggy of their sister only, they are left behind by their parents and never learn in the novel what has happened to them and whether they are dead or not. Similarly, although death 'has taken' only her mother from Nory, she does not know where her father is and whether he is still alive or not. In addition, Nory's eldest sister leaves for America and finally, her grandfather and sister Celia set out to look for their father. Consequently, the main characters of all three novels appear in a very similar situation – they find themselves on their own, without their parents, and thus, the fact that they have to rely on their own ability to survive is put into the foreground. At the same time, however, the importance of family and friendship is emphasised in all three novels, with none of the characters 'fighting' to stay alive alone, but with their siblings or close friends. The importance of family and friendship, as well as of mutual support and help, is stressed also in respect of losing beloved persons, grieving and

coping with death. As a result, family and friendship can be said to be of utmost significance in the novels, as they are put into the foreground throughout the whole narratives and on several levels.

What the main characters experience in the novels has both negative, as well as positive effects on their character development. The most prominent negative effect of losing their family members and close friends, and of encountering death at every turn, as well as of doing their best to escape death themselves, is that the child characters lose their childhood forever. Although the idea of a lost childhood is not so much emphasised in *The Grave* as it is in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Nory Ryan's Song*, it is nevertheless relevant to the discussion of character development in all three novels.

Among the most important positive effects of their traumatising experience is that the characters of all three novels come to appreciate and value life more than before, being grateful for every single day they can spend with people they love. In addition, the characters of all three novels have lost all their squeamishness and have learned to appreciate food, being grateful for every bite of anything that can keep them alive. And last but not least, the harsh experience of the child characters has resulted in them becoming, or at least learning to be, better persons, which is best exemplified in *The Grave*, but which can clearly be applied to the other two novels as well.

Because of the arguments given above, and despite the gruesome and sad topic of the novels, it can be concluded that the novels can have a very positive effect on the children's audience, on their perception of the world, as well as on the shaping of their life values, principles and priorities.

Conclusion

The thesis was an analysis of three children's novels on the topic of the Great Irish Famine, namely *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-McKenna, *Nory Ryan's Song* by Patricia Reilly Giff, and *The Grave* by James Heneghan, with a focus on the theme of death. The aim of the study was to compare the three novels in respect to the importance of the theme of death in their narratives, and with what manner death and dying are presented in each. The analysis has come up with interesting results. Although all three novels deal with the same topic, focused on Ireland's greatest tragedy the Great Irish Famine, during which over 1 million people died, and although they are aimed at an audience of approximately the same age, there is a striking difference between the novels in the way the theme of death is incorporated in each story, and to what extent the theme plays a role in the narratives, as well as in the way the concept is discussed, that is, in how the authors refer to death and dying. Essentially, marked differences have been found on both the story and discourse level, especially between *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* in one regard, and *Nory Ryan's Song* in the other.

In *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* the theme of death plays a very important role, whereby in the latter death could be said to be of even higher importance as a plot device than in the former. In contrast to this, in *Nory Ryan's Song*, death, resulting from Famine, plays a very marginal role. This argument can be supported by the fact that in contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*, *Nory Ryan's Song* contains one single reference to the death of a person who has died as a result of Famine – the grandmother of Sean Mallon. The only other reference to death and dying as a result of the Famine is one that refers to people dying in their houses. However, no concrete characters are referred to, nor does the author describe the scene in more detail. Due to its vagueness, no death-scenes are actually described in *Nory Ryan's Song* (there are only a few short and subtle references to dying people at home and on the streets), nor does the narrative contain any descriptions of burial ceremonies and references to mass graves, which might be interpreted as the author avoiding mentioning the huge number of deaths. Finally, in contrast to *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*, *Nory Ryan's Song* contains almost no references to the famine diseases (there are three altogether, and in none of these cases does the author explain the link between the fever and the Famine, nor does she discuss the probability in

which the fever might lead to death), nor to workhouses, which play an important role in the discussion of death in the other two novels. In contrast to *Nory Ryan's Song*, in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave*, the theme of death can be said to play a very important role, and while Conlon-McKenna approaches the theme in quite a sensitive way, both she and Heneghan discuss the theme very openly and directly. It can be concluded that although the target audience of the three novels is of around the same age (that of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is even a bit younger), while Reilly Giff avoids the theme of death, the authors of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* approach the theme as any other, albeit with a slight difference between these two novels too. The author of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* discusses death very openly, yet it can still be argued that she does so in a way which could be described as appropriate for a children's audience. It could be argued that because of its too detailed and naturalistic descriptions of dead and dying people, the author of *The Grave* approaches the theme of death in a way which one would expect to find in a novel for adults. In stark contrast to the other two novels contrasted, the author of *Nory Ryan's Song* could be said to be avoiding the theme of death and to be referring to it in an indirect way by using euphemisms. Consequently, while *The Grave* and *Nory Ryan's Song* are aimed for readers of approximately the same age, the former contains such detailed and graphic depictions of dead and dying people, that one would not expect to find these in a children's book, while the latter treats the concept of death nearly as a taboo. While all three novels deal with a topic which is inextricably linked to death, in *The Grave*, death is a very important plot device, yet on the other hand, the novel might be said to have been written in a style inappropriate for children. In contrast to *The Grave*, although *Nory Ryan's Song* might be regarded as a suitable book for children in reference to the way it discusses death, it could also be argued that the author of the novel 'hides' important historical facts, namely that the Great Irish Famine has been associated with a huge number of deaths.

In regards to the way the experience of the Great Irish Famine influences the development of the main characters of the novels, it could be argued that in every case, the characters come to appreciate and value food, their family and friends, as well as life in general more than before. Consequently, it could also be reasoned that through identification with the protagonists, the life values and principles of the young readers are influenced by these narratives too. While the impact of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *The Grave* on the young readers is a result of not only hunger and suffering, but also of the high

number of deaths presented in the novels, in the case of *Nory Ryan's Song* it is only as a result of hunger and hard living conditions. Even though each of the novels look at the Great Irish Famine from a slightly different perspective, focusing on different problems and highlighting different issues, the impact of the novels on its readers can be said to be approximately the same.

It could be contended that precisely because of their impact on its readers, the novels are an important part of not only the Irish literary canon, but also of the canon of children's literature in general. In addition to teaching children about a crucial event of the Irish history, the novels might be said to teach the young readers to appreciate life more, and as already pointed out, to have a great impact on the formation of their life values. In addition, through identification with the protagonists, the Irish children in particular connect with the past of their nation, coming to understand the great loss for Ireland through the loss of the main characters and the deaths as presented. As a result of their literary display, the books help to create the readers' sense of national identity and to understand their own past.

As could be surmised, there are a variety of opinions as to how death *is* and how it *should* be presented in children's books. While it has been argued that some books, such as for example *Life and Death* (1970) by Herbert S. Zim and Sonia Bleeker, deal with death in too open of a way, having a lack of consideration and reminding one of scientific literature, it has also been pointed out that some books, such as Stull's *My Turtle Died Today* (1964), deal with death in too soft a way, confusing children about the nature of death. In other words, whereas, as James (2) points out, some critics say that death in children's literature should be avoided as it can cause psychological harm, others, such as Matthews (89-101) or Gibson and Zaidman (233), argue that discussing death with children is extremely important as it has a great impact on their values and priorities, and because it educates them about the nature of life and death, and about cultural mourning rituals. The value of this research resides in its contribution to this discussion, focusing on children's books and dealing with a topic inextricably linked to death, thus providing a great opportunity to analyse this theme, and the way it is presented to children. The analysis has shown in what regard the authors of novels on the same topic can differ in the way they present and deal with death, and what impact their approach can have on, for example, the accurate presentation of historical events. From another perspective, the analysis highlighted above brings a new light to scholarly knowledge on children's novels related to the Great Irish Famine, as a lot has been

written about this particular field of literature, however, no research has been conducted so far on the presentation of death in these books, or whether it is necessary to incorporate the theme of death in these kinds of novels, what role death plays in them and to what extent it is dealt with, and above all, in what manner these books are appropriate for children in relation to the way they present the theme of death.

Although all three novels that have been analysed in this thesis are classified as children's books, the target audience of these novels are children between nine and thirteen, and this is where the limitations of this thesis lie. Even though the target audience of the three books are very close to each other in age, there is a slight difference, and this difference might be crucial exactly around the age of twelve or thirteen, where the border between children's literature and literature for young adults becomes blurred. The results of the comparisons of the three novels in respect to their presentation of death might not be as exact or profound as it would be if their target audience was of exactly the same age.

A further research analysis of, for example, children's books on the Great Irish Famine and the theme of death, aimed for children of six or seven years of age or, on the other hand, for children of around thirteen or fourteen years of age, and a comparison of the books for these two distant age groups, could bring even more light to the scholarly knowledge on the children's novels on the Great Irish Famine and the way death is dealt with in them.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit dem Thema des Todes in der Kinderliteratur über die Große Hungersnot in Irland. Auf der einen Seite ist das Thema des Todes in der Kinderliteratur ein Objekt von großen Diskussion geworden, wobei ein Teil der Kritikern behauptet, dass der Tod in diesen Büchern vermieden werden soll und als ein Tabu behandelt werden sollte, da es nicht in die Kinderwelt gehört und daher in den Kindern Gewalt erregen kann, oder psychologischen Schaden verursachen kann. Der andere Teil behauptet, dass der Tod in der Kinderliteratur wie jedes andere Thema behandelt werden sollte, da es ein natürlicher Bestandteil des Lebens ist. Auf der anderen Seite wird die Große Hungersnot als eines der tragischsten Ereignissen in der Irischen Historie betrachtet, wobei mehr als 1 Million Menschen gestorben sind, und daher anscheinend unvereinbar mit Literatur für Kinder ist.

Diese Arbeit verbindet die Kluft zwischen der Kinderliteratur und einem Thema, dass in der Kinderwelt generell verboten, oder zumindest vermieden wird. Dabei werden drei gegenwärtige Romane analysiert, nämlich *Under the Hawthorn Tree* [Unter dem Weißdorn] von Marita Conlon-McKenna, *Nory Ryan's Song* [Nory Ryans Lied] von Patricia Reilly Giff, und *The Grave* [Das Grab] von James Heneghan.

Das Ziel ist es, das Thema des Todes in den drei Romanen aufzuarbeiten, in Bezug auf wie wichtig das Thema für eine treue Schilderung der historischen Ereignisse ist, die mit der Großen Hungersnot in Irland eng verbunden waren, sowie auch wie der Tod und das Sterben präsentiert werden. Die Hypothese dieser Arbeit ist, dass die Präsenz des Todes in den Kinderromanen für eine treue und adäquate Schilderung der historischen Ereignisse und hauptsächlich der Großen Hungersnot notwendig ist, und nicht vermieden werden kann. In anderen Worten, die Frage dieser Arbeit ist: Wenn das Thema des Todes in Kinderbüchern vermieden werden soll, kann man dies auch über die Bücher sagen, die ein der wichtigsten und tragischsten Ereignissen in der irischen Historie darstellen, und daher sehr wichtig für die Ausbildung der Kinder sind, wo jedoch der Tod nicht vermieden werden kann?

Diese Arbeit analysiert drei gegenwärtige Romane aus einer interdisziplinären Perspektive, einschließlich einer kulturellen, literarischen, sowie auch einer psychologischen Perspektive. Dabei wird untersucht, welche historischen Ereignisse, die mit der riesigen Nummer der Toten eng verbunden waren, dargestellt werden, sowie auch wie sie

geschildert werden. Des Weiteren wird untersucht, wie die Autoren den Tod den jungen Lesern präsentieren, sowie auch was für einen Einfluss der Tod im Allgemeinen, aber auch der Tod der Menschen, die zu den Protagonisten emotional nah sind, auf die Charakterentwicklung der Protagonisten, und im Endeffekt auch auf die Charakterentwicklung der Leser und Leserinnen hat.

Es wurde herausgefunden, dass es einen relativ großen Unterschied zwischen den Romanen gibt, obwohl die Zielgruppen der drei Romanen ungefähr gleichaltrig sind, im Bezug auf die Einbeziehung des Todes in die Geschichten, sowie auch wie die drei Autoren den Tod und das Sterben präsentieren.

Da relativ viel über die Großen Hungersnot in Kinderromanen geschrieben wurde, aber nichts über das Thema des Todes in diesen, bringt diese Arbeit ein neues Licht nicht nur in die Forschung von Kinderliteratur über die Großen Hungersnot, sondern auch in die Disziplin der Kinderliteratur im Allgemeinen, da diese generell von den Wissenschaftlern vernachlässigt wird.

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