

Rosamaria Giammanco

The Myth of The Strong Irish Immigrant Servant Woman

An Analysis of Novels by Sadlier, McElgun and Atwood

Master's Thesis

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**The Myth of The Strong Irish Immigrant Servant Woman:
An Analysis of Novels by Sadlier, McElgun and Atwood**

A Thesis
Submitted to the English Department
Of Leiden University
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Master's Degree

By Rosamaria Stefania Giammanco

Song composed on the banks of Newfoundland

By James Orr¹

In Ireland 'tis evening. From toil my friend hie all,
And weary walk home o'er the dew-sprinkled lea;
The shepherd in love tunes his grief soothing viol,
Or visits the maid that his partner will be:
The blithe milk-maids trip to the herd that stands lowing,
The West finely smiles, and the landscape is glowing,
The sad-sounding curfew, and torrent fast-flowing,
Are heard by my fancy, tho' far, far at sea.

What has my eye seen since I left the green valies
But ships as remote as the prospect could be?
Unwieldly huge monsters, as ugly as *malice*,
And planks of some wreck, which with sorrow I see?
What's seen but the fowl that his lonely flight urges,
The light'ning that darts thro' the sky-meeting surges?
And the sad scouling sky, that with bitter rain scourges
This cheek Care sits drooping on, far, far at sea?

How hideous the hold is! – Here, children are screaming,
The dames faint thro' thirst, with their babes on their knee;
Here, down ev'ry hatch the big breakers are streaming,
And, there, with a crash, half the fixtures break free:
Some court – some contend – some sit dull stories telling –
The mate's mad and drunk, and the tar's task'd and yelling
What sickness and sorrow, pervade my rude dwelling! –
A huge floating lazar-house, far, far at sea.

How chang'd all may be when I seek the sweet village!
A hedge-row may bloom where its street us'd to be;
The floors of my friends may be tortur'd by tillage.
And the upstart be serv'd by the fallen grandee:
The axe may have humbled the grove that I haunted,
And shades be my shield that as yet are unplanted;
Nor one comrade live, who repin'd when he wanted
The sociable sufferer, that's far, far at sea.

In Ireland 'tis night. On the flow'rs of my setting
A parent may kneel, fondly praying for me:
The village is smokeless, the red moon is getting
The hill for a throne, which I yet hope to see:
If innocence thrive many more have to grieve for,
Success, slow but sure, I'll contentedly live for-
Yes, Sylvia! we'll meet, and your sigh cease to heave for
The swain, your fine image haunts, far, far at sea.

¹ Andrew Carpenter, "From Ulster to Delaware: Two Poems by James Orr about an Eighteenth-Century Emigrant Voyage," in Charles Fanning (Ed.) *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 68-9.

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Introduction: “Far at Sea”

“Emigrants were well aware of ... the suffering with which they had paid and they were proud: they stated as much in the bittersweetness of their songs: ‘how many tears this America costs.’”²

History of a conquered country

Ireland has been a troubled nation for many centuries. Over the centuries it has dealt with conquerors, loss of culture, poverty, hunger and political strife. The emerald isle was entirely conquered and colonized by the British in the second part of the sixteenth century. Before this period there had also been some British settlements, but not enough to speak of true colonization.³ After the colonization Ireland’s inhabitants were labeled as savages by their English colonizers and were denied their national identity and any basic (democratic) rights.⁴ Furthermore, they were overtly ridiculed for being Catholic. Many Irish abandoned their language and their culture, for adapting to the British could mean a method to find work and therefore surviving poverty and unemployment. However, as sociologist John Ardagh argues “British colonizers sucked it [Ireland] for its farm produce but did little to promote its economy.”⁵ In other words, Irish economy in those days depended largely on agriculture. An agricultural society is of course fully acceptable, but as Ardagh explains later on in his rhetoric: “much of the [Irish] soil is too stony and infertile to offer its farmers a decent living.”⁶

The best proof for Ardagh’s statement is the well-known Irish potato famine during the 1840’s. This dreadful famine prolonged the Irish suffering and brought it to new lows.

² Grazie Dore, “Some Social and Historical Aspects of Italian Emigration to America” in Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 113.

N.B. though this quote is specifically aimed at the Italian American immigrants, it could just as easily apply to the Irish immigrant group in America.

³ John Ardagh, *Ireland and the Irish: Portrait of a Changing Society* (England: Penguin Books, 1995), 69.

⁴ Fanning, 1997, 2.

⁵ Ardagh, 69.

⁶ Ibid, 70.

Moreover, it was not only the native Irish who were duped in the nineteenth century by poverty and hunger. Irish Protestants in the North, often descendants from early Scottish colonists, were experiencing the same inconveniences as the Catholic natives. They too had problems because of the bad crops and were experiencing poverty and famine.⁷ These problems which were therefore applicable to both Catholic and Protestant Irish - the unemployment rate, the oppressive rule of the British and the potato famine – caused various enormous emigration waves from all over Ireland in the nineteenth century.

Most emigrants chose to try their luck in America, hiring themselves as indentured servants, so their crossing would be paid for, or they took their last pieces of money to pay for it themselves.⁸ Many had no idea what they would meet or do once on the other side of the ocean. The numbers of Irish immigrants coming to America was enormous, and this massive exodus left Ireland half empty. As Lynette Kelly ironically notes: “Between 1841 and 1922, the number of sheep and cattle in Ireland was doubled, but [because of emigration] the population halved.”⁹ Of the total number of immigrants coming into the U.S. between 1820 and 1840 the percentage of Irish was forty-three percent, and by 1860 the Irish-born population in America consisted of about 1.5 million people.¹⁰ As can be expected this enormous influx of Irish into America caused problems, both for the Americans as for the Irish themselves.

Most new Irish immigrants did not move further into America but lingered in the east. This resulted in tremendous groups of Irish clinging together. For example a third of Boston’s inhabitants was of Irish descent by 1860.¹¹ Moreover, as Christine Bolt and A. Robert Lee write, many of these numerous newcomers were very poor, unschooled and Catholic. These

⁷ Kerby A. Miller, Bruce D. Boling, and Liam Kennedy, “The Famine’s Scars” *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies* 36:1-2 (2001), 98-123.

⁸ Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey* (Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), 327.

⁹ Lynette Kelly, “The Politics of Immigration in Ireland,” *Migpol* online. <http://www.emz-berlin.de/projekte_e/pj32_1pdf/MigPol/Migpol_Ireland.pdf>

¹⁰ Brinkley, 327.

¹¹ Christine Bolt and A. Robert Lee, “New England in the Nation,” in Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley, eds., *Introduction to American Studies* (England: Longman, 1998), 69.