
Effects of the Irish Potato Famine in the 19th Century: A Comparatative Analysis of Articles by Connell and Woodham-Smith

The articles by Connell and Woodham-Smith contain similarities and differences concerning the causes and effects of the Irish Potato Famine in the 19th century. Woodham-Smith tends to place more blame on the English lords and landowners. She is looking at the effects of the famine in Ireland and how the relief effort was poorly mismanaged by the English elite. On the other hand, Connell focuses the blame more on the Irish's dependency on the crop. He is asking why the Irish were so dependent on the potato and subsequently looking at how that dependency caused the famine. That is not saying that Woodham-Smith entirely ignores the importance of the potatoes in Ireland or that Connell finds the English presence in Ireland completely unrelated to the plight.

Connell argues that the potato, while a monotonous diet, combined with milk, allowed the Irish to be well nourished and fortified. The introduction of potatoes into Irish society allowed previously undernourished persons to be fully satisfied. This led to a healthier and more fertile society. The potato required less land and less work to yield a successful crop. While most other crops require a large amount of land to be fruitful, the potatoes allowed for smaller farms, thus allowing for more families to rent smaller pieces of land. Since the potato left the Irish well-nourished and possibly more fertile and allowed for smaller farms, the Irish, who had previously staved off marriage until after entering their 30s, were able to marry younger, and produce and provide for more children for a longer period of time. The increase in population due to previously stated reasons cause the Irish population to increase with astonishing vigor possibly at a rate of 172% or higher between 1779 and 1841. The rapid population growth was most likely caused by an overabundance of births and not nearly as many deaths partially due to the fact that the Irish diet of milk and potatoes made the Irishman healthier than he had previously been.

The Irish heavy reliance on the potato left them unprepared to deal with famine or other food sources. They did not have the resources to prepare other forms of food as they were accustomed to preparing their meals with just a pot and a fire, there were no ovens to prepare grain based foods; they had neither mills to grind the grain nor stomachs to digest it. All these reasons and more, Connell states, are the cause of the severity of the famine and the English's inability to help the common Irishman. With famine inevitably came disease and death, an epidemic across the state which could not be contained by those who held power in England. With an overabundant population, the Irish hadn't a fighting chance. Connell states, "But no

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government could have contained the Famine: given the dominance of the potato, some such disaster was all but inevitable; given the growth of population, the more it was delayed, the more malevolent it must be” (pg. 66).

Woodham-Smith, unlike Connell, places the blame more firmly on the English elite that controlled the Irish country. She acknowledges the importance of the potato and its effects on society as Connell described, but looks to the disaster caused by the English landowners during the famine as the main reason the famine was so powerful in Ireland.

When the famine hit, Ireland was left starving and diseased. Those with power from England did not have the resources to feed the overpopulated country, especially while England had experienced a population increase themselves. The Earl of Lucan, who Woodham-Smith focuses on in the excerpt, decides that, “There was only one solution for Ireland- a large part of the population must disappear” (pg. 7). The landlords began evicting their tenants willy-nilly to gain back control of their land and to hopefully start improving Ireland. However, this left millions starving, sick and dead, and in need of help. England tried to set up relief work building roads but that proved unsatisfactory, and more than two million people were receiving food from the government with that number growing each day. The English grew sick of having to provide for the impoverished Irish paupers and decided to cut off most of the relief efforts. They began motions of closing workhouses and turning out those who were in it. The Earl of Lucan offered to keep the workhouse open, paying for it himself. Lord Lucan, while called the Exterminator, felt that he was actually trying his best to improve Ireland, if not for the current generation, then for the generations to come. The Irish population, he knew, was too large to be sustained and somehow the population must be controlled and brought back down to a more manageable number.

Connell really delves deep into the root cause of the famine and how the changing Irish society played a part. He illustrates and explains in full detail how the Irish were in fact responsible for their downfall and explains that no country, whether ruled by itself or not, could not have remedied a famine of that magnitude. Woodham-Smith goes more into detail about how the English tried to alleviate the problem and how uncaring most of the English elite seemed to be at the plight of the Irish paupers. While this is helpful, I think that Connell’s explanation of the societal changes that led up to the famine were most helpful in determining the root cause of the famine and why it could not be stopped or helped.

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