

Irish Potato Famine
Analysis of Song Lyrics

To better understand the Irish Potato Famine of the 19th century, you are to analyze how this tragedy is portrayed in modern Irish music. Watch/listen to your assigned song and read the lyrics below, and then answer the following questions over it.

Artist: **Black 47**

Song: **Black 47**

video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=md_ttsKCtmM

Everything is still
Not a chicken not a body
Just an awful sickenin' silence roarin' in my brain
And the fog of death deepens and lies upon the land
An old wan rolls over on her back
The grass stains still green upon her chin
I can still hear her kickin' and screamin' in the wind

God's curse upon you Lord John Russell¹
May your black hearted soul rot in hell
There's no love left on earth
And God is dead in heaven
In these dark and deadly days of Black '47

God's curse upon you Lord Trevelyan²
May your great Queen Victoria rot in hell
'Till England and its Empire
Answer under heaven
For the crimes they committed in Black '47

Paudie³ said "c'mon now
Don't look back, she's not livin', she's a phantom
And she'll curse us if we look into her eyes"
Oh God, I think I'm dyin' - the fever's in my brain
For can't you see that pack of children up ahead
The beards of old men sproutin' from their chins
Can't you hear their screams of hunger in the wind

Darlin' Paudie save me
I think I'm sinkin' fast, me blood is boilin'
Don't let me die here in a ditch
If the hunger doesn't get me - the fever surely will
Paudie took me up and threw me 'cross his shoulder
He nursed me everyday 'til we reached America
Screamin' and shoutin' like two madmen in the wind

¹ Lord John Russell – British Prime Minister 1846-1852; his government's efforts to prevent widespread starvation as a result of the famine were ineffective

² Lord Charles Edward Trevelyan – head of the British Treasury; dealt with Irish relief; disapproved of the Irish and described warlike preparations after visiting Ireland and accused Catholic priests of provoking an uprising

³ Paudie – Irish slang word for a fellow countryman

Name: _____

Black 47 "Black 47"

Questions:

- 1) Why is the song, and the band, named Black 47? What does it say about how they view the famine?

- 2) How do they describe the famine?

- 3) Is the song sad or angry? Provide one section from the lyrics that proves this.

- 4) How does the song view England's role in the famine? Provide one section from the lyrics that proves this.

- 5) Describe the meaning of the first minute of the song. What was the band trying to get across?

- 6) This song was written in 1992. Why would a band write a song like this 150 years after the actual event? What was their goal in writing it?

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Artist: **written by Pete St. John; performed by The Dubliners**

Song: **The Fields of Athenry**

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS0dUvEXx3g>

By a lonely prison wall
I heard a young girl calling,
'Michael, they are taking you away.
For you stole Trevelyan's corn,⁴
So the young might see the morn,
Now a prison ship lies waiting in the bay.'

Chorus

Low lie the fields of Athenry⁵
Where once we watched the small freebirds fly.
Our love was on the wing,
We had dreams and songs to sing
It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry

By a lonely prison wall
I heard a young man calling
'nothing matters, Mary when you're free
Against the famine and the crown,
I rebelled, they cut me down,
Now you must raise our child with dignity.'

Chorus

By a lonely harbor wall,
As she watched the last star falling
As the prison ship said out against the sky
For she lived in hope and prayed,
For her love in Botany Bay⁶
It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry

Chorus

It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry

⁴ Lord Charles Edward Trevelyan – head of the British Treasury; dealt with Irish relief; disapproved of the Irish and described warlike preparations after visiting Ireland and accused Catholic priests of provoking an uprising; his “corn” refers to wheat that was for sale to starving Irish as he did not support simply giving away food for free.

⁵ Athenry is an Irish town outside of Galway

⁶ Botany Bay is in Australia, near Sydney, where British prisoners were sent in the 19th century

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Artist: **Sinead O'Connor**

Song: **Famine**

video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyLnbjtBLX4>

OK, I want to talk about Ireland
Specifically I want to talk about the "famine"
About the fact that there never really was one
There was no "famine"
See Irish people were only allowed to eat potatoes
All of the other food
Meat fish vegetables
Were shipped out of the country under armed guard
To England while the Irish people starved

And then on the middle of all this
They gave us money not to teach our children Irish
And so we lost our history
And this is what I think is still hurting me

See we're like a child that's been battered
Has to drive itself out of its head because it's
frightened
Still feels all the painful feelings
But they lose contact with the memory

And this leads to massive self-destruction
Alcoholism, drug addiction
All desperate attempts at running
And in its worst form
Becomes actual killing

And if there ever is gonna be healing
There has to be remembering
And then grieving
So that there then can be forgiving
There has to be knowledge and understanding

All the lonely people
Where do they all come from

An American army regulation
Says you mustn't kill more than 10% of a nation
'Cos to do so causes permanent "psychological
damage"
It's not permanent but they didn't know that

Anyway during the supposed "famine"
We lost a lot more than 10% of our nation
Through deaths on land or on ships of emigration
But what finally broke us was not starvation
But it's use in the controlling of our education
School go on about "Black 47"
On and on about "The terrible famine"
But what they don't say is in truth
There really never was one

Chorus

So let's take a look, shall we
The highest statistics of child abuse in the EEC
And we say we're a Christian country
But we've lost contact with our history
See we used to worship God as a mother
We're suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder
Look at all our old men in the pubs
Look at all our young people on drugs
We used to worship God as a mother
Now look at what we're doing to each other

We've even made killers of ourselves
The most child-like trusting people in the Universe
And this is what's wrong with us
Our history books, the parent figures, lied to us

I see the Irish
As a race like a child
That got itself bashed in the face
And if there ever is gonna be healing
There has to be remembering
And then grieving
So that there then can be forgiving
There has to be knowledge and understanding

Chorus

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Artist: **The Pogues**

Song: **Thousands are Sailing**

video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEz5mS_XOcQ

The island it is silent now
But the ghosts still haunt the waves
And the torch lights up a famished man
Who fortune could not save

Did you work upon the railroad
Did you rid the streets of crime
Were your dollars from the white house
Were they from the five and dime

Did the old songs taunt or cheer you
And did they still make you cry
Did you count the months and years
Or did your teardrops quickly dry

Ah, no, says he, 'twas not to be
On a coffin ship⁷ I came here
And I never even got so far
That they could change my name

Thousands are sailing
Across the western ocean
To a land of opportunity
That some of them will never see
Fortune prevailing
Across the western ocean
Their bellies full
Their spirits free
They'll break the chains of poverty
And they'll dance

In Manhattan's desert twilight
In the death of afternoon
We stepped hand in hand on Broadway
Like the first man on the moon
And "The Blackbird"⁸ broke the silence

As you whistled it so sweet
And in Brendan Behan's⁹ footsteps
I danced up and down the street

Then we said goodnight to Broadway
Giving it our best regards
Tipped our hats to Mister Cohan¹⁰
Dear old Times Square's favorite bard

Then we raised a glass to JFK¹¹
And a dozen more besides
When I got back to my empty room
I suppose I must have cried

Thousands are sailing
Again across the ocean
Where the hand of opportunity
Draws tickets in a lottery
Postcards we're mailing
Of sky-blue skies and oceans
From rooms the daylight never sees¹²
Where lights don't glow on Christmas trees
But we dance to the music
And we dance

Thousands are sailing
Across the western ocean
Where the hand of opportunity
Draws tickets in a lottery
Where e'er we go, we celebrate
The land that makes us refugees
From fear of Priests with empty plates
From guilt and weeping effigies
And we dance

⁷ "coffin ships" were the nicknames of Irish ships that Irish emigrants took to America, called so due to the high death rates on board

⁸ a traditional Irish folk song

⁹ Behan was an Irish poet and novelist in the 20th century

¹⁰ George Cohan was a major composer, playwright, and producer in the US of Irish origin

¹¹ President John F. Kennedy was of Irish descent, his great-grandfather emigrated from Ireland to the US in 1848

¹² reference to the tenement homes immigrant families lived in

