

Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*: The Irish Famine and Pathological Families

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I. Introduction

Star of the Sea is a historical metafiction envisaging the twenty-five-day-long voyage in *Star of the Sea*, a passenger ship carrying to North America the Irish refugees fleeing from the Irish (Great) Famine. *Star of the Sea* is composed of two narrative stratifications: one is about the voyage itself which occurs from November 8 to December 4 in 1847 and the mysterious murder of David Merridith on December 7 over the course of New York Quarantine Division's disallowance of the *Star of the Sea* passengers' disembarkation in the ensuing days; the other is about the historical embroilment between Irish peasants and English (Anglo-Irish) landlords around the Famine as reconstructed, interpreted, and evaluated by G. Grantley Dixon, the *New York Tribune* journalist who is a would-be novelist but never makes a successful career as a novelist. In *Star of the Sea*, Joseph O'Connor blurs the boundary between history and fiction by extrapolating into the narrative a variety of excerpts from historical texts such as personal memoirs, letters, diaries,

books, and newspaper articles written by Irish emigrants, English journalists, anthropologists, Irish nationalists, English politicians, or unidentified authors. O'Connor himself makes a list of the "sources" at the end of his novel he looked up in writing his novel. Some of them are *The Famine in Ireland* (1986) by Mary Daly, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (1988) by Joan Johnson, *The Irish Famine* (1994) by Helen Litton, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (1985) by Kerby A. Miller, *Patient Endurance: The Great Famine in Connemara* (1997) by Kathleen Villiers-Tuthill. Moreover, O'Connor further complicates a distinction between historical validation and artistic imagination by having his fictive character Dixon, as set up as a *New York Tribune* reporter, write a book assuming historical accounts of the Irish Famine, which is entitled *An American Abroad: Notes of London and Ireland in 1847*.

Star of the Sea is, as Gerry Smyth notes, indeed the outcome of the "individualism of the writer" (176) whose artistic freedom has made a postcolonial rethinking of the Irish colonial past since the mid-1980s. Historical citations from various sources O'Connor inserts into his book indicate that modern Irish writers' obsessions with the colonial past are still ongoing in the postcolonial era (Smyth 176). In *Star of the Sea*, yet, O'Connor remakes Irish colonialism by, to borrow Smyth's words, "allowing silenced voices to speak and questioning the voices which have dominated society" (177). The Irish Famine O'Connor reinvents in the form of artistic historiography challenges the national discourse of Irish history that has read the calamity as Irish decimation by English ascendancy. My design in this essay is to make the case a change in interpersonal emotional pattern the Famine inflicted on Irish and Anglo-Irish family relationships. Thus, this essay illuminates the way in which *Star of the Sea* redirects a narrative focus from the agonistic discourse of Irish revenge pitted against English domination to the emotional illness in a pathogenic family process transpiring in both the Irish Mulvey family and the English Merridith family. O'Connor tackles a simplified historical view of the English landlords only as merciless exploiters of the Irish peasantry by making to be a Famine victim the English landlord David Merridith. In *Star of the Sea*,

Merridith's parents as well as Merridith himself are shown to be a conscientious case countering the villainous English landlords in Irish accounts of the Famine. As Melissa Fegan observes, *Star of the Sea* "challenges the enduring nationalist version of the Famine, in which the English government was responsible for the deaths of up to two million people because of its failure to prevent exports of food from a starving country and its sole reliance on poorhouses and public works to relieve mass distress" ("That heartbroken island" 326). *Star of the Sea* is clearly one of Irish historical novels since the 1980s, whose literary "tactics of subversion and irony" (Patten 263) establishes the tendency of "ideological non-conformism" in Irish historiography. Cliona Ó Gallchoir also appreciates O'Connor's narrative strategy problematizing nationality-based historical arguments on the Famine. She makes Mary Duane a convincing case showing O'Connor's "central nationalist trope" (348). She sees Mary Duane as a figure representing Irish oral identity—as considered to be one of the authentic Irish nationalities—atavistically resurgent into the culture of Irish literacy after Ireland was anglicized in the English language. She argues that, as "a female figure" materializing an "Irish authentic origin" (360), Mary Duane is O'Connor's "symbolic" reification of an unwritten history about "a subject position grounded in an Irish nation state which can reclaim markers of identity" (359).

In *Star of the Sea*, the narrative is indeed tensioned between the ideological discourse of Irish nationalism and the interpersonal discourse of psychosocial life. On the one hand, the logic of Irish nationalism compels Pius Mulvey to be involved in the scheme to execute Merridith, the English landlord who the Hibernian Defenders brand as a national evil. On the other hand, the psychosocial life unvoiced by the national discourse makes a pathogenic family process the probable case of historical experience. This essay, in particular, casts light on the traumatic consequences of loss of mother during Merridith's and Pius Mulvey's early life, which causes their personality problems in their adult life. The emotional distresses from the loss of mother were fully reported by John Bowlby, a psychiatrist who examined dysfunctional psychodynamics on the plane of human emotive-cognitive

development. He stated that “an experience of” “the loss of mother” in early life leads to “severe dysfunction” (22) in interpersonal relationship in later life. Pius Mulvey’s extremity in his detachment from any relationship and Merridith’s severe trouble in making a new relationship are all assumed to be attendant on their early trauma from losing their mother: the absence of mother during childhood spawns their ongoing insecurity in their later interpersonal life. They all turn into persons dysfunctional in their marital interrelationship, while making themselves emotionally crippled. It suggests that an attachment disorder is multigenerational: one’s insecure attachment in his or her family of origin is transmitted to the family process in his own family. Pius Mulvey abandons Mary Duane pregnant with his child and lets it stillborn, and Merridith is incapable to have affectional bonds with his two sons. In this way, O’Connor transcends the racial dichotomy in the nationalist discourse on the Famine and expands a historical narrative into an Irish history of socio-emotional impediments. O’Connor’s new historical picture of the Famine includes not only the Irish but also the Anglo-Irish into an Irish history of family trauma.

II. Irish Historiography and the Famine

In *Star of the Sea*, Dixon is at once a narrator and the author of his narrative in which he constructs the facts he prefers to make by selectively compiling written statements he collected from the Famine witnesses and sufferers. As an American journalist, who holds a Marxist position in his view of the cause of the calamitous starvation, Dixon is involved in the Famine as its reporter. His report is, as Joseph O’Connor might intend, exactly made up with Bakhtinian *heteroglossia* carrying polyphonic voices. In the report, he himself makes one of the voices by pointing to David Merridith as one of “those who do nothing but eat have the most” (19) and one of the landlords who “have in fact evicted thousands [of the Irish people] from their inherited fiefdoms” (20). His report, which he subtitles *Notes of London*

and Ireland in 1847, is a novel in which fiction and history are amalgamated. He bluntly says, "Some things I have invented but I could not invent Mary Duane; at least no more than I have already done. She suffered more than enough composition" (399). It tells that his factual knowledge is limited in representing what actually happened. Moreover, he confesses that he tries to assume an objective position in representation of actualities but actually takes more of his emotive bias for making a story in the way he prefers it. His amorous desire for David Merridith's wife, Laura Merridith, places him into a self-interested position. Laura is a woman he loves, and David is a foe he "despise[s]" "in the cause of love" (397). Dixon self-consciously acknowledges that "A different author would have made a different selection" (397) by giving a verisimilitude to his preferred way in "the way the material is composed" (397).

Star of the Sea is a "self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, [and] auto-representational" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 1) text Linda Hutcheon calls "narcissistic narrative" (1)—the narrative that "includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1). Metafiction as "narcissistic narrative," Hutcheon maintains, is a dialectical process between art and life in which the reader is paradoxically ushered to discover fictional possibilities of the real world, while "trapped" in it. She says, hence, "Narcissistic narrative demands just this sort of involvement [in the world of imagination], yet also a detachment and ability to judge, to face certain implications for both art and life" (147). In reading a metafictional narrative, Hutcheon says, the reader is enforced to play the role of reworking the writer's imagination in his own way by critically examining the process itself, not the product, of art self-consciously reflecting on its artistic way. In reading *Star of the Sea*, the reader takes a much more challenging task than Hutcheon conceives him or her to do in reading any metafictional text. In *Star of the Sea*, Dixon is never free of his personal biases in interpretations of social relationships in that his epistemology and his emotive drive dominate his narrative:

There was once a Galwayman called Pius Mulvey, another named Thomas David Merridith. They sailed to America in search of new beginnings. The first had been charged to murder the second, a man who was blamed for the crimes of his fathers. In a different world they might not have been enemies; at a different time, perhaps even friends. They had far more in common than either of them realized. One was born Catholic, the other Protestant. One was born Irish, the other British. But neither of these was the greatest difference between them. One was born rich and the other poor. (397)

Dixon here encapsulates the stories of the two men who were strangers to each other before they were aboard *Star of the Sea* and thrown into an inescapable confrontation by the Irish nationalism against the English due to the Great Famine. What is puzzling in Dixon's accounts is that he doesn't detail what Merridith and Mulvey have in common after an adumbration of it. After his loquacity about their racial and social difference, his reticence about their common ground, which could be ontological, shows that their commonality is rarefied by the narrative situation of the Famine in which Dixon is required to consider the rhetorical side of narrative historiography on account of his personal motivation for his readership.

In *Star of the Sea*, Dixon divulges that "altruism" is not his "only motive" (392) in writing his book. As a newspaperman, he states, he wanted a story for which he would be admired. The readership for his book turns out to be mainly the English people—much of Ireland was actually under the influence of Gaelic oral culture during the Famine. Dixon assumes that his book might have drawn "the attention of some of the reading public" (391), some of whom made donations for the helpless in Ireland. As he admits, yet, his book never ends the Irish sufferings. Moreover, his book only generates the English readership intrigued far more by its sensational report on the Irish deserter Pius Mulvey who escaped Newgate by killing an English guard than by its account of the wretched Irish condition. The ferocious image of Pius portrayed in his book uncritically reproduces racial slurs against the Irish.

The monster [Pius] now entered the vernacular of politics. The Irish parliamentarian Mr Charles Parnell, who bravely led the poor of his country towards some variety of liberation, was on one occasion described in the House of Commons as ‘little better than the Monster of Newgate.’ . . . The grotesque cartoons depicting the Irish poor in the English journals began to change. Always previously portraying them as foolish and drunken, now they more frequently showed murderers. Ape-like. Fiendish. Bestial. Untamed. (390)

The story about Pius in the book is what Dixon extorts from him for his career success as a journalist: Dixon threatens to tell on him if he doesn't confess his crimes. Dixon turns a blind eye to Pius's crimes and spares him from being hanged in return for getting his story. For Pius, Dixon manipulating the disadvantaged by his vantage point is comparable to the notorious Newgate jailer physically and mentally abusing prisoners:

‘I know about the guard. What you suffered at his hands.’

‘And you think what you're doing now is different.’

‘I have no weapon.’

‘Only your pen.’ (334)

His compromised integrity in journalism ethics demonstrates that he personalizes in his narrative the Irish Famine for his personal interest.

Personalizing the Irish Famine, Dixon concomitantly oversimplifies the deadly event stratified by many different realities of the Irish life. Hoping the Famine would not lead to an incurable extent of the feud between England and Ireland, as an American journalist, Dixon saves the English commons from being reproached for the Irish starvation. Rather, he attributes it to the English government whose incompetence gives rise to its unawareness of the gravity of the massive starvation. He deprecates the English polity in which “nineteen of every twenty Britons have no vote whatsoever” (20) and its representative power only serving the wealthy English aristocrats who care about their own fortune (20), one of whom is Merridith he marks as an inveterate villain. Yet, Dixon's emotional subjectivism reduces

Merridith to a paradigmatic symbol embodying the cruelty of English landlordship exploiting Irish labor. He allows his subjectivity to undermine “the objectivity” of representation “required of the journalist” (120). Dixon’s simplification of Merridith in the way of consigning his ontological meaning only to the prototype of aristocratic cruelty excludes the facts of Merridith contradicting his personalized version of Merridith. In particular, Chapter 14 of *Star of the Sea*—one of the chapters¹⁾ told by an unnamed third-person narrator, perhaps representing the authorial voice—is a revelation of the multiple layers of meanings that the Anglo-Irish experience of Merridith engenders. First of all, the Merridith ancestry’s Irish settlement dates back to 1650, which makes Merridith feel that he is both Irish and English. Moreover, the logic of Dixon’s opposition to English colonization of Ireland is found self-contradictory when Merridith points out Dixon’s irony in his anti-colonialism: why don’t white Americans give their land back to the Indians whom they “stole [it] from” (131)? Furthermore, it turns out that Dixon leaves out in his writing the Merridith family’s famine aid to save the starving Irish tenants: “My own mother died of famine fever, Dixon. Your beautiful Muse ever bring that small fact to your attention? Caught it while feeding our tenants in ’22” (132). A self-contradiction in his anti-aristocratism is that his forefathers lived on their slavery plantation. American egalitarianism is debunked by the fact of American way of aristocracy based upon slavery. Merridith questions Dixon, “Were *many* of the slaves on your family’s plantation Swahili? I imagine they must have been. Didn’t they teach you any? Or perhaps Bwana [white boss] felt it rather below himself to mix with them, did he?” (133).

Dixon’s eschewing of his ancestral past makes him paradoxical between his social motive and his internal reality. On the one hand, he is internally aware that he can never purge himself off the history of his ancestral enslavement of Africans.

1) It is, in *Star of the Sea*, unclear which parts of the novel are actually in Dixon’s *An American Abroad*, as the author Joseph O’Connor imagines, and which parts are not. All things considered, Chapter 14 is clearly not in Dixon’s book: an unidentified third-person narrator tells about him.

He feels ashamed that he lives on the money from his grandfather, the money “established by his slave-trading ancestors” (329). He recalls his grandfather having tried to make him easy by saying it is “clean money now,” but he knows “there [is] no clean money in a dirty world” (329). For his professional success, on the other, he needs the “scoop that might give him his freedom” from the dirty money from his grandfather in Louisiana. He aspires to get a good salary by “the story nobody else could tell” (329). Merridith downplays his narrative, as he perceives it merely a “novel”—i.e. not about historical facts but about imaginary facts to personalize historical experiences: “Your famous novel. Your great work of art. Or perhaps it simply does not exist. Like your right to lecture others on the crimes they have committed *in order to mask the guilt of your disgusting own* ” (134).

Dixon emblemizes a history writer whose professional nature is to accord his personalized meanings to particular events and to highlight particular facts. As a self-reflexive text Hutcheon dubs “narcissistic,” *Star of the Sea* problematizes the process itself of writing about the Famine, a traumatic event in Irish history, by presenting Dixon narrativizing it. Like any history writer, Dixon is inevitably trapped in a signification system without which any occurrence is never mnemonically vitalized. Hutcheon remarks that writing history is the process of making “sense of the past,” which means turning “past events” into “present historical facts” by meaning-making of them (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 89). The concept of authentic historicity is, to borrow Hutcheon’s phrases, challenged because different choice of words makes a different history. Writing of Irish history is particularly an arena in which the two modes of history writing are contestants while each of them respectively takes a different side of the signification system.

In *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919*, Fegan sees that “Irish historiography—particularly Famine historiography has been polarized within the confines of a concentric and narrow historical discourse” (12). She notices that two different historians, called revisionists and traditionalists, produce two different realities (facts) of the Famine. As exemplified by Fegan, one of the realities is about whether the English government deliberately let the Irish people starved to

death by a scheme to exterminate the Irish race. Cecil Woodham-Smith, one of the revisionists Fegan cites, rejects the English government's culpability for the Famine deaths:

These misfortunes were not part of a plan to destroy the Irish nation; they fell on the people because the government of Lord John Russell was afflicted with an extraordinary inability to foresee consequences . . . parsimony was certainly carried to remarkable lengths; but obtuseness, short-sightedness and ignorance probably contributed more. (Woodham-Smith 410, qtd. in Fegan 13).

Fegan's main concern is on how different kinds of words are used in those different views of the Famine. She extracts different key words drawn on different facts in conceptualizing the Famine: it is "providence" for some historians, or "unfortunate policy," or "genocide" for some others (14). She discerns emotionally charged words in historical descriptions of the disaster: "ruthless," "sanguinary," "horror," "desolation," "slaughters," "severe suffering," "injustice," or "extreme misery" (27, 30) to show how a historian's personal emotions are "channeled into historiography" (15). The emotive languages in Irish historiography demonstrate, she states, that writing of history takes the character of a literary narrative.

Fegan's findings in critical examinations of Irish historiography offer a great insight for positioning Dixon's stance as a history writer in *Star of the Sea*. Not Irish as Dixon is in the novel, he resonates with Irish nationalists in charging English landlords with the Famine deaths. An Irish nationalist historian, Michael Davitt figures the Famine to be "the holocaust of humanity which landlordism and English rule exacted from Ireland in a pagan homage to an inhuman system" (50, qtd. in Fegan 31). *Star of the Sea* is clearly a novel deconstructing, to borrow Fegan's terms, the mythology of Irish nationalist historiography by its self-reflective narrative making the reader to critically examine the rhetorical side of historiography whose writers make it difficult to draw the line between the factual and the imaginary: they put what is probable into what is factual according to social or national directives in writing history. Fegan raises an objection to the "literary

mode” (34) in “Irish historical interpretations,” while she asks “Famine historians to abandon the emotional high ground and regain their objectivity” (34). As Hutcheon points out, however, “Historiography and fiction are seen as sharing the same act of refiguration, of reshaping of our experience of time through plot configurations; they are complementary activities” (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 100). As a narcissistic narrative, *Star of the Sea* requires the reader to discover a different kind of historical fact (reality) about Irish history by representations of what might have happened but had never been recorded in history.

III. The Famine and a Pathogenic Family Process

In *Star of the Sea*, Merridith is portrayed as a pathological symptom of traumatic loss thematized by a facet of Anglo-Irish experience around the Famine. It is the loss of mother that initiates Merridith’s life-long emotional unsettlement. Merridith is raised without his mother, Lady Verity, for “the first six years of his life” (50) even before his mother’s sudden death in 1823 when he was ten in the midst of her extolled charity for any starving tenants as well as for all the tenants of Kingscourt (the Merridith estate) during the 1822 potato blight. Moreover, Merridith is virtually fatherless during his childhood since, as a navy officer, his father (Lord Merridith) is long sent overseas to the war. He is left unhappy with “his drunken mustachioed aunt” (54), who is his only caregiver but too ineffectual for meeting his emotional needs. Rather, he is better but not sufficiently cared by his nanny, Mary Duane’s mother. His happiest years only span the five years after his mother’s return to Connemara (Carna) from London until just before her death. During those years, Merridith doesn’t come wailing to Duane’s cottage as frequently as before because he is “happy and well” (54) with his mother. His brief bliss ends with his mother’s death and he reverts to his old solitude and helplessness. His dire condition is much worsened by his father’s beatings of him showing his bitterness from his widowed life.

During his marriage to Laura Markham, in London, Merridith's hauntings of East End brothels are an ongoing sign of his insecurity ascribed to a wrong pathway in his personality development, which stems from the loss of his mother in his childhood. Mary Duane testifies the significance of Lady Verity's absence in entailing Merridith's sense of displacement lasting throughout his life:

He was the saddest breed of man in the living world; the kind to whom women seem a kind of crucifixion. But the women around him would always be sadder. He was thirty-four now. He would never change. Perhaps it was something to do with his mother. She had left him in Ireland for the first six years of his life and returned to London to live with her people, taking her two daughters but not her son. (50)

Merridith's emotional vacuousness in his conjugal relationship with Laura is a main cause for their devastated relationship:

Whenever she approached him as a woman to a man, he had brushed her away or made some excuse. He had made her feel ashamed to want what was beautiful, the small, shared intimacies of married life: the closenesses which had once brought them such happiness and friendship. . . . He had become private, secretive; completely unattainable. It had started long before the death of his father. . . . Something was terribly wrong with him; she could see that clearly. Often she had tried to help him, but had obviously failed. Being married to him required a passivity she didn't have any more; like standing on a pier and watching a ship sink in the bay, knowing you were entirely powerless to save it. (148)

The early period of his marriage to Laura is one of his happiest moments, but his personality vulnerable to aloofness makes him difficult to make emotional bonds with Laura.

Merridith's pathological difficulty in adaptation to a new relationship has its origin in his insecure attachment to parents, in particular mother, in light of attachment theory. A psychiatrist, John Bowlby represents parents as a resourceful

base to child—the base he can return to for reassuring of his self by parental emotional support whenever he feels insecure:

This brings me to a central feature of my concept of parenting—the provision by both parents of a secure base from which a child or an adolescent can make sorties into the outside world and to which he can return knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened. (*A Secure Base* 11)

Bowlby's attachment theory distinguishes the attachment patterns conditioning children's development. The patterns indicate the extent to which child feels confident about himself in making any social relationship according to how much he feels protected, cared, and comforted by parent (or attachment figure). The central tenet of Bowlby's developmental view of human personality formation is that "the pattern of attachment that an individual develops during the years of immaturity—infancy, childhood, and adolescence—is profoundly influenced by the way his parents (or other parent figures) treat him" (*A Secure Base* 123-24). It implies that an attachment pattern characterizing a child's relationship with his parents in his family of origin is repeated in his subsequent social relationships to be made in his adulthood, in particular his marital relationship.

The loss of mother in the early phase of his life intensifies the degree of Merridith's indifference repellent to any person approaching him. The absence of mother launches his life-long pursuit for an attachment figure, i.e. a substitute mother-figure. Mary Duane is, for him, associated with the feeling of home by which he can be comforted whenever he feels estranged in the harshness of English masculine culture. His unhappy days in Winchester College epitomize the state of his social misfit in the rest of his life he would have to live as an aristocrat whose fate is to be forced to compromise his self to social and parental expectations:

They [Winchester College students] had 'masters' but not like a servant would have a master. If you lived in a house you hated all the other houses. You

stuck up for the honour of your house to the end. But if it came to a fight you'd fight fair and manly. You never gave a chap a biffing when he was down or injured, and you never *ever* peached on him to his master. (61)

When he comes “back from Hampshire [Winchester College] sickly and pale” (63), Mary Duane is the person with whose natural feelings he can negotiate his cultural knowledge so that he can feel secured: she is not ashamed of her sexual intercourse with him, just feeling it is a kind of Winchester College Football informed by him. The natural simplicity in her emotional system is never possessed by Laura, “the only daughter of a Sussex industrialist family” (160) and the art and literature connoisseur hosting a literary coterie every Wednesday evening, one of them is Dixon with whom she secretly has some affairs. Her ennobled sensibility nurtured by affluence never matches Merridith’s internal needs for a homely life. His marriage to Laura reactivates “the restlessness and anxiety he had known as a child” (230) and aggravates the “sleeplessness that had plagued him since boyhood.” The more he realizes that “the life of a gentleman of leisure” doesn’t satiate his hunger for emotional comfort, the more frequently “he would find himself remembering a girl [Mary Duane] he had once known” (232) and the walk with her through “the woods and the boglands, up the reefs of Cashel Hill” (233). His unhappiness with Laura is felt much more poignant by the fact that his father disowns him for marrying Laura, not Amelia Blake—his father’s pick for Merridith in return for a fund from her father Henry Blake to improve the lands of Kingscourt.

The series of Merridith’s insecure attachment is worsened by his confused sense of racial belongingness. Merridith is impelled to taboo Mary Duane because Merridith’s father threatens to evict the Duanes from Kingscourt if Merridith doesn’t keep himself away from Mary Duane. Merridith is later on made aware of his father’s reason for that: Merridith discovers that Mary Duane is his half-sister born between his father and Mary Duane’s mother, Margaret Duane. Mary Duane figures Irishness which Merridith can never assimilate. For Merridith, Mary Duane is an attachment figure on whom he concentrates his emotional drive with a feeling

of love for her. He encounters with his long lost love at a Dublin brothel he comes around to satisfy his carnal needs and rescues her from prostituting there. He longs to have her, but she is tabooed:

Very occasionally if he was badly drunk, he would ask for permission to touch her. . . . He never asked to be touched himself. He wanted to look and to touch: nothing else. Mostly he seemed not to find her body actually stimulating but a kind of problem he did not understand; as though its declivities and enfoldings and hardnesses and softnesses were geometrical conundrums he had to decipher. (48)

Mary Duane is, for Merridith, a socio-emotional uncanny ever perpetuating his insecure attachment. He is at once attracted to her and repulsed by her. The emotionally closer he gets to her, the more he finds her cultural alterity. His secure attachment to her is always procrastinated by the cultural discourse of incestual taboo he internalizes: she is a taboo with which he is prohibited from being attached. She is felt familiar to him but she is made to be an alien code incomprehensible to him by his father's control of his internal needs. Mary Duane's body, which can never be possessed by Merridith, is a metonymic signifier of cultural otherness bespeaking the uncanniness of Irish Merridith cannot master. No Connemara tenant understands Merridith's Irish pronounced in English, despite that he "loved to speak in the Irish language" (63). Pretending to understand his "brogue" being made "harder to decipher," the Irish natives appreciate his efforts in speaking their native language while they "tend merely to nod and back away, smiling." Moreover, an odd position in his English identity is to resist English misconceptions of the Irish people and to claim his family's patriotic attachment to Ireland. Merridith advocates his father's love of Ireland, who made a speech in the House of Lords "on a proposed change to the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), which had made hard labour a condition for entry to workhouses" (256). He does justice to the good-heartedness of his father who attended to the Irish penury during the great hunger. He says, "In the food shortages of '22 and '26 and '31, His

Lordship had spent considerable sums importing grains for charitable purposes” (254). He rebukes Laura for her racial prejudice perceiving the Irish people to be idle—“I’ll be damned if I’ll be given lectures on idleness by your good self, Laura” (15).

Merridith’s insecure attachment is interconnected with his ambivalent national identity. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon examined the anomalous state of the colored, which comes from an incongruity between the authority of family and the authority of nation. Unlike a white man in Europe in which “the family is a miniature of the nation” (142) and “there is no disproportion between the life of the family and the life of the nation” (142), Fanon says, a black man is constrained to choose “between his family and European society [nation]” (149). Fanon states, in other words, the black man “who climbs up into society—white and civilized—tends to reject his family—black and savage” (143). According to Fanon, the neurotic symptom of the black man occurs when he realizes the unreality of identifying him as a white. The black man ultimately feels the liminal state of his identity by being awakened to the unreality of his whiteness while negating the reality of his blackness. The identity trouble of the black man illuminates Merridith’s identity ambivalence his insecure attachment effects on the national level. Like the black man in Fanon’s description, Merridith’s insecurity with both the English and the Irish makes his liminal identity, which shows that the developmental problem from an attachment glitch between child and parent is affected by national or cultural settings.

Merridith’s pathogeny from an attachment disorder is transnational and transracial. While Merridith is an English case displaying the developmental problem from a change in family structure by the Famine, Pius Mulvey is an Irish case showing another socio-emotional effect of the Famine. Both cases in common present a psychopathological symptom coming from attachment disorder due to the loss of mother in the early period of their life and resulting to personality problem in their later period of life. Compelled to execute Merridith by Relybill Hibernian Defenders—a group of Irish peasants discontented with English landlords, Pius

Mulvey is shown to be a character whose mother, “a one-time scullery maid in the convent at Loughglinn in County Roscommon” (87), teaches English to him as well as his elder brother, Nicholas. The orphaned state of Pius Mulvey, who lost both of his parents one after another at the age of sixteen, makes him adhere to the “[lost] radiance” (90) of the maternal love by which both he and his brother were brought up and fret about the prospect of no further chance to have such a love (89-90): no possibility of regaining the loving mother “plunged him into a darkness he found terrifying” (90). He feels that the “mother’s absence [is] so sharp that it felt like a presence” (90). Pius Mulvey consoles himself bereaved of his mother by emotionally depending on Nicholas. Finding that God is a parent-substitute he would ultimately rely on, however, Nicholas considers priesthood to be a course he should take. Already bereaved of both of his parents, Pius strives not to lose his last resort he could lean on not to be left alone:

‘What about the land? Your father’s land.’
 ‘It’s my father’s land I’m going off to till.’
 ‘I’m speaking literally,’ Mulvey said.
 ‘So am I,’ his brother replied.
 ‘Don’t leave me here, Nicholas. I can’t stick it here alone.’ (106)

Pius Mulvey’s desertion of Connemara of no hope he sees ensues soon after Nicholas’s departure for “the seminary in Galway” (107). Despite his knowledge of Mary Duane’s pregnancy of his child, Pius Mulvey feels his birth place is no more a home ground he can rest on. Pius Mulvey leaves “his father’s land, down the boren and out of Connemara, resolved that never as long as he lived would he set eyes on any of it again” (107).

For Pius Mulvey, the barrenness of Connemara is intertwined with not only his orphanhood but also his landlessness. He knows that any tenant is liable to eviction and the marriage to Mary Duane cannot change the grim reality. Pius Mulvey’s loss of the home ground as his emotional backbone suggests the end of the pre-modern Ireland. In *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, David Lloyd speculates that one

of the Famine's cultural consequences was the destruction of Irish oral culture. Pius Mulvey's representation of rising literacy and bygone orality is evident in that he is presented as a gifted bard who performs for money to the Irish public the ballads he himself remakes in writing for each of different public tastes – the ballads about “things that could otherwise not be said in a frightened and occupied country” (94). The Irish oral culture, as Lloyd states, characterizes emotional closeness coupled with “the close proximity both of dwellings in relation to one another and of people within them” (65). Walter Ong notes that spatial proximity is a precondition for the occurrence of oral communication since “all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth, involved in the give-and-take dynamics of sound” (45) so that it can be heard between speaker and hearer. The psychodynamics of orality is, Ong says, in particular discerned: “Primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups” (69). Pius Mulvey's literacy, a legacy of his mother, ironically accelerates his detachment from communal values, whose instances are his desertion of Mary Duane and his manipulation of the public mind by inventing ballads tailored to public tastes for his bardic purpose for money.

In *Star of the Sea*, Pius Mulvey illustrates the ethnographic case of betrayal emotionality. His use of many alias names in London is necessitated for him to pass as a different kind of person for the purpose of his survival in different circumstances. His name change for his life foreshadows the fate of every Irish emigrant who keeps in his heart the two contrary emotional orientations towards his home country: at once his desire to be attached to an Irish identity and his emotional need to be detached from it. That Pius Mulvey's migration to London is caused by his loss of his mother denotes in O'Connorian symbolism the loss of mother commensurable to that of nation-state. Pius Mulvey's return to Connemara is accompanied with his abhorrence of Nicholas who married Mary Duane: his lingering affection for Mary Duane effects his sexual jealousy for his brother. Pius Mulvey makes Nicholas “evicted by cmndr [commander] [B]lake[’s] agent” (274)

and takes over his land by paying “better rent” (273). Pius Mulvey’s treachery is most singularly dire in that it signifies Irish fratricide: Pius obliges Nicholas to kill himself as well as his own daughter. Pius’s fraternal disloyalty is social as well as individual because it is the Famine that brought forth a new form of Irish emotional character signifying the genesis of the emotionality of betrayal as the disaster’s social effect. Thomas O’Neill Russell’s *Struggles of Dick Massey* (1860) well documented the Irish emotionality of betrayal as one of the Famine’s social consequences:

Hunger and wrongs turn people soon into beasts; . . . men who might have been thought incapable of any cruelty, actually trampled down and walked over feeble women and children in their eager haste to secure the food which was thrown at them by brutes in the shape of men. (Russell 166-67, qtd. in Fegan “That heartbroken island” 324)

In *Star of the Sea*, O’Connor makes Pius one of the Irish men who pay the price for his fratricidal betrayal: he is atrociously “knifed to pieces in a Brooklyn alleyway” (400), a year “after landing in Yew York.” Pius is, yet, a pivotal figure who might keep the ambivalent emotions of Irish emigrants’ attached detachment towards their Irish home. The Irish emigrants’ amnesiac detachment towards their Irish home has to do with their collective guilt about turning their backs on their own family members. Fegan remarks that “Landlords and governments might have been expected to abandon and neglect, but the failure of neighbours, friends and family members to help each other was still more shocking” (“The heartbroken island” 324).

IV. Conclusion

Merridith and Pius Mulvey’s emotional insecurity is sociohistorical. Lloyd conceives of the Famine as a historical event having triggered the demise of the

pre-modern Irish oral physiology—the “bodily economy” of the Irish oral orifice through which “food, drink, speech, and song” (1) freely flowed in and out. The post-Famine Irish mouths, Lloyd says, were subjected to discipline, while their talkativeness and their excessiveness in drinking were put down, by “the very processes and institutions of modernity” (4). It is, culturally, the space in which Irish orality is made salient. Spatial proximity between individuals is the hallmark of the Irish oral community before the Famine. The most Irish cultural form of land use was the *clachan* system, a kind of “communal land-holding” (Lloyd 6). The spatial proximity in the *clachan* betokens the emotional closeness in the oral community. The modernized form of land use enforced by English colonial interest precipitated the division of the communal land, whose cultural consequence was emotional distance between individuals. The break-up of the emotional proximity clearly echoes Merridith and Pius Mulvey’s emotional illness caused by the loss of attachment figure. The Famine is a disaster that massively propelled, in terms of Bowlbyan developmental psychology, “anxiety as a reaction to threats of loss and insecurity in attachment relationships” (Marrone 45). Merridith and Pius Mulvey’s attachment failure signals synchronic and diachronic effects the disruption of durable bonds has had on the Irish emotional life: their anxiety from the Famine-driven emotional disruption is social as well as multigenerational. As Inga-Britt Krause notes, “emotions are culturally and socially constructed” (54), which means that some part of individual emotions is directed by ethnographical experience lasting through the following generations. The Famine conditions Pius Mulvey’s fraternal disloyalty whose historical implication indicates the cultural generation of the ambivalent feelings of being affectionate towards but distant from Irishness. Pius Mulvey’s treachery is ethnographic because it is passed down to the following generations and characterizes the Irish betrayal whose cultural paradigm is certainly from emotional insecurity begetting Irish identity trouble. Douglas Hyde succinctly points out the Irish emotional contradiction as “the illogical position of men” (266) abandoning their own language to speak English and forgetting their own literature to read English literature but hating England in the matter of

sentiment. The loss of mother-figure Merridith and Pius Mulvey suffers from carries an ethnographic meaning foreshadowing the Irish trouble in emotional attachment on the plane of culture and nation.

Merridith's loss of his mother historicizes pan-national, pan-cultural aspects of diasporic experience. His diasporic experience is originated by his inability to inherit the Irishness of his mother who died of famine fever in the midst of her relief efforts to help out the Famine victims. For Merridith, his mother Verity Mairridith figures a humanitarian bridge between Englishness and Irishness: "Lady Verity was beloved by the tenants of Kingscourt" (55). The death of his mother makes him search for a vicarious mother figure, the Irish girl Mary Duane. His impossibility of assimilation into Irishness is represented by his Anglicized Irish causing his estrangement from the Irish community of Connemara and by his tabooed relationship with Mary Duane. His diasporic predicament is that he can't be Irish because of his racial and lingual in-betweenness. He paid "the fares to Quebec of [his] seven thousand tenants" (148) to move them off the Famine, who were evicted in the aftermath of closing down his bankrupted estate. Despite his relief efforts succeeding his father and mother's benevolent precedents, he is victimized by the Irish Famine complainers against English landlords. His diasporic fate parallels the ill destiny of all Irish emigrants who are bound to live the life of strangers on foreign soils. His emotional alienation at the ground of his diasporic experience is transmitted to the next generation. Merridith's two sons inherit their father's diasporic life: "They [Robert Merridith and Jonathan Merridith] never talk about Ireland now. They tend to say they were born in America" (403). Merridith's failed attachment to his mother in his family of origin repeats its pathogenic pattern into his children's difficulty in their socio-emotional life by way of his impaired relationship with his wife Laura: "Robert married three times, Jonathan never" (403).

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Abstract

Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*:
The Irish Famine and Pathological Families

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This article historicizes the psychopathological aspects of family process in the Irish Famine Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* presents. Critics on *Star of the Sea* have drawn much of their attention to the novel's revisionist complication of the traditional view of the Irish Famine as the Irish holocaust by the English government. Taking note of O'Connor's non-racial, non-national discourse on the historical calamity, this article makes the case the social effects of the attachment problem in family process during the Famine on Irish emotional life. Drawing on Bowlby's attachment theory, this article further illustrates the historicity of the Famine-driven emotional illness appearing in both Irish and Anglo-Irish families. The disruption of family bond especially from the loss of the mother figure ethnographically originates the Irish emotional character such as the emotionality of betrayal and the ambivalent feelings of attached-detachment towards Irishness.

■ **Key words** : Joseph O'Connor, *Star of the Sea*, psychosocial development, Irish Famine, attachment theory, ethnography

Received Oct. 29, 2017

Reviewed Nov. 16, 2017

Accepted Nov. 28, 2017

Which is where Joseph O'Connor enters the scene. Brother to the famous Irish singer Sinéad O'Connor (who infamously ripped up a photo of pope John Paul II on SNL as protest against child abuse in the Church) and author of *Star of The Sea*. The eponymous *Star* is a coffin ship sailing for New York from Britain, hosting a whole poor house from Connemara and a couple of big fish, along with an American journalist and aspiring author and a mysterious solitary man on a secret mission. The adjective "Dickensian" gets thrown around a lot but here it fits perfectly, and the good man ... Similarities between *The Star of the Sea* and *English Passengers* end there, but it's a great novel about a tragic part of history which isn't written about very often. Joseph O'Connor has abandoned his modern larrikins to produce a rare fictional account of those who fled the Great Hunger, says Judith Palmer. Saturday 4 January 2003 01:00. ^{moreThanTen}. One of *Star of the Sea's* intentions is to reassess the culpability, and redistribute the blame. "In my own childhood, the Famine was all the fault of the English. As recently as 1997, Tony Blair issued an official apology to the people of Ireland," says O'Connor. "When you look at it closely, you see how little the wealthy and powerful Irish did to protect the poor. The people who benefited most, economically, were the merchant class and slightly wealthier farmers. Vast fortunes were made out of the Irish Famine, almost invariably by Irish people who shut up and joined Joseph O'Connor is a talented writer who has delivered a rollicking good story; a page turner that will not disappoint the most critical reader. Set in the time of The Great Famine in Ireland, it tells the story of those individuals aboard the *Star Of The Sea* as they travel towards The Promised Land of America. The hardships and tragedy endured by the Irish during this time has been well documented but O'Connor weaves a tantalising tale around a handful of characters aboard this creaky, rat infested tub, and the horrors that ensue on their four week laborious journey. In *Star of the Sea*, however, the young Irish novelist Joseph O'Connor not only vividly conjures up the memory of the disaster out of which modern Ireland was born, but produces an acutely contemporary piece of experimental fiction disguised as a quaint Victorian historical novel. 2The eponymous, antiphrastically-named "Star of the Sea" is a ramshackle coffin-ship making its final voyage across the Atlantic in the last months of "black 47". On board are a handful of first-class passengers, including an American journalist (the novel's chief