The Great Famine: The Art of Simplicity in Christine Kinealy's *The Bad Times*

Sungjin Jang

> "No, Young Dan. The Bad Times Have to Come to Ireland."
> ― Christine Kinealy, *The Bad Times*

I. Introduction

In the beginning of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, the narrator writes:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. (1)

By juxtaposing two paradoxical views of the period (the year 1775), the narrator aptly explains the gap between the ruling and ruled classes. To upper

class people, the period was the best of times and "the season of Light," but to the public the period was the worst of times and "the season of Darkness." These contradictions about the period can be applied to Ireland's Great Famine of 1845-51. The potato blight, caused by an airborne fungus, was the center of the Great Famine. However, while the blight did not lead to mass starvation in 1845 when it first appeared, when it reappeared in 1846, it led to "an almost total failure of the potato crop. Reports of death from starvation began as early as October, and these multiplied in the months that followed" (Kelleher 85).

While death from starvation was widespread throughout Ireland, it was concentrated on a certain population and not evenly distributed among the Irish. In "The Irish Famine: History and Representation," Margaret Kelleher describes the disparity by using the terms "winners and losers"—the "winners" of the Great Famine were the "haves," while the "losers" were the "have-nots" (88). Whereas landlords made a lot of money, many farmers, who could not pay rent, were evicted and died of starvation. However, this disparity of the Great Famine was not limited to the Irish alone. Ireland's colonial relationship with England showed an even bigger difference. In this case, England was "the haves," and Ireland "the have-nots." In fact, the Great Famine became "great" because England did not take the appropriate steps to curb its effects. Joel Mokyr, in *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*, argues that "the British simply abandoned the Irish and let them perish. There is no doubt that Britain could have saved Ireland" (291). This was not simply a case of negligence because England made this situation worse by taking potatoes from Ireland. Miriam O'Kane Mara in "James Joyce and the Politics of Food" writes: "This understanding of famine [The Great Famine] as political symbol for English oppression politicized Irish eating behaviors and intensified food as a way to mark

identity" (95).

Because of the inequality between the haves and the have-nots, more than 1.5 million Irish people died during the Great Famine. With the potato crop failure, people could not find food anymore, and they began to die of hunger. People were dying so rapidly that the dead could not be properly buried. They were simply left in the streets, and were sometimes eaten by rats and dogs. Because the bodies were not buried properly, infectious diseases spread uncontrollably, and those who did not starve would often fall ill. Most of the sick were children and elderly people since they were vulnerable to malnutrition and contagious diseases. The famine was so traumatic in the history of Ireland that it was impossible to describe it as it was. It was so disturbing that none of the Irish even today wanted to acknowledge its existence. Séamus Ennis, an Irish musician, talks about how people avoided mentioning the Great Famine: "I spend the rest of my visit talking and writing about the Famine—or 'Drochshaol' ['bad times'], as they still call it here all the time . . . . The Famine, until the 150-year commemoration from 1997, was not a part of Irish history or folklore prominent in public discussion. Indeed, an air of shame and denial characterized popular memory" (qtd. in Falc'her-Poyroux 160).

As Séamus Ennis indicates, the Great Famine, despite its significance in Irish history, has not been addressed by critics until 1997. Since then, there have been many attempts to deal with the famine. However, most of the attempts have been mere documentaries of the famine. These documentaries include novels, poems, songs, dramas, photographs, pictures, among other media, within them to describe the Great Famine as faithfully as they can. For example, *The Truth Behind the Irish Famine 1845-1852* by Jerry Mulvihill tries to visualize the famine by including sixty-four paintings, which were drawn based on the diaries written at that time, *and* more than 400 quotations

from people who actually went through the famine. This visualization is enough to make the audience feel as if they are experiencing what an Irish person felt at the time. When they encounter how infants died of hunger, they may feel so much pain they might not be able to finish the book. In fact, many of the famine-related works have tended to use this documentary-like method.

However, unlike these versions of the Great Famine, the graphic novel *The Bad Times* by Christine Kinealy and John Walsh does not follow this pattern. To be sure, *The Bad Times*, much like other texts that discuss the famine, deals with the potato crop failure, the British government's ill treatment of Ireland, and the selfish landlords and merchants. However, rather than describing the famine as it was, the graphic novel employs its own drawing technique, which I will call the art of simplicity, that presents the famine in digestible pieces. For this, the graphic novel first makes its book cover similar to the Irish flag by incorporating green, white, and orange. Green is used extensively throughout the text, recalling Ireland as the Emerald Isle. In addition, the graphic novel includes Irish words and conversations, allowing the graphic novel itself to represent Ireland as a whole. In doing so, the graphic novel creates a small Ireland. Then it describes how the Irish people go through the famine in this world. But rather than explaining the Irish people's sufferings from the famine in detail, the graphic novel presents relatively simple drawings, which ironically do more to highlight their pains and struggles to survive the famine than a regular depiction ever could. By omitting details, readers are forced to really look at what is happening, and that could lead to a deeper understanding of the Great Famine than simply trying to relate facts. In this respect, *The Bad Times* becomes a medium that allows for more faithful representation of tough historical times of the Great Famine.

II. *The Bad Times* as a Microcosm of Ireland

Although the term "graphic novel" was coined by a historian Richard Kyle, it became widely known by Will Eisner. By attaching a subtitle ("A Graphic Novel") to his book *A Contact with God*, Eisner was the first writer that called his book a graphic novel. Since then, critics paid attention to graphic novels; as a result, graphic novels became one of academic fields. Graphic novels have been taught in English departments at many universities, and many internationally and academically recognized graphic novels (*Maus*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, *Persepolis*, etc.) have been published. Among these many important graphic novels, *The Bad Times* is the first graphic novel that deals with the Great Famine. *The Bad Times*, which was published in 2015, is set in Kilkee, County Clare, in the west of Ireland, and takes place between 1846 and 1850.[1] The book focuses on the three young children: Dan O'Brien, Brigit O'Dea, and Liam Hayes, and it describes how they survive these bad times. Dan, who is named after *The Liberator* Daniel O'Connell, loses his father and mother during the famine. Unable to find food, Dan conspires to steal a cow. As a result, he is in danger of being arrested, and he barely escapes Ireland with the help of Liam. Likewise, Brigit loses her grandmother, father, mother, and younger twin brothers. Later, she goes to the poorhouse (officially named a workhouse) and finally leaves for Australia to get a job. Lastly, Liam, unlike Dan and Brigit, is free from the famine because of his father William Hay. William is a shopkeeper and pawnbroker. He makes lots of money during the famine and does not care about his people. Liam, who helps Dan and Brigit

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[1] The English language version of *The Bad Times* was published in 2015, while the Irish language version was published in 2016. In this paper, I am going to use the English version of *The Bad Times*.

with the money that he steals from his father, is left alone at the end of the story. During the famine, only "the haves" represented as Liam survive. The years are bad times only to "the have-nots."

Although there has been no academic discussion of *The Bad Times*, the graphic novel presents an accurate view of the Great Famine, which is possible because of the co-authorship between Christine Kinealy and John Walsh. Kinealy, an Irish historian and the founding director of Ireland's Great Hunger Institute, writes the story about the Great Famine as accurately as she can. John Walsh, the graphic novelist, visualizes the story with his own drawing technique. On their Youtube talk titled "'YAWP! An Open Dialogue on Creativity and the Arts'—Christine Kinealy and John A. Walsh," Kinealy calls this co-authorship "an unlikely relationship." However, this "unlikely relationship" helps the graphic novel present a faithful visualization of the famine.

Along with the book's faithful narration of the Great Famine, the book itself has an Irish flavor.

Fig. 1 *The Bad Times* Courtesy of Christine Kinealy

For example, the graphic novel's title "The Bad Times," the three underlines

of the title, and the quotations "Music, poetry & dancing died. The famine killed everything" are written in green.[2] The names of the co-authors "Christine Kinealy & John Walsh" and the word "by" are in orange. Finally, the background of the cover is white. Focusing on these three colors, one would easily recall the Irish flag. In addition, among the three colors, green is extensively used in the graphic novel. Green represents at least three things: the Emerald Isle, the Irish republicanism, and the Roman Catholics. Ireland has been known as the Emerald Isle because of its verdant, lush, and rolling green landscapes. Second, when the Society of United Irishmen fought against England for Irish independence, they used a green flag. This green flag later became a symbol for Irish republicanism. Finally, Irish people are traditionally Roman Catholics. Although *The Bad Times* does not cover all these symbols, it focuses on the portrayal of Ireland as the Emerald Isle. Half of the book, 52 pages out of 102 pages by my count, includes Kilkee's lush hills and coastlines.[3] The 50 pages that do not have green merely describe the inside of the characters' houses and winter in Kilkee. This *greenish* graphic novel is enough to remind readers of Ireland as the Emerald Isle.

The graphic novel also uses the Irish language to emphasize Irishness. Although the book is written in English, there are some Irish words and conversations in the graphic novel. The glossary at the back of the book explains them. For example, Dan's royal dog is called Cú, which is "a traditional [Irish] word for dog or hound."[4] The word "slán" is used when people say goodbye. People use Irish words "máthair chríonna" or "manó":

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2) The book's copyright page writes: "the quote on the title page is from Recollections of Máire Ni Grianna of Rannafast, Co, Donegal, in Seamus Deane (ed.) *The Filed Anthology* (Derry, 1991), 203-04."

3) In addition to the main contents of the graphic novel, all the additional pages including the copyright and acknowledgements pages contain green.

4) The glossary does not have any pagination.

("grandmother" in English), "mhuirnín" ("sweetheart" in English), "mo chara" ("my dear friend" in English), "mo mhuirnín" ("my darling" in English), etc. Along with the Irish words, there are also Irish conversations: "Ar dheist Dé go raibh a hanam" ("May her soul be on the right hand of God" in English), "Dia daoibh" ("God be with you all" in English) "Dia is Muire duit" ("God and Mary be with you" in English), "Go mbeire muid be oar an am seo arís" ("May we be alive at this time next year" in English), and "I measc laochra nan Gael go raibh sé" ("May he be in the midst of the heroes of the Gael" in English). Those who do not know Irish language would not understand what these words and conversations are about. They need to consult the glossary or an Irish dictionary. Ironically, this difficulty with reading assures the graphic novel's Irishness; Irish people would easily read *The Bad Times*.[5]

With the use of green, white, and orange, the book cover evokes the Irish flag. Then, the book intensively uses green color to describe Kilkee's verdant and lush hills and coastlines, therefore making this book as a so-called Emerald Isle. Finally, by putting Irish words and conversations, the novel makes real Irish people live in Kilkee. In doing so, the novel *The Bad Times* becomes a microcosm of Ireland.

III. The Great Famine and the Art of Simplicity

In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud argues that comics are far from realism. He writes:

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5) What is interesting with these Irish conversations is that they are not everyday conversations. In fact, they are prayers for the survival during the famine. Thus, reading these conversations, readers would feel the *Irish* people's pain and suffering from the famine.

> In emphasizing the concepts of objects over their physical appearance, much has to be omitted. If an artist wants to portray the beauty and complexity of the physical world, realism of some sort is going to play a part. When drawing the face and figure, nearly all comics artists apply at least some small measure of cartooning. Even the more realistic adventure artists are a far cry from photo-realists. (41-42)

According to McCloud, comics artists do not necessarily have to describe objects as they are. Instead, they need to focus on certain aspects. In doing so, their drawings become far from realism. However, their far-from-realistic images ironically achieve realism; they look more real as opposed to their unrealistic appearances. By the same token, if comics artists strive to describe every part of an object as much as they can, then the drawings become unrealistic. By describing objects as simply as they can, I believe that comics artists accomplish the art of simplicity.

In fact, this simplicity of style is well pronounced in *The Bad Times*. Walsh does not draw objects as they are; rather, he highlights some parts of the objects, thereby presenting very simple images.

Fig. 2 *The Bad Times* Courtesy of Christine Kinealy

For example, the book cover shows Dan, Brigit, Liam, and Cú on a Kilkee hill. The hill is drawn with only three very simple short lines, and the rock is presented with five small dots. However, with these simple drawings, one would easily recognize that they are a Kilkee hill and a large rock. As for these three children, Brigit and Liam do not have mouths, which oddly enough looks natural. Even Liam's and Dan's hands are drawn with only incomplete circles; they do not have any fingers and nails. In addition, Liam's left foot (from the reader's view) looks very strange; it has only a vague outline with one short line and a twisted semicircle. But this somewhat strange drawing fittingly depicts that his left foot is in the grass.

This simple drawing technique does not end with the book cover. There are eight panels on page 11, and the first panel shows more than 11 people and a church. The panel depicts these people as simply as it can. Among them, three people look like snowmen: there are only one or two chunks that are hardly recognizable for human beings. Four people have only vague faces without any clear body lines. Likewise, on page 18, the first panel has more than 40 people; however, they do not have any clear outlines that denote humans. Even some people's faces are expressed with cross shapes.

One way to understand the illustrator's simple drawing technique would be for perspective. To be sure, Walsh draws people with simple body lines if they are relatively far away. If people are close, he draws them with clear and detailed outlines. Yet Walsh's style is not just for perspective. Rather, Walsh uses this technique to effectively show how the Great Famine takes everything from the Irish people. For this, I would like to go back to the book cover one more time. As I have explained above, Dan, Brigit, Liam, and Cú are drawn in black only; in other words, they are not colored. This lack of colors suggests that they are lacking something: food. By using only black, the book cover skillfully connotes that the Irish people are dying of hunger. The

depiction of Brigit's house also shows this art of simplicity.

Fig. 3 *The Bad Times* Courtesy of Christine Kinealy

When Brigit goes home, the panels on page 15 depict the inside of her house. The house is literally simple. There are one table, four chairs, one fireplace (which is used to cook), and one ladder. Without them, the house is grey. However, considering that Brigit's father, who cannot buy food anymore, pawns his things, including his precious fiddle, there should be more furniture in this house. In this regard, this simple depiction of the house should be understood as the illustrator's purpose. He only describes the furniture that Brigit's family uses. With this simple depiction of Brigit's house, Walsh emphasizes her family's poverty.6)

Likewise, William's affluence is aptly depicted through Walsh's simple

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6) Likewise, there is one piece of furniture shown in Dan's house. Dan's mother sits on a chair.

drawings. For this, I first want to talk about how William makes money during the Great Famine. William sells goods at a high price. For example, when Brigit tries to buy meat with her father's wages, William, who knows that Brigit is one of Liam's friends, offers only three pieces of meat. Seeing this, Brigit tells William: "Sir, last week you gave more than this" (50). William answers bluntly: "Take it or leave it, girl" (50). William even calls Brigit a girl, which denotes how unimportant and even strange she is to him. This treatment does not indicate that William sees his son's friend any differently than a stranger, which shows just how little he cares about the situation of even the people he knows in Ireland. Similarly, when Brigit's father John O'Dea comes to William to sell his fiddle, William makes fun of John: "Come to us a little songs? Maybe a jig?" (60). When John stresses the fiddle's value, William retorts by saying "I've ten in the back just like it! I don't need another" (61). By exploiting his people, John becomes very rich and enjoys his well-to-do life in these bad times.

William's wealth is highlighted in Walsh's depiction of whiskey.

Fig. 4 *The Bad Times* Courtesy of Christine Kinealy

The first panel on page 60 zooms in on whiskey and some coins on a table. Except for those items, there is nothing in this panel. The whiskey has a label with the words "*fine* old malt" (emphasis added). The whiskey is flowing from

the bottle and soaking into the table. The label shows that this is an expensive liquor, and, moreover, it being wasted shows extravagance; whoever owns the drink does not seem to mind it being wasted.

Fig. 5 *The Bad Times* Courtesy of Christine Kinealy

Then the third panel shows that William is resting his face on his left hand, which suggests that he is drunk. After this, the fifth panel describes William falling asleep drunk. Putting the first, the third, and the fifth panels together, one could easily guess that William was drinking while counting his money. The idea of excess and extravagance is driven home further considering that, during the famine, drinking whiskey would itself be a luxury. William does not only drink whiskey, but he actually *wastes* it. Although these three panels have very few images, they in fact skillfully portray William's wealth.

With this realization in mind, I would like to talk about the fifth panel in more detail. By adding "ZZZZ," which represents snoring, the panel shows that William is sleeping face down on the table. William tries to say something about his neighbors ("Those people. . ."), but he cannot finish the thought. In fact, these sleeping scenes reoccur often throughout the graphic novel. For example, when Dan and Brigit are going home, they see people who look like they are asleep on the street. Brigit tells Dan: "They don't look

alive" (56). Since Brigit knows they are dead, Brigit asks Dan to take her home. When Dan and Brigit arrive home, Brigit finds that her grandmother also seems asleep—but outside of the house. She later finds out that her grandmother was already dead and rats were eating her. After this, the graphic novel shows many dead people on the street, but they all seem to be sleeping. If these poor Irish people are metaphorically sleeping out of hunger, William is literally sleeping from excess. By simply presenting William's sleep with "ZZZZ," the graphic novel effectively delivers the message: only "the haves" can survive the Great Famine.

The simple juxtaposition of the time and John's death aptly shows how long he has been suffering from starvation and diseases.

Fig. 6 *The Bad Times* Courtesy of Christine Kinealy

On page 93, there are 9 panels. Except the 7th, 8th, and 9th panels, the panels

are juxtaposed with each other. On the left, each panel has either the sun or the moon. On the right, each panel shows John lying down because of illness. The four panels on the left show that the sun rises, sets, and the moon rises. With these simple images of the sun and moon, the graphic novel aptly expresses that time passes from morning to evening. The four panels on the right show a slight change: John is lying with his eyes open, and the last fourth panel shows that John is lying with his eyes closed. Then the last panel shows Brigit's crying, which suggests that she has been watching this whole dying progress. Although these panels do not explain John's death in detail, these simple panels in fact help readers feel his pains and struggles to survive *and* Brigit's grief over his beloved father's death.

IV. Conclusion

The Holocaust was the genocide of Jews by Nazi Germany during the World War II. Between 1941 and 1945, more than six million Jews across Europe were mercilessly massacred. To inform the public about Nazi Germany's atrocity, media and literature describe the genocide as faithfully as they can. However, sometimes faithful representations do not capture the actual feeling of an event. Martin Amis, in his novel *Time's Arrow: or The Nature of the Offence*, describes the genocide by showing everything happening in reverse. For example, characters walk backwards, and clocks go counterclockwise. The novel begins with a retired German Holocaust doctor and ends with the doctor entering his mother's womb. By using reverse chronology, the novel highlights just how horrific the Holocaust was. The dead suddenly become alive, go through each genocide stage backwards, and are finally free from their death. Since everyone knows this is backwards, this

method of storytelling forces the audience to reassess their understanding of the Holocaust, leading to the realization of the terrible nature of the historical event. By describing the genocide in reverse order, the novel aptly emphasizes the brutality of Nazi Germany.

Similarly, *The Bad Times* uses a different way to describe the Great Famine. Unlike other literature and media about the Irish famine, the graphic novel does not attempt to relate the famine as it was. Instead, the graphic novel visualizes *and* even emphasizes the harsh realities of the famine by using its own simple drawing technique. For this, the novel first makes itself as a small Ireland by making the book cover similar to the Irish flag and putting some Irish langue in the book. The graphic novel's extensive use of green color assures this. Then the graphic novel's art of simplicity aptly describes how Irish people suffer and eventually fail to survive during the famine. Rather than simply relating the famine faithfully, the graphic novel's simple drawing helps readers feel the void, which documentaries would not fill; the void continually tells readers that only "the haves" could survive the famine; to "the have-nots," the famine was the bad times.

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Abstract

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This paper argues that the graphic novel *The Bad Times* by Christine Kinealy and John Walsh presents the famine in digestible pieces, which I call the art of simplicity. For this, the graphic novel makes the book itself a small Ireland by making book cover similar to the Irish flag and putting Irish language in the book. Then the graphic novel describes how the Irish people go through the famine in this small Ireland. But rather than explaining the Irish people's sufferings from the famine in detail, the graphic novel presents relatively simple drawings, which ironically do more to highlight their pains and struggles to survive the famine than a regular depiction ever could. In doing so, readers are forced to look at what is happening, and that could lead to a deeper understanding of the Great Famine than simply trying to relate facts. In this respect, *The Bad Times* becomes a medium that allows for more faithful representation of tough historical times of the Great Famine.