"Those Who Can Suffer the Most": Cultural and Religious Symbols Within Irish Republican Prison Protests

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"THOSE WHO CAN SUFFER THE MOST": CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS
SYMBOLS WITHIN IRISH REPUBLICAN PRISON PROTESTS

by

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B.A. May 1999, Davis & Elkins College

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MASTER OF ARTS

HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

"THOSE WHO CAN SUFFER THE MOST": CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS WITHIN IRISH REPUBLICAN PRISON PROTESTS

Betsy L. Morgan-Cutright
Old Dominion University, 2003
Director: Dr. Douglas Greene

Hunger striking was a powerful weapon used by the Irish Republican Army throughout the twentieth century. This study will attempt to answer the question of which specific symbols were visible during the prison protests and hunger strikes in Northern Ireland from 1976 to 1981. It will also address how such symbols relate to the cult of Irish Republican martyrdom and Catholicism.

Several symbols manifested themselves during this time period. Upon examination, a pattern emerges where two overriding yet contradictory themes were used far more frequently than any other. These two themes were those of traditional Irish Republicanism and Irish Catholicism, with Catholicism involving symbols of sacrifice and selfless loyalty to one's comrades and country. Although each type of symbol was used on its own, both were sometimes surprisingly used together.

This study uses several different types of scholarly materials. Books and articles are consulted that deal with the broad themes of religion, self-sacrifice, and
hunger striking. Several works are used that chronicle both the Troubles overall and the prison protests and hunger strikes specifically, in addition to the situation of women in Northern Ireland. Primary source materials are equally diverse and consist of traditional historical sources, including several collections of the recollections and diaries of blanket protestors and hunger strikers, works by Catholic priests on the question of the morality of hunger striking, and newspaper articles. However, because of the multifaceted nature of this study, several other types of sources are incorporated for analysis which includes pamphlets and posters published during the prison protests and hunger strikes, folk songs, and films, which reveal the perception of these events and their importance in Northern Irish history.
I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Greene for his guidance and advice. The assistance from my entire committee, Dr. Greene, Dr. Finley-Croswhite, and Dr. Pearson, was very much appreciated. I would also like to thank my parents, Gregory and Pamela Morgan for all of their support. Lastly, I could never have written this had it not been for the constant encouragement I received from my husband, Ryan Cutright.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This study will seek to examine the cultural and religious symbols within Irish hunger striking that come from two ethnic and social sources. The Irish Republican practice of hunger striking and the relative success of the practice in securing demands in the early twentieth century were the chief reasons for its revival as a tactic in the latter part of the century, but hunger strikes were also characterized by the influence of the Roman Catholic Church.

Both Republican and religious symbols, whether employed consciously or unconsciously, were important features that highlighted the ritual of hunger striking. This section will take into account psychological, sociological, and historical explanations of martyrdom. It will also clarify how cultural and religious symbols are used in Northern Ireland to justify tribal mentalities. The history of hunger striking worldwide

will be briefly outlined and its history in Ireland will be explained.

**Explanations of Martyrdom and its History**

Martyrdom was the ideal Christian model until the religion was legalized in the Roman Empire in the early fourth century. Christian martyrdom's predecessor was the passion of Jesus, but it had Jewish roots from the Maccabean period and in Jewish figures such as Daniel, Eleazer, and Hannah. Although legends and accounts of martyrs are not usually historically accurate, they do retain sociological significance.¹ This is because such accounts are not meant to describe facts, but revered actions.

In addition, martyrs can be passive or active and through their death achieve a posthumous immortality.² Existing social circumstances such as "a religiously


²Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner, 9, 12.
oriented culture; a theology of an after-life; and a very punishing super-ordinate authority" can all be pre-existing conditions that facilitate martyrdom.³

Martyrdom means bearing witness (martyria) to one's faith through suffering. Martyrs represent the symbolic death of Christ and let go of the earthly body in order to move towards God. They "transform the 'suffering of the flesh' into redemptive suffering . . ."⁴ The martyr is one who achieves not only his or her own redemption, but also that of others. Martyrdom carries with it themes of endurance and suffering.⁵

Suffering, persecution, and martyrdom are inextricably linked. To martyrs, pain represents the suffering of Christ and heavenly reward. Early Christian martyrs were, in fact, molding their bodies symbolically into Christ's. Consequently, the more pain they experienced, the closer they got to their own salvation. A martyr's eventual sacrifice was calculated and consciously manipulated to draw support to his/her cause.

⁴Streete, 349-351.
⁵Ibid., 349.
The sacrifice also contained within it imagery of purification and a sort of spiritual rebirth.⁶

Sigmund Freud pointed out that in ancient pagan societies sacrifices were always followed by a meal. Eating together symbolized fellowship and mutual societal obligations within a community.⁷ In analyzing Christianity, Freud argued that the ultimate sin was one committed against the father. From this he believed that any self-sacrifice was a result of blood-guilt. Therefore, self-sacrifice was meant to ameliorate a guilty conscience. In addition, Freud felt that a person's propensity toward suicidal behavior was caused by a death wish or a passive-aggressive desire for someone else's death. In other words, hunger striking could in fact be "an insufficiently repressed death wish."⁸ This suggestion


⁸Ibid., 154.
points to the idea that hunger strikers, who were usually prisoners and in a weak position, could not commit any proactive act against those regarded as their enemies. It was for that reason that they would be left with few options, the most extreme option being the hunger strike through which prisoners would sacrifice themselves to justify their cause. Therefore, hunger strikers were in actuality desperate and powerless in their hope to attract attention to their grievances.⁹

Sociologists have several explanations for martyrdom. Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner present their theories in The Martyr’s Conviction: A Sociological Analysis. In this study, the authors bring up the question of whether the proclivity of some towards martyrdom comes from external circumstances or whether it stems from a person’s internal convictions.¹⁰ Additionally, they outline several different theories concerning the reasons why some become martyrs. The Human Nature Theory holds many similar views to those of Sigmund Freud’s. This theory deems that the martyr’s personal qualities, such as masochism, self-destructive behavior and group frenzy, all drive the need

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for martyrdom, not the oppressor or the external situation. Martyrdom could also be said to be a means for attaining love. Through the act of sacrifice, the martyr gains the love and attention not given in life.

Conversely, the Theory of Situation as Cause dictates that ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances become martyrs. Other theories suggest that the grounds for martyrdom come from cultural and sociological forces. More specifically, practices of recording martyr’s deeds and the embedment of martyrdom in a culture through influences such as religion, symbols, folk beliefs, and rituals facilitate the willingness of people to be martyrs to conform to a heroic and venerated societal ideal.\(^ {11}\)

The Irish hunger strikers of 1980 and 1981 came from a myriad of backgrounds. Some were from urban Belfast and others from the more rural areas of Northern Ireland. Each hunger striker was chosen by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) prison leadership partly on the basis of what crime they had been convicted of. The leadership did this to counteract any possible criticism of the hunger strikers as mere thugs and murderers. Therefore, the hunger strikers by and large had not committed major

\(^{11}\text{Ibid.}, 14-17.$
crimes. The hunger strikers came from the working class and some had Republican family backgrounds, but not all. Most of them were relatively young, but this is a characteristic of most that end up being involved in terrorist organizations. Other than these facts, there are no other common characteristics between the hunger strikers. However, it is certain that the Northern Irish situation led those to become imprisoned who, had the situation been more peaceful, would not have been likely to have become martyrs. Yet it is clear that the combination of the explosive situation in Northern Ireland and the very long cultural tradition of Republican martyrdom coalesced to contribute to the difficulties of the prison situation by the mid-1970s.

**Historical Background**

The difficulties between England and Ireland could conceivably stem from when geology placed Ireland just across the Irish Sea from England. For England, Ireland was a hoped-for and tempting conquest, but it was never completely conquerable. After Ireland withstood the Viking invasions, the Anglo-Norman conquest began. In 1171, Henry II of England tried to make himself overlord of Ireland. In areas where Anglo-Norman barons settled
and drove out the native Gaelic aristocracy, they established a feudal system like that in England.

During the fourteenth century England was distracted from Irish affairs because of the Hundred Years War and, therefore, was not able to subjugate Ireland completely. In the fourteenth century, the English colony in Ireland reached its greatest height. Many Anglo-Normans intermarried with the native population and adopted Gaelic customs. Yet, by the end of the Middle Ages, it was clear that the Anglo-Norman conquest was a failure. English monarchs Henry VIII, Mary I, and Elizabeth I tried to conquer Ireland both militarily and by the introduction of English settlers. Tensions between the Catholic Irish and the English mounted when Henry VIII cut off ties between the Church of England and Rome. This was the true beginning of the religious factor in the struggle for Irish independence.

The next biggest impact to the history of Ireland was the Plantation of Ulster beginning in the seventeenth century. Indeed, the effects of the Plantation of Ulster can hardly be exaggerated as the ramifications of it were to shape Anglo-Irish relations for four hundred years. King James I believed that by encouraging English and Scottish settlers to emigrate to Ireland, he could subdue
what had nearly been a constant threat of Irish rebellion. Most of these settlers were those from the very poor lowland area of Scotland and were largely Presbyterian. These Scottish Presbyterians settled mainly in the northeastern portion of Ireland. Because the immigrants were commoners, they were in direct competition with the native Catholic population for land.

In 1641, the first Irish Catholic secret society, The Defenders, was founded and was the first of many such agrarian societies that were eventually formed. The main goals of The Defenders were to protect fugitive priests, as Catholicism was banned, and to guard Catholics against attack while they held Mass. Protestants were regarded as the "enemies of the faith" and stood for "the Constitutional authority of Britain."12 Competition for land continued to mark many of the early clashes between Catholics and Protestants.

Also in 1641 the Irish rebelled, fearful that the religious freedom they had under James I and Charles I would end if the Parliamentarians were victorious in the English Civil War. The Irish revolt was put down by

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Oliver Cromwell in 1649, after which Cromwell punished Ireland severely. Cromwell repaid his soldiers with lands taken from the Irish Catholics.

In 1688, Catholics gambled again in hopes of regaining their lost lands. They took the side of James II in the Glorious Revolution. In December 1688 the Protestant town of Londonderry closed its gates to James II’s army. The royal army demanded that the city surrender. Several apprentice boys ran to the city gates and shut them in the face of James’s army. The siege lasted 105 days. The siege of Londonderry became a powerful symbol to Ulster Protestants of resistance and solidarity. When James was finally defeated by the Protestant William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, the Penal Laws were enacted, which were aimed at disenfranchising and religiously discriminating against Catholics.

In 1798, Wolfe Tone, along with Presbyterians, and Catholics from the south of Ireland, led a revolution prompted by the French and American Revolutions. This rebellion convinced the British to revoke Ireland's political autonomy. Members of the Irish Parliament were bribed and cajoled into signing the Act of Union in 1800, which provided one parliament for the entire British
Isles. Catholics, who had been granted the right to vote in 1793, were encouraged to believe that Parliament would grant them the right to hold Parliamentary seats. This in fact, was not granted to the Irish until 1829.

In the 1830s Daniel O'Connell started a new movement to repeal the Act of Union. However, this movement stalled when the Irish Potato Famine began in 1845. In 1848, yet another rebellion ended in failure, but it strengthened nationalistic ideas.

Isaac Butt was the first proponent of the new idea of Home Rule. In the late 1870s, Irish Parliamentary Party member Charles Stewart Parnell gradually assumed leadership of the Home Rule movement and pursued Home Rule with a vengeance. The Home Rule movement's goal was the creation of an Irish Parliament subordinate to the British one. Parnell was instrumental in creating an Irish nationalistic party that was able to gain quite a bit of influence in Parliament. The First Home Rule Bill was defeated in the House of Commons in 1886. In 1893 the Second Home Rule Bill was passed in the House of Commons, but failed in the House of Lords. The House of Commons passed the Third Home of 1912 for the third time in 1914 and the House of Lords decided to give several counties in
Ulster the option of being excluded from the bill, but the outbreak of World War I delayed its implementation.

Parnell fell from prominence in 1889 and a split developed in his political party that divided politics for ten years after his fall.\textsuperscript{13} Parnell was replaced by an Irish cultural movement, through the Anglo-Irish literary revival, the Gaelic Athletic Association, and the creation of the Gaelic League in 1893 by Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeill. The Anglo-Irish literary movement, in particular put forth the idea that Ireland needed a soul before it could advance. The Irish Renaissance awoke ideas of a national consciousness and was directly related to the growth of Republicanism because the two blended into each other.\textsuperscript{14}

Arthur Griffith established the political party, Sinn Fein, in 1899. Sinn Fein was more radical than the Home Rule movement. Sinn Fein members believed the Act of Union was illegal and that all Irish Members of Parliament should withdraw together to form a new independent

\textsuperscript{13}The news of Parnell's affair with a married woman broke when her husband filed for divorce, which was regarded as a huge scandal. Eventually, several of his former supporters urged the Irish Parliamentary Party to dismiss him. Parnell died shortly after, in 1891.

government. But where Sinn Fein advocated passive resistance, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) advocated force. The IRB was the precursor of the IRA.

Frustration over the delay in the Home Rule Bill due to World War I led to the Anglo-Irish War. The war began with the very undramatic Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. The Rising itself was an absolute failure. The Irish population was not even supportive of it until sixteen of the participants in the rebellion were executed. This fanned the fire of revolt in Ireland. Following the Anglo-Irish War in which the Irish were victorious, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, which called for the partition of Ireland. The treaty later established twenty-six counties to be included in the Irish Free State and six to remain with the United Kingdom as Northern Ireland. The partitioning was due to the Protestant majority that resided in those six counties. The population of Northern Ireland at that time was roughly one-third Catholic and two-thirds Protestant.

Having sworn in 1912 to fight all-Ireland unification to the death, most Protestants were extremely suspicious of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland did have its own parliament at Stormont. Yet Protestants enjoyed an exclusive majority in the governing
of the province. This was because those in power practiced gerrymandering to guarantee a Protestant majority. The Special Powers Act, first passed in 1922 and expanded in 1933 and 1951, gave the government a large amount of power. In addition, there were property restrictions on voting rights; Catholics were kept from getting jobs, and resided in horrible ghetto-like housing. In these ghettos there was an astonishing rate of unemployment. Statisticians have estimated that in Ballymunphy the unemployment rate was 33 1/3 percent, but could have been as high as 48 percent, with 60 percent for male unemployment.  

Catholics were bitter about the corruption of the Northern Irish government and their own second-rate social status. Such bitterness would soon transform into more active protest.

All of these conditions provided the atmosphere for the Catholic civil rights movement in 1968. Protestants met this movement with violent opposition. As a result, the British sent troops to Northern Ireland and in 1972 suspended Northern Ireland's Parliament at Stormont and imposed direct rule over the province.

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The IRA was still in existence at that time and had mounted cross-border campaigns in the 1950s, but by the late sixties was effectively dormant. The IRA reportedly had only ten guns in its armory and its leadership was divided. It was at this time that the IRA resurfaced to protect fellow Catholics from sectarian attacks. After the introduction of British troops, which Catholics had initially welcomed, the IRA engaged in a number of terrorist activities including ambushing Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and British Army units. The British immediately stepped up activities to wipe out the IRA. In response to the growth of the IRA, several terrorist groups developed on the Protestant side, including the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Freedom Fighters.

The Roots of Irish Hunger Striking

Even though hunger striking has occurred in all cultures throughout the world, with nearly two hundred cases being recorded by Amnesty International between 1970 and 1984, it does remain a distinctively Irish phenomenon. In Ireland, hunger striking has remained a very passionate political symbol and fundamental part of Irish history and mythology. It existed in Ireland in the ancient legal
codes, called the Brehon laws. In pre-Christian Ireland the less powerful fasted against the powerful in order to redress a perceived wrong. Theoretically, the wrongdoer was shamed into making hunger striker stop. If the wrongdoer did not halt the fast and the person died, the family of the hunger striker would be paid compensation.

Hunger striking was also markedly a representation of the Catholic principle of self-denial. The Catholic Church acknowledges that the genesis of the practice of fasting is hard to trace and remains unwritten, but it did exist from early Christian history. Fasting was a phenomenon that had Greco-Roman and Jewish roots, but for the Christian, fasting facilitated self-control, inhibited lust, severed the bonds between the soul and filthiness of the body, and was a form of penance. In addition, fasting mimicked Christ’s suffering.

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18O'Malley, 25; Vandereycken and Van Deth, 15.
Tertullian, the ecclesiastical writer of the second century, regarded food as poison and was the first to correlate lustfulness with gluttony and self-indulgence. Moreover, he recorded that over-fed Christians were "more necessary to bears and lions . . . than to God," and that it was the Christian's "duty to practice emaciation." Tertullian believed that the faster was preparing his body for resurrection and thus would leave behind the putrefaction and rot of the earthly body. The faster, in denying the body food and digestion, which were natural and mortal processes, was literally grooming the body for eventual salvation. In the fourth century, St. Jerome believed that fasting singled out heroic Christians because starvation was usually something feared, not enthusiastically sought out.

The early desert ascetics of the third and fourth centuries, such as St. Anthony and St. Simeon Stylites,

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fasted severely in order to "relive" Adam's temptation and to overcome it, as he had been unable to do.\textsuperscript{22} To Tertullian, Adam's sin was so grave because he had "yielded more readily to his belly than to God, heeded the meat rather than the mandate, and sold salvation for his gullet!"\textsuperscript{23}

However, desert ascetics were not the only ones who fasted, as Lenten fasting was also meant to redress Adam's sin. Religion and food were associated in other ways as well. Christians discussed torture in hell as perpetual digestion and gluttony was considered a venial sin. The Eucharist was paradoxical because of the issue of cannibalism, in that Christ was consumed yet not digested. To take the Eucharist meant that "suffering flesh became suffering flesh" and served to imitate the anguish of Christ on the cross.\textsuperscript{24}

Although fasting had begun as a secondary Christian development, it later became a hallmark of Christianity.


\textsuperscript{23}Tertullian.

Several members of the clergy, including St. Patrick and the twelve apostles of Ireland, all practiced hunger striking in ancient Ireland.

It is, perhaps ironic at best to discuss the practice of hunger striking amongst a people that have been more famously known for starving. The Irish Potato Famine lasted from about 1845 to 1859 and was to have disastrous consequences in a country where nearly 40 percent of the population lived almost exclusively on potatoes. Between 1845 and 1851 Ireland’s population fell from 8.2 to 6 million. Approximately one million Irish died and another million emigrated. After the Famine, attendance at mass increased dramatically. Before the Famine, attendance at Mass was about 40 percent and following it, attendance swelled to 90 percent. Women, who had often lost several family members to death by disease or starvation, identified closely with Mary, Mother of Sorrows.²⁵

Hunger striking seems to hold even more meaning within a culture that has experienced starvation. This is the same reason that early Christian fasters were regarded with such admiration, because they voluntarily underwent

what others were terrified of. On the surface, the Potato Famine and hunger striking seem to defy comparison. However, in both instances the Irish people perceived themselves to be starving at the hand of the British.

The resumption of the use of hunger striking in the twentieth century to gain political goals might also have been related to its use among British suffragettes. The suffragettes campaigned for the granting of the right to vote to women during the period leading up to World War I. Their actions were widely publicized and they used hunger striking to protest the conditions that they were held in while in prison.

The first modern Irish hunger strike recorded was that of James Connolly, an Irish revolutionary, in September 1913. Connolly went on strike to protest his imprisonment and was released eight days later. After the Easter Rising, Republican prisoners refused to acknowledge the legality of the British courts. In prison they demanded treatment as prisoners of war. Prison authorities did not concede. The prisoners at Mountjoy Jail and Wormwood Scrubs refused to work or wear prison clothes and eventually participated in a hunger strike in

\[26\] Grimm, 160.
1917. At this time Britain still imposed forced feedings and some forty prisoners were subjected to them. Three men died as a result, including Thomas Ashe, whose death was immediately viewed by the Irish as martyrdom.27

Terence MacSwiney began his hunger strike on 12 August and died on 25 October 1920 in Brixton prison. It was MacSwiney who proclaimed in defiance, “It is not those who inflict the most but those who can suffer the most who will conquer,” which was to become the mantra of the IRA.28 Daniel Corkery, a friend of MacSwiney and fellow Republican, wrote an obituary for him that appeared in the Irish Jesuit periodical Studies. Corkery writes that many knew that MacSwiney would end up dying tragically and that “the end would crown his life.”29 No statement better sums up MacSwiney’s tremendous influence on the hunger strikers of 1980 and 1981.

In opposition to the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, Ireland saw a massive hunger strike of a little more than eight thousand political prisoners. A hunger strike led by Billy McKee in 1972 got all political prisoners Special

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27Sweeney, 424; Witherow, 16; O’Malley, 26.
28O’Malley, 26-27.
Category, or prisoner of war status in Northern Ireland.30 Nevertheless, it was the 1981 IRA hunger strike to regain Special Category status that was the most infamous.

The Path to the 1980 and 1981 Hunger Strikes

On August 10, 1976 Roy Mason replaced Merlyn Rees as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Mason initiated a policy of criminalization in order to try and neutralize the IRA and other terrorist groups. This new policy meant that Special Category status would be taken away from imprisoned IRA members.31

Diplock Courts were established in 1973 so that paramilitary groups could not intimidate witnesses, as the courts had no juries. They were so-called because of a 1972 report by Lord Diplock counseling the implementation of non-jury trials. One study done by the Queen's University, Belfast, Law Department found that 94 percent of these cases resulted in a guilty verdict. As a result, the prison population swelled from 729 in 1968 to 2,848 in

30Before 1972 only prisoners in Long Kesh Prison could claim political status (both Catholic and Protestant). With the granting of Special Category Status, prisoners in the Crumlin Road Jail and the women's prison at Armagh could also claim political status. Sweeney, 421.
31Coogan, On the Blanket, 70, 102.
1975.\textsuperscript{32} It became increasingly clear that Northern Ireland was not equipped to deal with the enormous increase in prisoners so most were held at a former RAF airfield, at Long Kesh Prison.

Detention without trial was phased out in 1975, but the British revoked Special Category Status for prisoners convicted after 1 March 1976. At Long Kesh Prison, prisoners convicted for paramilitary activities organized themselves as soldiers in rank and were responsible to their Officer Commanding (OC) as opposed to prison authorities. While in prison, convicted IRA members attended classes in Gaelic and held discussions on Irish history. They were also allowed to wear their own clothing. After Special Category Status was revoked, the government moved prisoners to the newly built Maze Prison with its H-Blocks.\textsuperscript{33} The blocks were so called because they were shaped like the letter 'H' as is visible in the diagram in Figure 1.

The first reaction of the prisoners was what was later called the blanket protest. In the several prison protests that resulted, religious imagery manifested

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 72, 149. \\
\end{flushright}
itself in the symbols used by Catholics. The prisoners refused to wear the prison uniforms and wore only blankets. Ciaran Nugent was the first prisoner to lose Special Category Status. Nugent said that the prison guards would have to “nail them [the prison uniforms] to my back.” Nugent ended up spending three and one-half years on the blanket protest.34 Hundreds of other prisoners joined the protest. This was to become the first of many protests that eventually culminated in the hunger strikes as prisoners were faced with the refusal of the British government to yield.

The no-wash protest began when prisoners were refused a second towel to wash with.35 Eventually, the prisoners refused to “slop out” their chamber pots and as a result, began smearing their excrement on the walls of their cells to prevent it from dirtying their cell floors. Women prisoners held at Armagh later joined the dirty protest.

The prisoners lived in horrible conditions. Tomas O Fiaich, the Roman Catholic Primate of All Ireland, visited the male prisoners on 1 August 1978 and famously compared

35 The prisoners had one towel, which was used as their only clothing and they did not want to use that towel to wash with as well.
the prisoners' living conditions with the "slums of Calcutta."  

The prisoners had five basic demands:

1. The right to wear their own clothing.
2. Freedom from prison work.
3. The right to visits and recreational facilities.
5. Restoration of reduction of sentences for good behavior (while on the various protests prisoners would lose the reductions of their sentences usually given for good behavior).

The government did not concede any of these demands. The government and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher took the approach that the prisoners were murderers and criminals and therefore did not deserve the rights included in the five demands. One prisoner predicted, "This thing will go on until we start coming out those gates in coffins."  

Meanwhile, the dirty protest was beginning to take its toll on the prisoners, who were discouraged at the lack of a resolution. Prisoners regularly likened the Maze to a Nazi concentration camp, due to their unspeakable living conditions and harsh treatment by the

\[36\text{Annabel Ferriman, "'Inhuman Conditions' of Republican Prisoners Shock Archbishop," Times (London), 2 August 1978, 1.}\]

\[37\text{Coogan, On the Blanket, 256.}\]
prison guards. In the protesting wings of the prison, furniture had been taken out of the cells. The prisoners often used pieces of their foam mattresses to smear their excreta on the walls. The prisoners could often get creative in their perpetual boredom as Blanketman Joe McQuillan remembers:

As part of our protest we wrote some political slogans on the cell walls. Myself and my cellmate were very original: 'We are POWs' and 'Up the IRA'. We also started to throw our leftover food into the corners of the cell, and we splashed tea onto the ceiling, staining it dark brown. When the weather got warmer, the rotting food in the corner soon grew a 'beard' (a fungus mould). Eventually a slurping sound could be heard, and soon the pile began to move and maggots emerged.

Leaders of the prisoners now opted to use the weapon of hunger strike largely because Billy McKee's hunger strike in 1972 was what got them Special Category Status in the first place. IRA prisoner Brendan Hughes called for a strike to begin on 27 October 1980. At this point, Bobby Sands took over as OC in place of Hughes, as Hughes was the leader of the strike. Seven men planned to fast

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39 Brian Campbell, Laurence McKeown, and Felim O'Hagan, 40.
simultaneously. Three women prisoners from Armagh Jail joined the strike on December 1.\textsuperscript{40}

All the same, the first strike did not end well for the prisoners. One of the strikers, Sean McKenna, suddenly deteriorated and was transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital. Hughes knew that a document was on its way from the Foreign Office in London through secret lines of communication. Hughes was also aware that this document might contain the terms conceding the five demands. Therefore, he had a chance to save McKenna's life. So, Hughes and Sands secured reluctant agreements from the remaining hunger strikers and called off the strike on 18 December 1980. The document, thought to contain hope of ending the crisis, proved inadequate and did not contain the concessions that would meet the prisoners' demands. Both Sinn Fein and London claimed victory over the matter in the end.

The prisoners felt taken in and Bobby Sands immediately urged Sinn Fein to allow another hunger strike. On Thursday, 6 February 1981 it was announced that

a new hunger strike would begin. Sands refused food on 1 March 1981. He was joined by two fellow IRA members and one Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) member. In the event of death a hunger striker would then be replaced with another prisoner.

At the onset of the second strike the government again refused to concede. There was nevertheless a small victory for the hunger strikers. Frank McGuire, member of Parliament for Fermanagh-South Tyrone, died. He had been an Irish Nationalist and supported the prisoners' cause. Sinn Fein felt it would be beneficial to put Sands up for the empty seat because it would give publicity to the situation inside the H-Blocks. Sands defeated the Unionist candidate by a margin of 1,446 votes. There was hope among many that because Sands was now a member of Parliament, Margaret Thatcher would surely not let a colleague die and would concede to the prisoners' demands. They underestimated Thatcher's resolve. After Sands' success in winning an election, several prisoners and hunger strikers were put forward as candidates in the general election in the Irish Republic. Prisoner Paddy

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41The INLA was a splinter group of the Provisional IRA. The INLA was more radical than the IRA and was responsible for the death of Airey Neave, M.P., Margaret Thatcher's advisor and good friend.
Agnew and hunger striker Kieran Doherty won seats in the Irish Dail. Posters published by Sinn Fein pictured the candidates along with Terence MacSwiney as if to remind the Irish Republic of its own history.\textsuperscript{42}

As to the hunger strike itself, nothing was resolved and on 5 May on the sixty-sixth day of his fast, Bobby Sands passed away. His family had held a constant vigil in the prison hospital wing for several days.\textsuperscript{43} He died within a month of being elected to Parliament. His family urged that there be no violence following his death. Extra police and land rovers, however, were dispatched into the streets of Belfast to stop or prevent any riots following Sands's death. Just as Sands's election to Parliament had not changed the government's position, neither had his death. Nine other prisoners followed him into death: Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee, and Michael Devine.


Dying of starvation was a horrible and excruciatingly slow way to die. The hunger strikers' deaths were prolonged by the fact that they drank water and were thus able to survive on average about sixty-two days, but survival ranged anywhere from forty-six to seventy three days. A hunger striker would experience a variety of symptoms throughout his fast, with hunger pangs disappearing around day three or four. When deprived of food, the body literally begins to digest itself, working from the most expendable body tissues, beginning with fat deposits, and ending with the vital organs. The body slows down to conserve energy, the pulse decelerates, and blood pressure falls. With this, usually around day nine through about day thirty, the hunger strikers described feeling cold, especially in their extremities.

Most hunger strikers were moved to the prison hospital during the first few days of the fourth week. There, they continued to get weaker and other side effects included vomiting and retching, which appeared around days forty through fifty, dry skin, anemia, and mouth ulcers. All of the hunger strikers experienced what can best

\[44\text{Without water the body can only survive a very short time and in some cases only a matter of days. Grimm, 12-13.}\]

\[45\text{Clarkson and Crawford, 144; O'Malley, 114-115.}\]
described as a general state of confusion and disorientation roughly between the fortieth and seventieth days without food. Before death, most of the hunger strikers lost their hearing and sight.46

Several different groups had tried to meet with the British and the prisoners to come to an agreement, but to no avail. A group of Catholic bishops representing the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP) had unsuccessful dealings with the Northern Ireland Office in late June to early July. In July, the International Red Cross tried to intervene, but the prisoners asked them to abandon their mission. Individuals from the Catholic Church tried to help out as well, notably Cardinal Thomas O Fiach. In fact, religious emissaries inside the prison seemed to give quasi-religious endorsement to the hunger strike.47

Upon going on the strike it was customary for a prisoner to have a visit with his family to inform them of his decision. He asked them to honor his wishes and not intervene should he lose consciousness. As next of kin, the prisoner’s family had the right to have him fed

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46 Ibid.
intravenously once he fell into unconsciousness. This was to be the real breakdown of the hunger strike. After Paddy Quinn's mother's intervention on 31 July, the families of the prisoners' commitment to let their sons die for their beliefs wavered.⁴⁸

In short, the intervention of Paddy Quinn's mother seemed to start a tidal wave. Families, also under pressure from the Catholic hierarchy, realized that the prisoners did not have to die. On 2 October, Sinn Fein publicly came out against the hunger strike and on 3 October, the prisoners formally called off the strike. Following the call-off of the hunger strike, the British government granted, in essence, all five of the prisoners' demands.

⁴⁸O'Malley, 125.
CHAPTER II
HUNGER STRIKING LITERATURE

The aim of this examination is to investigate three sources concerning hunger striking. These sources will include *The King's Threshold*, a play by W. B. Yeats, Frank Gallagher's *Days Of Fear: A Diary Of Hunger Strike*, and the writings of Bobby Sands contained in the collection *Bobby Sands: Writings from Prison*. Textual analysis will identify thematic and symbolic similarities among the three works. Several general common issues will be explored such as the personal sacrifice and spiritual transformation inherent in hunger striking. However, cultural and religious symbols that appear in all three works will be given more attention. In particular, Yeats's and Gallagher's works will be examined because they most likely served as an inspiration to later hunger strikers.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) looked to occult mythology, Irish folklore, and history to uncover his own unconscious mind. The poems "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland," "The Hosting of the Sidhe," and the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* all exhibited his preoccupation with Irish myths. Yeats was a key
figure in the Irish Renaissance, which occurred in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, Yeats also exhibited an Irish political consciousness with his poem "Easter 1916," which concerned the botched Easter Rising. Following the Anglo-Irish War, Yeats served as a representative in the parliament of the new Irish Free State from 1922 to 1928. Much of his work has had a tremendous impact and influence on the present day IRA and the Catholic community in Northern Ireland as a whole, through his revival of Gaelic traditions.

Yeats wrote the play The King’s Threshold in 1903, the same year that he founded the Abbey Theatre in Dublin with Lady Augusta Gregory. This study will attempt to uncover the mentality of the play’s protagonist, Seanchan, in addition to the written accounts left by hunger strikers Frank Gallagher and Bobby Sands. An emphasis will be placed on cultural and religious symbols used in such literature. It should be noted that there are significant differences among these three sources. However, whether such works are fiction, as in The King’s Threshold, or nonfiction as in Gallagher’s and Sands’s accounts, will not necessarily be a primary lens of analysis. The concern here will be how similar symbols
are used in all three texts to serve as a literary introduction to the symbols used within hunger striking.

In *The King's Threshold* the poet, Seanchan, is refused a place in King Guaire's council. Seanchan undergoes a fast to the death to win back his right to attend. Many urge him to eat and, in the climax of the play, he pushes away his love, Fedelm, and dies to right the wrong done to him.\(^1\) Yeats used Lady Wilde's *Ancient Legends of Ireland* and *Sancan The Bard*, a play by Edwin J. Ellis, as sources for the play. The play was a "reflection of Yeats's belief in the individuality of the poet and an affirmation of the essential freedom of the creative spirit, despite restrictions which society may impose on that freedom."\(^2\) The character of Seanchan embodied Yeats himself, the poet who suffered in a world where he tried to gain his proper place. Seanchan's fast could be compared to Yeats's poetic theories and mysticism

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in that Seanchan was transported “to a higher plane” and was able to leave earthly affictions behind.³

Again, the fact that Seanchan is a poet is significant because writing and hunger are comparable acts. By writing, Seanchan sacrificed flesh for word. Both were ways to escape mortality and “rise above the flesh” to fortify the inner self from the world.⁴ Similarly, the play was constructed in such a way that there was a battle between two forces: instinct, personified in Seanchan, and reason, embodied in the king. The play was inflexible and had an either/or formula. Either the king would give in or Seanchan would die. Seanchan died in the end, but in fact, Yeats had revised the ending of *The King’s Threshold* following Terence MacSwiney’s death. In the original version, Seanchan survived the ordeal.⁵

As the poet wasted away and came closer to death, he seemingly transcended his mortal body, exhibiting symptoms

³Brenda S. Webster, *Yeats: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1973), 64.


of confusion and disorientation that occur in the latter stages of hunger striking. Seanchan supposed, "For when the heavy body has grown weak, / There's nothing that can tether the wild mind / That, being moonstruck and fantastical, / Goes where it fancies." The hero became independent of reality and therefore no longer needed to perform mortal functions such as eating or to express base human emotions like anger. In addition to the forces of intuition and reason acting against one another, there was a conflict between delirium and poetic vision as Seanchan approached death.

Seanchan's denial of his lover, Fedelm, represented his ultimate break with human limitations and was his decisive and final independence from the world. Alternatively, others have interpreted the character of Fedelm differently. The King's Threshold was completed six months after the marriage of Yeats's former lover, Maude Gonne. This affected Yeats's work tremendously and some believe that this play shows the influence she had on his life, as did many of Yeats's other works. Yeats seems

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6Yeats, The King's Threshold, 73.
7Taylor, 19-20.
to be saying to Gonne unconsciously that when he dies, she will feel sorry for the way she spurned him.6

Frank Gallagher took part in a hunger strike in Mountjoy Jail near Dublin in 1920. The aim of his hunger strike was to guarantee either prisoner of war status for Republican prisoners or secure their release. The strike ended on 14 April, with the promise of the British to release the prisoners. Gallagher's diary itself spans an eleven-day period between 5 April and 15 April 1920. The first entry tells of Gallagher's arrest and details the beginnings of his hunger strike. As the entries continue, it is evident that Gallagher's state of mind became less and less rational. For a period of several days, Gallagher writes in an almost stream of consciousness technique, blending his inner feelings with what he imagines is happening outside the prison.9 Several times, Gallagher expresses his fear of dying. Yet, while he is

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6Webster, 63.

9One of such passages reads: "A bearded, habited priest with uplifted hand. 'Hail Mary! full of grace.' The feverish, thunderous knocking of an aeroplane flying low. 'Holy Mary, Mother of God.' The warning shout of a sentry. Mothers and fathers who entered the prison with the fire of resolution in their eyes, leaving it with a woe in them which not even the cordon of troops can make them hide. . . . What a play it is! Not the only actors now, these tight-skinned, clammy bodies on the prison pallets. The whole Nation crowded into the caste. It is
afraid of dying, he is even more afraid of letting down his comrades by not dying courageously. He also fears caving in and has a nightmare that he ends up eating while his best friend, who was also on hunger strike, died. Ultimately, Gallagher did end up surviving the hunger strike.

Contained within the collection of imprisoned IRA member Bobby Sands’s writings are some sixty-three poems. Included also is the diary that Sands kept for the first seventeen days of his hunger strike, from 1 March to 17 March 1981. While both Sands’s and Gallagher’s memoirs of their time on hunger strike are intensely personal, Gallagher’s account is more fluid and emotional. Sands expresses fear about being strip-searched by prison guards following a family visitation, but never records a fear of dying for the Republican cause. Of his ability to die bravely, he is obdurately certain. On Sunday, March 1 Sands wrote:

I am standing on the threshold [emphasis own] of another trembling world. May God have mercy on my soul. . . . I believe I am but another of those wretched Irishmen born of a risen generation with a deeply rooted and unquenchable desire for freedom. I

the world which has become the audience . . . .” Some punctuation in text has been changed for clarity. Frank Gallagher, Days of Fear: A Diary of Hunger Strike (County Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 49.
am dying not just to attempt to end the barbarity of H Block, or to gain the rightful recognition of a political prisoner, but primarily because what is lost in here is lost for the Republic and those wretched oppressed whom I am deeply proud to know as the 'risen people.'

What is interesting here is Sands's use of the word "threshold" itself. Not only is the word included in the title of Yeats's hunger strike play, but it signifies the either/or formula present in hunger striking. Furthermore, it symbolizes the hunger striker's seeming break with reality.

Later, when Sands wrote of his admiration for the protesters in the women's prison at Armagh, he said, "I have poems in my mind, mediocre no doubt, poems of hunger strike and [Terence] MacSwiney, and everything that this hunger strike has stirred up in my heart." Gallagher also calls to mind several other Republican martyrs and further compares himself to a Christian martyr entering the gladiatorial ring. It is thus apparent that the martyrs of the past were still alive in the minds of the Republican prisoners. Their fasts allowed them to emulate their heroes.

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10 Bobby Sands, 219.
11 Ibid., 232.
12 Gallagher, 48-49, 75-76.
As well, Sands proclaimed that he was not just dying for the granting of prisoner of war status; rather, his death was for something larger than himself. Both Seanchan and Frank Gallagher echoed this feeling. Gallagher said that enduring a hunger strike required "something greater than self to make a man willing to give up his life." The hunger strikers were voicing that great dedication was needed to attain the spiritual rebirth necessary for martyrdom.

This is related to the idea that to be willing to die for a cause, one must attach to that cause something sacred and righteous, both to convince themselves that their sacrifice is crucial and to sway the public. The hunger strike was also a struggle between two opposed forces, the will of the hunger striker and that of the alleged wrongdoer. This struggle was not merely for a desired goal and with such high moral stakes, compromise was impossible.

The last words of Sands's diary conclude with a proclamation that "if they aren't able to destroy the desire for freedom, they won't break you. They won't break me because the desire for freedom, and the freedom

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13Ibid., 77.
of the Irish people, is in my heart. The day will dawn when all the people of Ireland will have the desire for freedom to show. It is then that we’ll see the rising of the moon.”

Seanchan’s last statement was, “That evil picture in the sky—no, no! / I have all my strength again, I will outface it. / O, look upon the moon that’s standing there . . .”

Both Sands and Seanchan made use of the image of the moon. The line “the rising of the moon” actually came from a poem by John Casey that celebrated the 1798 Irish rebellion led by Wolfe Tone against British rule. Casey was an imprisoned Fenian who died in 1879 of health complications from the reported severe treatment he received in prison. So the image of the moon came directly from nineteenth century Republican literature.

All three texts bring up the image of birds. The most obvious reason for this, especially for Gallagher and Sands who were imprisoned, was that a bird signified freedom. But conversely, the term ‘jailbird’ probably came from the fact that birds were sometimes kept in cages, like prisoners. An image of a bird would therefore

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14 Bobby Sands, 239.
15 Yeats, The King’s Threshold, 93.
16 David Beresford, Ten Men Dead, 73.
seem to be the perfect one for a prisoner to use, not to mention the fact that they probably watched them from the prison windows.

In *The King's Threshold*, as Seanchan slowly loses his grip on reality, he holds up his hand as if a bird has perched on it and calls it "A little God." As Seanchan moves farther away from the material world, the bird he sees perched on his hand represents his own eventual flight from the chains of mortality. Following the resolution of the hunger strike Gallagher participated in, he was freed from prison. As he lay in bed the subsequent day he looked out the window of his room and saw "green trees . . . a blue, blue sky . . . and such sweet birds." But it is Bobby Sands who used the image of birds most frequently. In the short story "The Lark and the Freedom Fighter," Sands relates a tale that his grandfather told him about a lark that was caged and tortured by a cruel man because it would not sing for him. The bird refused to sing and died rather than submit to the man's wishes. Clearly, the lark represented Ireland and the cruel man Britain, but the lark would also have

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17Yeats, *The King's Threshold*, 85.
18Gallagher, 117.
19*Bobby Sands*, 83-85.
been an important symbol to Sands himself. Like the lark, Sands was willing to die rather than be branded a criminal. On his fourteenth day without food Sands wrote that:

I was lonely for a while this evening, listening to the crows caw as they returned home. Should I hear the beautiful lark, she would rent my heart. Now, as I write, the odd curlew mournfully calls as they fly over. I like birds. Well, I must leave off, for if I write more about the birds my tears will fall and my thoughts return to the days of my youth."  

To Bobby, the lark especially symbolized freedom. Later, the figure of a lark wrapped in barbed wire became the symbol of Irish Republican prisoners, due to the influence of Bobby’s writings.  

The image of the mother both in The King’s Threshold and the 1981 IRA hunger strike bears examination. Similarly, Seanchan connects his mother with the “selfless

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20 Ibid., 234.
mothering bird" and himself with Christ's death.\textsuperscript{22}

Seanchan likewise asks about his mother, showing his love and deep emotional attachment to her:

\begin{quote}
Seanchan. What did my mother say?
Brian. Your mother gave no message, for when they told her that you had it in mind to starve or get again the ancient right of the poets, she said, 'No message will do any good. We cannot change him,' and she went indoors, lay down upon the bed and turned her face out of the light. . . .

Seanchan. She sent no message. Our mothers know us, they knew us before birth, and this is why they know us even better than sweet hearts upon whose breasts we have lain."\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Both the suffering mother and Christ themes showed up in 1981, but the importance of the mother figure in Ireland did not come only from purely religious influences. A very old Irish concept was that of personifying the nation of Ireland as a sorrowful mother figure, a symbol that Yeats himself used in his play \textit{Cathleen ni Houlihan}.\textsuperscript{24} The main plot of \textit{Cathleen ni Houlihan} concerns a young man who is persuaded by an old woman to abandon his young fiancée to assist her in recovering her house and land that have been taken over by strangers. This old woman is in fact Mother Ireland. The

\textsuperscript{22}Webster, 70.
\textsuperscript{23}Yeats, \textit{The King's Threshold}, 77-78.
\textsuperscript{24}O'Malley, 118; W. B. Yeats, \textit{Cathleen ni Houlihan}, 3\textsuperscript{rd}
young man later sacrifices himself for the old woman, at which point she transforms into a beautiful young queen.

The message here is clear - country and mother are more important than the wife who represents selfishness and earthly concerns.

In essence, all of the hunger striker's mothers were transformed into Mother Ireland. They became symbolic of the Irish nation itself, the nation that was sacrificing its sons for Irish freedom. The prisoners' mothers were in the same way defined by their suffering and sacrifice. Sands's mother, Rosaleen Sands, had been at his bedside and made a statement just before his death that appeared in the New York Times, "I appeal to the people to remain calm and have no fighting, and cause no death or destruction. . . . My son is dying. But he has offered his death to improve conditions, not to cause death outside." 

The Christian idea of Marian suffering was epitomized by Rosaleen Sands’s comment that her son died as a sacrifice so that others would not have to. This comment could be clearly correlated with the idea of Christ's dying for the sins of humankind, themes that all three

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sources refer to. Gallagher’s diary is also marked with the idea of sacrifice. Throughout the strike, his feelings waver between depression and what he terms “a sacrificial glory.” He purports to fast for those who had not yet been imprisoned, so that they would not have to suffer the same fate and he declares that, “It may be that if we die now, thousands, who would have to die later if we failed, can live . . .” Owen Carron gave the funeral oration at Bobby Sands’s funeral and said that, “Someone once said that it is hard to be a hero’s mother and nobody knows that more than Mrs. Sands who watched her son being daily crucified for sixty-six long days and eventually killed.”

While the prisoner’s mothers were held up as Marian figures of suffering, the prisoner’s wives and girlfriends were perceived very differently. Within the culture of Irish terrorism the figure of the wife was regularly suspected of sexual trickery and was often accused of being a sexual betrayer. Examples of the paranoia

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27Gallagher, 18.  
28Ibid., 26, 43.  
29O'Malley, 119.  
30Begoña Aretxaga, Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern
concerning a lover’s betrayal to a prisoner are frequently repeated throughout Irish culture. For example, in the screenplay of the 1996 movie Some Mother’s Son, which tells the story of the 1981 hunger strike, a hunger striker dies. His girlfriend wails to his family, "Youse [sic] could have taken him off it. Oh, Jesus . . . If we’d have been married, I would have saved him."31 Her admission that she would have taken the prisoner off the hunger strike reveals her disloyalty to the Republican cause.

The film The Boxer, although not directly concerned with hunger striking, underscores fears of a lover’s disloyalty and infidelity. In the film, the main character, Danny Flynn, is an IRA man recently released from prison. Flynn has an affair with a jailed IRA man’s wife. Consequently, the wife is threatened with disownment from her community because of her betrayal of her husband, a prisoner for the Republican cause.32

The complex role of the wife or lover of the IRA man was due to the fact that she had the paranoid fears of the

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Republican movement projected onto her. She was the voice of dissent personified. Just as Seanchan repudiated Fedelm, the hunger strikers' wives and girlfriends took a subordinate and more negative position to the mother figure. The mother represented Mother Ireland, and the Virgin Mary. She was an example of purity and loyalty.

Repudiation of a lover also makes sense upon analysis of the physiological effects of fasting. This action is a manifestation of physical and mental symptoms in several ways. Early Christian ascetics used fasting as a way to control sexual desire because early Christians equated food with lust. They felt that food produced heat, which in turn produced lust, which was an idea that originated in theories regarding bodily humours.  

We now know that starvation produces, among other things, "the disappearance of menstrual periods in women, the loss of sexual potency in men, and the loss of sexual interest in both." Additionally, physiological symptoms of disorientation and disconnection are directly related to the hunger striker's emotional break with reality and earthly cares. Purification is also an integral part of

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33Grimm, 72, 164-172; Brown, 9-10, 166, 238.  
34Grimm, 11.
hunger striking and sexual desire would be seen as a contradiction to the cleansing of the spirit.

In the article "Mothers, Whores and Villains - Images of Women in Novels of the Northern Ireland Conflict" Bill Rolston discusses how women have been portrayed in literature dealing with Northern Ireland. Rolston categorized the portrayal of women into three groups: mothers, whores and villains. He stated that their status and roles in the political conflict were subordinate to the male role. When their roles were not subordinate, the women were left bereft of their femininity and became "sad specimens of womankind." In contrast to the role of the mother, the wife or lover became the whore in the categorization of Irish women into either Madonnas or whores.

There are thus several uniform themes present throughout The King’s Threshold, Frank Gallagher’s diary and Bobby Sands’s writings. All three sources exhibited themes of leaving behind the earthly body and world and a consequent introspectiveness, Christ-like sacrifice, and the viewing of themselves as the next in a historical roll

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of martyrs. Moreover, none of the hunger strikers believed in compromise. Nearly all viewed their mothers as incarnations of Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mary and/or their lovers as traitorous. These examples of common symbols reveal that Irish cultural and religious influences were prevalent in hunger striking literature from the early twentieth century to the latter half. It will be the task of later chapters to examine such themes through other source material to expand on the notion of how these cultural and religious symbols were utilized.
CHAPTER III

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Attention here will focus on how the Irish Catholic Church has historically dealt with the issue of hunger striking. Consequently, this will then highlight exactly how the difficult issues of self-starvation and sacrifice influenced the blanket protest and 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes. Religious symbols were often evoked during this time period in Northern Ireland, by both the Church and Irish Republican supporters. From accounts of the 1981 hunger strike particularly, it appears that those in the Church did not always support hunger strikers, yet respected them for holding true to their beliefs.

The theme of Christ-like sacrifice is embedded in hunger striking literature and here is shown to have also been displayed in visual images as well. Religious depictions of Blanketmen appeared in broadsheets, some of which were published by religious figures, flyers, and posters. There will also be a further examination of the role of women in the blanket protest and hunger strike to show how religion factored into their behavior. The use of religious imagery was surprisingly flexible and serves
as an example of just how much Republican and religious symbols were related in the job of creating martyrs.

The Catholic Church's Role

The Catholic Church in Ireland made several attempts to resolve the 1981 hunger strike by meeting with both the prisoners and the British government. None of their overtures were successful and the IRA leadership became increasingly frustrated and accused the Church of meddling. Some Catholic clergy began pressuring the families of dying hunger strikers to use their power as next of kin to remove them from the strike. Despite the apparent negative reaction from the IRA to the Church's involvement, many Protestants accused the Church of supporting terrorists and condoning violence. Thus, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and Britain viewed the Irish Catholic Church very differently. The point of exactly how the Church could morally accept hunger strikes in light of its pronouncements against suicide was also problematic for the religious figures involved in the hunger strike.

The concept of the act of suicide being a crime actually came late to Christian doctrine. In the sixth century the Church ruled that suicide was a sin through a
very narrow interpretation of the sixth commandment, "thou shalt not kill." In earlier Greco-Roman society suicide was considered admirable and even brave. Christianity therefore differentiated itself from Greco-Roman society by reiterating the Christian tenet that "every life was equally valuable," a point argued by Augustine himself when he sought to make suicide illegal. Even though suicide became prohibited, for the early Church it remained a tricky issue because of early ascetics and fasters who probably would have lived much longer, had it not been for their self-destructive behavior. Self-starvation carried over into Irish religious tradition with several Irish religious figures participating in hunger strikes from the fourth to the twelfth centuries.¹

Father P. J. Gannon wrote the article "The Ethical Aspect of the Hunger Strike" when Terence MacSwiney was on the twenty-third day of his hunger strike in 1920. In that article, Father Gannon supported the view that dying from hunger strike was not suicide. A fundamental question in the hunger strike as suicide debate was whether or not a hunger striker had the guilt associated

with suicide. Clergy who were against the suicide notion pointed out that the basic difference between suicide and hunger strike came down to the end versus intention.\(^2\) Gannon went on to say that although refusing to take food as a direct way to deliberately end one’s life would be an obvious sin, “In a righteous cause a man can risk his life though he may not take it.”\(^3\) A hunger striker is “willing to run the risk of death,” which is distinctly different from committing suicide where the “object is to escape from a life that has grown hateful.”\(^4\) Hunger striking could also be seen as a breach of the Christian tenet of self-preservation, but Gannon counteracted this point by saying:

If charity towards a single individual be held an adequate reason for not eating and thus sacrificing life, it would seem that love of one’s country, which is really charity towards the millions of one’s countrymen, constitutes a far more valid excuse for neglecting the positive precept of preserving life.\(^5\)

In other words, circumstance adds virtue to actions.\(^6\)

Following the Anglo-Irish War and during the Irish Civil War the Catholic Church became more critical of

\(^3\)Gannon, 450.
\(^4\)Ibid.
\(^5\)Ibid., 452.
\(^6\)Hogan, 41-44.
using hunger strikes as a means to an end. For example, the Church forbade a Christian burial for Denis Barry, a Republican hunger striker, whereas Terence MacSwiney had been allowed one in 1920. The Church permitted MacSwiney’s burial because in the pre-Civil War period it did not want to alienate the Irish people while the emerging Irish nation was so volatile. The Irish Catholic Church gained further control over morals after the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. At that time Irish President William Cosgrave, leader of the Fine Gael Party, agreed not to interfere with the Catholic Church’s control over morality. As things settled down in the new Irish Republic and heated up in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s, hunger striking began to be used again by Republican prisoners. This brought several of the old controversies surrounding it to the forefront for religious figures.

Father Denis Faul has been the recipient of two contradictory nicknames, having been dubbed “the Provo’s priest” as well as “Mrs. Thatcher’s priest.” Father Faul

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7Sweeney, 431.
8A split occurred in the IRA in 1970. Those that split formed the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) whose members were nicknamed ‘Provos’. The other side called themselves the Official Irish Republican Army
started out teaching at St. Patrick's Academy in Dungannon in County Armagh where he became frustrated at the treatment of Catholics at the beginning of the Troubles. Father Faul had always been outspoken and first managed to aggravate the Church by complaining about anti-Catholic biases in Northern Ireland’s judicial system. Faul eventually teamed up with Father Raymond Murray from Armagh to write fifteen pamphlets and books outlining the plight of Catholics and the infringements upon their civil rights. Fathers Faul and Murray also tackled the issue of alleged beatings of Republican prisoners in Northern Ireland’s prisons.  

Faul was a chaplain at the Maze prison during the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981. Although he did not like the idea of a hunger strike, he believed that it was not suicide and supported the prisoners’ decision. He attempted to persuade the British government to grant the prisoners’ demands in 1981, but after that failed and six prisoners had died, he realized the futility of the strike. Faul said that, "[t]here could have been 30 young

(OIRA) and its members were nicknamed 'Stickies.' The OIRA called a cease-fire in 1972 and the PIRA is now just commonly known as the IRA.

men [who] died after the initial publicity had come to an end. . . . There were terrible convulsions in the community outside, with 60 people killed in that time. And it was fostering great hatred of the British and Protestants."¹⁰

Faul convened a meeting in July 1981 with the families of the remaining hunger strikers in attendance. At that meeting he encouraged family members to take the hunger strikers off the fast once they fell into unconsciousness. It was this call for families to intervene that was the death knell of the hunger strike. It is because of this that Faul has often been solely blamed for ending the hunger strike. He so enraged Republicans that prisoner Bik McFarlane reportedly had to be held back from physically attacking him. Some prisoners even went so far as to believe that if the Church had fully supported the 1981 hunger strike, none of the prisoners would have died.¹¹ The surviving hunger strikers felt betrayed that the Church exploited their families' grief to bring the strike to an end.

Fathers Faul and Murray justified the use of a hunger strike by saying that it was a way to "draw attention to

¹⁰Ibid.
¹¹Ibid.; Collins, 586.
the grievances which might be neglected or overlooked by government." They further believed, "If a group of persons or even one man is suffering in silence and isolation and efforts to draw attention to their plight have failed, they have a sufficient reason for going on hunger strike." Basil Hume, the English Catholic Cardinal, had released a statement calling Bobby Sands’s death suicide. Faul and Murray disagreed with Hume but did not approve of encouraging hunger strikes "not because Cardinal Hume and Archbishop Armstrong say they are suicides which is false, but because they cause great distress to the relatives and they highten [sic] community tension and can lead to violence outside the prison." Faul even admitted that the Church should accept responsibility for what happened in the hunger strike because "they taught people to imitate Christ." At one point, Faul tried to persuade Sands to give up his hunger strike. Sands famously responded with Jesus’ words from John, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This quote was to become legendary as it epitomized Sands’s fierce devotion to his

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12 Faul and Murray, Search for Solutions, 1.
13 Ibid.
14 Beresford, Ten Men Dead, 330.
15 John 15:13 King James Version.
fellow prisoners and imitation of Christ. A poster published by Sinn Fein and reproduced in Figure 2 shows Sands’s quote written in the sky above an image of the Maze Prison. Pictures of the ten dead hunger strikers line the bottom in order of their deaths. Following Sands’s comment, Father Faul silenced his entreaties for Sands to give up. Faul later said of him, "He saw himself as the Messiah, Christlike, and he was determined to go ahead."¹⁶

Religion was important in Northern Irish Catholic society, but became even more so inside the Maze. Attending weekly mass was virtually the only time blanket protestors saw each other outside of their cells. They had to agree to wear the prison uniform trousers in order to attend. Given their otherwise complete stubbornness against wearing the prison uniform, sometimes even to visit family members, this demonstrated just how vital their religion was to them. In addition to delivering the sacraments, the prison priests often heard reports from prisoners of beatings and ill treatment from prison guards.

¹⁶Beresford, Ten Men Dead, 64.
Fig. 2. Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend. From left to right: Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O’Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee, and Michael Devine. Source: Troubled Images, image number PP01354 ([Northern Ireland]: Sinn Fein, 1981).
Because of their isolation, the Catholic faith and the prison priests began to take on an even deeper significance to the protestors. Blanketman Peadar Whelan described how religion functioned in defining the prisoners' cultural identity:

Religion was also important to us as part of our identity because of the screws' contempt for us as Catholics, as much as Blanketmen and Republicans. Often they would vent their bigotry by breaking rosary beads during searches and wing shifts. When we said the rosary out the doors at night, the night guard screw would turn on the vacuum machine (used for sucking up the piss we'd slopped out the doors) to drown out our praying. Once, as the rosary was being said and the Hail Mary recited in response to 'Hail Mary, full of grace', a screw walking in the wing said, 'She's only a fucking whore'. We were incensed.17

Given the importance of religion in their daily lives and their closeness with several of the prison priests, it is not hard to understand why the hunger strikers and prisoners felt so betrayed when the Church ultimately came out against the hunger strike. Laurence McKeown said that in the end the Church had to turn against the hunger strikers because they "were posing a threat to the status quo, [and were] no longer prepared to bend the knee and

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17Brian Campbell, Laurence McKeown, and Felim O'Hagan, 36-37.
accept moral control from the Church." That was why McKeown believed that they had to be stopped.\textsuperscript{18}

So it was all very complicated. The prisoners held firmly to their religion while they resented what they perceived as the Church's meddling via the ICJP initiative and were bitterly disappointed when the Church turned against them. All of this was nothing new and only serves to exemplify one facet of the complicated relationship between the Irish Catholic Church and Irish Republicans. Religion was the bedrock of Northern Catholic identity, yet the Church could not ally itself completely to Republicanism, which thereby alienated some Catholics. As a result, Republican Catholics often conveyed the idea that they were disappointed with the Church and felt it could have done more to help them in their fight.

\textit{Blanketmen and Hunger Strikers as Christ}

Sacrificial themes have characterized the Republican movement at large, but particularly the symbol of Easter figures prominently in Republican mythos. The 1916 Easter figures...

\textsuperscript{18} Laurence McKeown was a Blanketman who volunteered for both hunger strikes. He was selected for the 1980 hunger strike, but the strike ended before he was called to begin his fast. He began the second hunger strike on 29 June, but his family intervened to save his life. Ibid., 210.
Rising occurred during Holy Week, which honors the resurrection of Christ. Leaders of the Rising planned their rebellion knowing that they were sacrificing themselves for the birth of an Irish Republic free from British rule. Pearse, who had planned the Rising, often used the image of blood sacrifice in connection with fighting for Ireland’s independence. The execution of fourteen of the key figures in the Rising served to immediately turn them into “secular saints.” In addition, Frank Gallagher’s Days of Fear: A Diary of Hunger Strike symbolically began on Easter Monday. The hunger strikers of 1981 chose to begin the strike partly on the basis that the first prisoners to go on it would be near death around Easter. This remains an important point in evaluating the representation of the hunger strikers as Christ-like martyrs.

Several illustrations from the time of the prison protests and hunger strikes confirm the idea that the prisoners and hunger strikers were identified as Christ-like figures. The front cover of the book On the Blanket: The H-Block Story by Tim Pat Coogan written about the blanket protest and published in 1980, contains such a

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\(^{19}\)Sweeney, 425.
painting by Irish artist Robert Ballagh. Shown in Figure 3, the painting depicts Jesus Christ lying on his back, covered by a shroud. This painting was meant to represent Jesus lying in his tomb following his crucifixion. Coogan’s use of this image for the cover of a book about the blanket protest shows that from early in the prison protests, the prisoners were identified with the sufferings and persecutions of Christ.

A broadsheet published by Fathers Denis Faul and Raymond Murray entitled *H-Block, Christmas 1978: The Caves of Long Kesh* contains a similar image. Figure 4 reveals a black and white sketch of the Baby Jesus and Mary encircled by shepherds. The shepherd figures are wrapped in blankets and have long beards and therefore bear an uncanny resemblance to the Blanketmen in the Maze. A light shines through a barred window onto the Blanketmen. Underneath the illustration, the text of the pamphlet reads:

The cells in H-Block, Long Kesh, are like caves. The heavy door opens. A dark hole appears before one’s eyes. Dirty floor. Filthy walls. A dark and dreary atmosphere. Figures squat on damp and foul grey mattresses. Blankets draped around their waists and towels over their shoulders. They remind one of the cave at Bethlehem which was the only place men would allow their Lord and Saviour to come into the world. There is no room for 363 young Irishmen and 33 young women at the Inn of Decency and Human Rights.

Maybe Bethlehem has more meaning for the prisoners
on protest than for the rich rulers in their homes of luxury. We pray that God will protect the prisoners and their families and bring about a just and peaceful solution of their problems caused in the Irish community by people from outside.  

Father Faul undoubtedly sympathized with the prisoners and admired them for keeping up their protest in the face of alleged regular beatings, forced washings and searches, and appalling living conditions. Although Faul did not always agree with the hunger strikers, he obviously admired and respected them, especially Bobby Sands, whom he saw as imitating Christ. It is not difficult to see why Father Faul would have admired the hunger strikers. After all, the most holy were almost always the ones who willingly went without.

The Relatives Action Committee (RAC) published a flyer which was intended as an information sheet about conditions inside the Maze. In it was included an excerpt from Letters from a Prisoner of Conscience by Carlos Christo. Christo was a Catholic priest who had been

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21 St. Jerome recorded that the ideal monk “fasted, did not wash (emphasis own), wore rough clothes and slept on the ground.” Grimm, 161.
jailed in Brazil in 1969. He was charged with participating in subversive activities against the Brazilian military government. The RAC published a letter written in prison by Christo. He said that those wrongfully held "come to believe in sin, anguish, need, uncertainty, and risk" and they:

... clinging to the refuse that thickens on the walls, finding acceptance and repose in it. . . . But it is in all this that we find salvation. We identify with one who was born in a stable and died on the Cross. We bear in our own flesh the stigmata of sorrow and suffering. Our faces are drenched with tears, but our hearts go on beating."  

Christo was evidently an inspiration to the prisoners and their supporters during the prison protests because references to him appear in leaflets and posters published during them. Fathers Faul and Murray published a broadsheet entitled *H-Block: Maltreatment - The Relatives* where another excerpt from Christo's writing appears.

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Christo likened prison to a "giant sewer." A poster published by Clonard Martyrs and Sinn Fein appearing in Figure 5 depicts a crucified Christ looking down upon a blanket protester with the slogan "He too was a prisoner of conscience," which was obviously a reference to the writings of Carlos Christo. The aim of this poster was plain. It was to present the Blanketmen as suffering for an ideal, just as Christ himself did.

Figure 6 is another example of a crucifixion image. This poster advertises a demonstration in support of the prisoners to be held on 4 October 1981 and was published by The National H-Block Armagh Committee. The central image is that of a prisoner stretched out on the British flag either being crucified or tortured on the rack. The blanket and later dirty protest were shocking, and much of the literature and many of the images published during that time reflect that. The prison protests brought to the public eye the sullied and unspeakable, which was remarkable because of the conservative nature of Irish society. These Christ-like images were indicative of how deeply Irish Republicanism cut into Northern Irish

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Fig. 5. Prisoners of War. Source: Troubled Images, image number PP01254 (Belfast: Clonard Martyrs; Sinn Fein, 1977).
Fig. 6. Mass demo in support of prisoners. Source: Troubled Images, image number PP01455 ([Derry?]: National H-Block/Armagh Committee, 1981). This image was later reproduced for a poster entitled 15th Anniversary of hunger strike, image number PP00114 ([Belfast?): n.p., 1996).
culture. Just how important Republicanism was, is evidenced by the fact that its heroes were shown in religious terms. The two most important things to a Republican Catholic were merged into one. When both secular and religious images were combined, they served to justify the non-religious aims of the IRA prisoners with religious symbols and connotations.

The Hunger Strikers' Families

Outside the prison, the families of prisoners had organized themselves into the RAC, which held marches and protests in support of the prisoners. The prisoners' mothers and sisters symbolized the suffering of the prisoners by taking to the streets barefoot and wearing only blankets. Four blanket-clad mothers demonstrated for two weeks in several European cities in October 1977. The majority of women who had joined the RAC had been housewives and gathered together out of concern for their sons. They blockaded roads, picketed courts, handed out leaflets, and contacted religious authorities to intervene

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\[24\] Aretxaga, 107; Collins, 63.
in behalf of their sons. Several women even chained themselves in front of 10 Downing Street.\textsuperscript{25}

Their campaign centered on the idea of maternal suffering and religious symbolism that was widely used during the prison protests.\textsuperscript{26} Pictures smuggled out of the male blanket protesters revealed Christ-like men clad only in blankets with long hair and beards. A Republican community worker also employed religious symbolism by saying that the “British were going to crucify us.”\textsuperscript{27} The women activists embodied a combination of the Mother Ireland symbol and the Virgin Mother “in their willingness to sacrifice their males.”\textsuperscript{28}

Tom Collins, the author of \textit{The Irish Hunger Strike}, chronicled the inner struggle of Patsy O’Hara’s mother, Peggy O’Hara. Collins recorded that she felt that Mary “must have felt as helpless when Jesus said to her, ‘Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?’”\textsuperscript{29} Just like Mary was seemingly left out of Jesus’ divine relationship with his father, Peggy O’Hara articulated her

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\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{25}Aretxaga, 106-107.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., 107-121.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., 107-108.
\textsuperscript{29}Collins, 272
\end{flushleft}
feelings of being an outsider in the male world of the H-Blocks, Blanketmen, and hunger strikers. In what must have been an enormously difficult time, Patsy's mother identified closely with the mother of Jesus.

It made much sense in a province where religion was the cornerstone of personal identity that suffering in the Catholic community in Northern Ireland would initiate the employment of religious imagery. Since the partition of Ireland, Northern Catholics did not feel loyalty to the Northern Irish state, and thus the Church "by default was the acknowledged chief source of authority and social coherence in a 'state within a state.'"³⁰

Thirty-two women prisoners at Armagh Jail had joined the dirty protest on 7 February 1980 after there was a brutal prison search by the warders to find Republican paraphernalia. The women prisoners were confronted in the afternoon in the dining hall. The women prisoners' protest, in contrast to the men's, seemed even more taboo because not only did they spread their feces on the walls, but also menstrual blood. Mairead Farrell, Mary Doyle, and Mairead Nugent, who were Armagh prisoners, joined the first hunger strike at the beginning of December 1980.

³⁰O Connor, 274.
After that strike ended the women prisoners decided not to embark on the second so as not to take attention away from the male prisoners in the Maze.\textsuperscript{31}

In the case of the hunger strikers' wives and girlfriends, art imitated life and the representations of them in film and literature were firmly grounded in reality. Joe McDonnell was the fifth man to die on hunger strike in 1981. His wife, Goretti, fit many of the classic characteristics of a hunger striker's lover. After Joe McDonnell was imprisoned, he and Goretti did write to each other. Eventually, another prisoner told Joe at Mass that Goretti had been spotted with another man. Following that, they did not speak for about six months. Joe did write her back, but mentioned nothing about their argument. She replied and also ignored it. Things remained fairly normal between them until she heard that Joe planned to embark on the hunger strike. At that point, Joe had refused to take family visits and had not seen Goretti or his children for five years.

Prison authorities decided to move Joe to the prison hospital much earlier than the other hunger strikers. Goretti busied herself with campaigning for her husband’s life, especially after Joe was put up as a candidate for a seat in the Sligo-Leitrim constituency in the Irish Republic. Goretti was the first wife of a hunger striker to be seen in the media. Indeed, she became somewhat of a controversial figure because traditional Irish society perceived that she was exploiting herself and her two children in the media.

The relationship between Goretti and Joe’s family began to deteriorate at about this time. Goretti supported Joe and the other prisoners, whereas Joe’s family began to suspect that the outside IRA leadership had more control over the hunger strikers than they liked to admit. Joe’s family urged Goretti to take Joe off the hunger strike and when she did not, tensions heightened between Goretti and Joe’s family.\(^\text{32}\)

With hunger strikes, the lover figure always seems to take the contrary line from that of the family, in both reality and fiction. In the film* Some Mother’s Son* the girlfriend of a hunger striker bewails the fact that had

\(^{32}\)Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, 218-222.
she been married to the hunger striker, she would have let him live. In 1981, Goretti did the opposite, but Joe's family wanted her to intervene to save his life. Joe's mother's bitterness towards Goretti was noticeable. Eileen McDonnell said of her son, "I never got a chance to ask my own son if he wanted to die; his wife never consulted me." Such tensions among the hunger striker, lover, and family echo those which appear in Yeats's The King's Threshold when the main character, Seanchan repudiates his lover.

Joe and Goretti McDonnell's relationship exhibited a fear of adultery. They were not the only ones to experience such insecurities, which were only natural given their circumstances. Michael "Micky" Devine was the last 1981 hunger striker to die. His marriage had been a particularly painful one. Micky was born into an extremely poor family and grew up in the city of Derry. He married a seventeen year old young woman named Margaret Walmsley when he was himself only nineteen. Early on, Micky became involved with the INLA. Micky and Margaret did not have an especially happy marriage before he was arrested and it only got worse while he was in prison.

\[^{33}\text{O'Malley, 264.}\]
Margaret began seeing another man. When the INLA found out about her affair, Margaret and her lover were beaten up and Margaret had her head shaved as punishment for being disloyal to Micky. As discussed earlier, the 1998 film The Boxer fictionalizes how perilous it really was for a woman to be unfaithful to her imprisoned husband. In 1979, Margaret gave birth to a child. Micky was enraged and cut Margaret completely out of his life as he was preparing to go on hunger strike. Margaret begged Micky to let her visit him, but he refused and even made sure that she was not allowed to attend his funeral.\(^ {34}\)

Women as a whole had several symbolic roles in the hunger strikes. The IRA women prisoners in Armagh did begin the prison protests alongside the men, but ultimately bowed to their authority and let them have the spotlight. The girlfriends and wives of the hunger strikers were often thought to be disloyal to the Republican cause. However, the mothers of the hunger strikers became both the embodiment of the Mother Ireland symbol and of Christ’s mother Mary. They reflected the dual image that their sons had as Irish Republican martyrs.

\(^{34}\)Beresford, Ten Men Dead, 306-312.
CHAPTER IV
SYMBOLS AND MEMORY

Understanding memory is an essential part of understanding the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Remembrance of past events and the repeating of them is the fundamental reason why the Troubles persist. It is also amplified by the fact that Protestants and Catholics have two separate collective memories and two different versions of Northern Irish history. In Northern Ireland the past does more than color the present, it determines it.¹

Consequently, this chapter will examine the memories of surviving blanket protesters, hunger strikers, and Northern Irish Catholics as a whole in order to ascertain how memory is affected by tragic events. More specifically, it will concentrate on exactly how the images of two hunger strikers have become legendary and symbolic whereas both are remembered very differently. In addition, this research will reveal the continued use of cultural and religious symbols in the remembrance of the

1980-1981 hunger strikes in Northern Ireland. The memories of ex-Blanketmen show their fierce loyalty to one another, while the memories of others within the Irish Catholic community betray a collective sense of memory, rather than an individual one.²

_Two Very Different Heroes_

Even though ten men died during the 1981 hunger strike, Bobby Sands, the first to die, probably became the most well-known of them. Sands became a potent symbol of resistance for Irish Republicans and the shock of his death was felt around the world. Yet, Sands's early life gave no hint that he would later become such a legendary figure. He was born in the mainly Protestant Rathcoole area of North Belfast in 1954. The Sandses were chased out of two houses in Rathcoole after their Protestant neighbors found out that they were Catholic. Following this, they moved to the Catholic housing estate of

Twinbrook. Bobby joined the IRA in 1972, was arrested, and spent time in the Cages of Long Kesh. After he was released, he was arrested a mere six months later for his alleged involvement in a firebomb attack on the Balmoral Furniture Company.³ This time Bobby was not sentenced to the Cages, but to the H-Blocks of the Maze.

He immediately joined the blanket protest and within prison he was enthusiastic, industrious, and often remembered for being an excellent Gaelic teacher and storyteller. His stories, which purportedly included a retelling of Leon Uris's massive book Trinity, which took several weeks, frequently entertained the blanket protesters.⁴ But at first Bobby was not notably different from the many other young IRA prisoners populating the protesting wings of the Maze. However, he seemed to find his calling within prison and he rose up the ranks of the prison leadership, eventually becoming OC of the H-Blocks during the first hunger strike. He became a prolific

³Interestingly, Joe McDonnell, who was later to replace Sands on hunger strike, was arrested along with Bobby for his involvement in the attack.
⁴Uris's novel was an epic chronology of the fight for Irish independence. The novel was set around the time of the 1916 Easter Rising and although it was a completely romanticized version of Irish history, the main characters planned to carry out the Easter Rising knowing that they would likely die. The Blanketmen would have easily identified with such a story. O'Malley, 55.
writer and his writings appeared in the major Republican newspaper, An Phoblacht, under the pen name Marcella, the name of his eldest sister.

Bobby had volunteered to go on the first hunger strike, but the prison leadership denied his request because they were trying to choose hunger strikers who represented a geographic spread of Northern Ireland (to achieve maximum support from those on the outside) and someone from Belfast had already been chosen. Sands was an early advocate of mounting a second strike, probably because as OC he had been involved in negotiations to end the first strike and felt misled by the British after it became evident that they had no plans to concede to any of the prisoners’ demands. He volunteered immediately for the second hunger strike and knew that he faced an almost certain death before the British would make any moves towards a settlement with the prisoners.5

Fellow prisoners clearly convey the idea that Bobby became much larger than himself the minute he embarked on his campaign of self-starvation. Many prisoners felt awe-inspired by Sands’s courage. Former Blanketman Thomas Loughlin describes a chance meeting with Sands:

5Collins, 91-98.
When we went out into the circle, Bobby happened to be coming out of the doctor’s room. He had his head cocked to one side and looked very pale, but he always looked like that. . . . All I could think of to say was, “Alright, Bobby?” He didn’t respond to us except to nod his head. . . . I was struck because I couldn’t get Bobby’s image out of my mind. ‘There was a man,’ I thought, ‘who knows that he is going to die. How does he feel? What is he thinking? Is he afraid? With these questions I was trying to get inside his head. I wanted to be Bobby Sands for just a second in order to experience his feelings. That frightened me because, even though I could understand his motivation, I couldn’t understand where his courage came from. It was a type of courage I didn’t have and it made me feel a sense of guilt. For those reasons that chance meeting with Bobby will always be my outstanding experience of the hunger strike.  

Here Loughlin expresses the common emotion of guilt associated with martyrs and martyrdom. In fact, the act of martyrdom itself was meant to consciously provoke this reaction from spectators. Because Loughlin could not imagine himself going through such an ordeal, he supposes that those who die for their beliefs are extraordinary individuals. And accordingly, beliefs that were strong enough to die for must be right.  

What is for certain is that Sands became the epitome of many things: astonishing endurance and a sacrificial victim against all that was wrong in Northern Ireland. Sands thought of himself as a savior figure, passively and peacefully starving to death for his comrades. For Sands, 

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Campbell, McKeown, and O’Hagan, 152.
his suffering brought him closer to God. He believed, "Blessed is the man who stands / Before his God in pain. / And on his back a cross of woe / His wounds a gaping shame / For this man is a son of God / And hallowed be his name."  

The memories and stories about some of the hunger strikers contain some traditional Irish cultural symbols as well religious ones. Cultural symbols abound in the memories and reputed exploits of Francis Hughes, the second prisoner to die on hunger strike. Hughes was from the small village of Bellaghy near Tamlaghtduff in County Derry. Well before his arrest in March of 1977 Francis Hughes was the most wanted man in Northern Ireland. He was finally caught after he and a companion unexpectedly came across an SAS patrol. Francis fired his gun and fatally wounded one of the paratroopers. Francis was shot in the thigh, but managed to flee the scene and spent the night hiding in a ditch, but was arrested the next morning by British soldiers who had tracked him. At his trial Hughes received a life sentence for the murder of the paratrooper among several other charges. All in all, he

7Bobby Sands, 137.
8The other charges included fourteen years for attempted murder for a bomb attack on an RUC man's house,
was an odd choice for the hunger strike since he was such a notorious and controversial figure.

Hughes was a much different figure from Sands. He was the embodiment of the traditional IRA 'bandit' figure, in the style of Michael Collins. Collins was a very heroic figure within the halls of Irish Republicanism. Collins had fought in the Easter Rising of 1916. He later rose to prominence when he became president of the IRB, Minister for Finance in the Sinn Fein cabinet, and Director of Intelligence for the IRA. He was an instrumental part of winning the Anglo-Irish War by using hit-and-run guerilla tactics against the British. His deeds were legendary and he was a remarkably intelligent man as well as a natural born leader. Collins was tragically killed under mysterious circumstances in 1922 at an ambush at Beal na mBlath not far from where he had grown up in County Cork. Nevertheless, his tragic death only seemed to fuel the fire of his already folk hero-type status.

With visions of Francis Hughes engaging in shootouts with the RUC and then disappearing into the County Derry twenty years for the bombing itself, and fifteen years for possession of guns and ammunition. Paul Keel, “Fearless Soldier or IRA Terrorist?” The Guardian (24 May, 1981), 5; Collins, 138-141.
countryside in mind, the parallels are easily drawn between Hughes and Collins. Actually, Hughes molded his IRA unit after the Flying Columns led by Tom Barry and Dan Breen in the Anglo-Irish War. Stories about Hughes reveal his bravado and recklessness. While on an IRA assignment, Hughes would apparently become impatient waiting for the security forces and would phone them and tell them his exact location and wait for them to appear.⁹

Perhaps the most interesting story about Hughes concerned one night when Hughes and his IRA unit were crossing a field and stumbled into a group of several soldiers at a roadblock. The soldiers asked the men why they were on the road and Hughes complained that they were walking because the IRA kept stopping cars along the road. The soldiers let them go and Francis turned around and calmly asked a soldier for a cigarette and a lighter. Following that, Hughes joined his companions and they disappeared into the night.¹⁰

This story is remarkable because it follows nearly exactly a similar story told about Michael Collins. Collins came upon a British Army patrol and the most wanted man in Ireland asked for a light. A couple of

⁹Collins, 150-151.
¹⁰Ibid., 152.
inferences may be drawn from these corresponding stories. Possibly the incident really did happen and Hughes asked for a cigarette and a light to imitate Collins, who would have obviously been a hero of his. Another possibility is that the story was invented, but shows clearly that people thought of Hughes in the same way as Michael Collins and thus accorded the deeds of one folk hero to another.

Hughes was a modern day outlaw, with his heroic status sung of in The Boy From Tamlaghtduff by Christy Moore:

For many years his exploits were a thorn in England's side
The hills and glens became his home there he used to hide.
Once when they surrounded him he quietly slipped away
Like a fox he went to ground and kept the dogs at bay.
Moving round the countryside he often made the news
But they could never lay their hands on my brave Francis Hughes.
Finally they wounded him and captured him at last
From the countryside he loved they took him to Belfast.
Oh from Musgrave Park to the Crumlin Road and then to an H-Block cell
He went straight on the blanket then on hunger strike as well.
His will to win they could never break no matter what they tried
He fought them every day he lived and he fought them as he died.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\)Christy Moore, The Boy From Tamlaghtduff [online] available from <http://www.irishhungerstrike.com/boyfrom
Bobby Sands and Francis Hughes fulfilled two very
different and indeed almost contradictory roles for
Northern Irish Catholics. Superficially, their
differences began with the fact that Sands came from urban
Belfast while Hughes came from the countryside of County
Derry. Bobby Sands was the quiet and intellectual
revolutionary more in the vein of Terence MacSwiney than
Michael Collins, whereas Hughes was the dashing and
perhaps more traditional face of Irish Republicanism.
Both men, however dissimilar they were from one another,
did come together to join the clashing mainstays of
Northern Irish culture: Catholicism and Republicanism.

Collective Memory

Felim O’Hagan, a former Blanketman, amusingly noted
that when ex-Blanketmen get together they only seem to
remember the “good bits.” They swap stories, sing songs,
and laugh about practical jokes pulled on comrades. So it
seems that Blanketmen are subject to the normal effects on
human memory, where traumatic events are sometimes
recalled nostalgically. Even though they lived in
completely appalling conditions, they managed to remember

some of their time together fondly. O’Hagan noticed that events that took place during the blanket protest have taken on “mythical status.” Indeed, the memories of the Blanketmen do betray their undying loyalty to their fellow prisoners. Their memories also reveal that many of the emotions experienced by those on the outside during the hunger strikes were also felt by those in the H-Blocks as well.

Tony O’Hara, an ex-Blanketman and brother of hunger striker Patsy O’Hara, remembered that the prisoners soberly passed time as Bobby Sands’s condition steadily deteriorated following his election to Parliament. O’Hara recollected that “we had waited for days for such bad news, but when it came, it was devastating. For when Bobby died, and a little bit of everyone [sic] of us died with him.” O’Hara’s account is an example of just how close the Blanketmen were to each other. Many of the prisoners had been ‘on the blanket’ for several years, facing reportedly frequent beatings from prison guards and

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12 Campbell, McKeown, and O’Hagan, 71-72.
living in horrible conditions. Blanketmen were as close to each other as brothers, sometimes even more so.\textsuperscript{13}

After the initial phase of the hunger strike, doubt and dissatisfaction began to grow on the outside within the Sinn Fein leadership, as well as with prisoners' families, concerning the usefulness of continuing the hunger strike. The British government was not moving and ICJP initiatives had failed. Those on the outside helplessly watched as coffins kept streaming out of the prison hospital, even after the hunger strike's pointlessness became apparent.

But for the prisoners, events on the outside had become almost irrelevant. Some even pointed out that what they were doing had become a lot bigger than the five demands they petitioned for. In truth, to come off the hunger strike would have been to invalidate all of the previous hunger strikers' deaths. It would have been a betrayal of one's own comrades. Former prisoner Jackie McMullan said that although the prisoners continued the strike even after the British weathered the storms of the first few deaths, "there was a sense of loyalty towards

those who died; you didn’t want to let them down, to give up the struggle." \(^{14}\) Séanna Walsh had volunteered for the hunger strike, but withdrew his name after it became obvious that he would not be dying purely for political status, but "because we couldn’t let Bobby, Francie, Patsy, Raymond, Joe and Martin down. They hadn’t let us down and now it was our turn, one by one, to follow them." \(^{15}\)

Danny Morrison, former Director of Publicity for Sinn Fein, recalled that from a handshake with Bobby Sands one could feel "his power, spiritual and physical, and his courage." \(^{16}\) Morrison referred to the 1981 hunger strike as a watershed and remarked that "in many ways that year was our 1916." This remark was significant because Morrison was articulating the sentiment that the 1981 hunger strike marked a defining moment for Sinn Fein as a political party. Comparing the hunger strikes to the year 1916 also certainly indicated the tendency of those involved in the Irish Republican struggle to live in the past. Yet an underlying implication of this was that it showed the


\(^{15}\)Campbell, McKeown, and O’Hagan, 237.

\(^{16}\)O’Hara and others.
growing trend of Northern Irish Catholics to frame their struggle in their own terms due to their increasing disillusionment with the Irish Republic, whose inaction during the hunger strikes was a bitter disappointment to many in the North. During the hunger strikes, Northern Catholics learned that they could not always depend on the Irish Republic to fully support them.

Several individuals who were not even close friends of Sands and some who had never met him, felt a deep sense of loss after his death. An Irish-American activist, Dáithí Mac Bhurrais, who was in high school in 1981, believes that at that time he did not realize just how much Sands’s writings and death would later affect him. Mac Burrais said that he now holds a deep love for the Irish people and that he thinks “of those ten brave men daily,” and professed that “I for one will never forget them . . .”\(^{17}\)

A study of Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants and how they remember the major tragedies over the course of the Troubles revealed that 81 percent of Protestants attributed the cause of the hunger strikes to internal factors, such as suicide. Not surprisingly, 88 percent of

\(^{17}\)Ibid.
Catholics responded that the hunger strikes were mainly caused by external factors and they laid the blame on the British government. Padraig O'Malley investigated the hunger strikes and their ramifications. At the end of his extensive study on the subject he concluded:

In a paradoxical way there is too little memory in a country which prides itself on too much. 'We will always remember you, Jimmy Sands' [emphasis own] - the graffiti on the gable wall is a poignant reminder that militant Republicanism provides the martyrs for a culture that devours and forgets. Yet the appetite remains insatiable, the role of martyr too fatally attractive. In the Catholic ghettos they remember the hunger strikes. But the names no longer trip off the lips -- memory is collective, not personal. Too much death has robbed people of their memories.

However, repetition has not devalued Irish martyrdom; it is precisely why it is valuable. In trying times, a society "looks for examples in the heroic past that match present conditions" in order to make sense of them. The past is then recreated in the present, through ritual and repetition because there is an in-built "system of

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19O’Malley, 260.
expectation." In analyzing the role of Christ in religion, Maurice Halbwachs concluded that Christ’s sacrifice "is integrally renewed every time believers are assembled to receive the Eucharist." The taking of the Eucharist, though celebrated in different places and times, is "but one and the same sacrifice." Christ is repeatedly sacrificed in order to form a connection with the past while at the same time authenticating it.

In this same way, the deaths of the hunger strikers were a repetition of past ritual. Ritualistic replication of history is the reason why the hunger strikers died in 1981 and why their deaths are honored as a sacrifice. If hunger striking had not been connected to the past, it would not have had any value at all within Irish culture.

The many marches and vigils that sprang up all over Northern Ireland throughout 1981 portray the people’s call for a martyr. The Irish people needed a martyr because a martyr for the cause allowed them to legitimize their fight against the British. It was as if those on the street were practically saying, "Give us our martyr so

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Halbwachs, 90.
Ibid., 87.
that we can prove that we are right." Bobby Sands, through his death and transformation into a martyr, would the IRA hoped, shame the British.

Within Irish Republicanism, history is not so much made as repeated. Each hunger striker followed the previous one into death because those who died "hadn't let us down." But it was even larger than that - their struggle to regain political status was a legitimizing of the entire Irish Republican struggle. Not to fight for it would be to negate over eight hundred years of Irish history. Therefore, the sacrifice of the hunger strikers was significant to fellow prisoners and Catholics alike because of the nature of it within the larger context of Irish Republican history, something that the British government could not seem to come to grips with.

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Symbols used during IRA prison protests illustrate two contradictory Irish cultural characteristics. Several of the images associated with Irish Republicanism were rooted in secular Irish culture. At the same time, images of Blanketmen and hunger strikers took on religious connotations. The use of religious symbols came from the influence of Roman Catholicism on Northern Irish culture. Ultimately, a hunger striker exhibits Christ-like qualities in his sacrifice for higher principles and break with earthly cares. This characteristic resemblance to Christ was played on in 1981 to add credibility to the hunger strikers’ cause and to elude feelings of guilt and sadness from their supporters.

Almost from its inception, Irish Republicanism had succeeded in creating a martyr cult. Through this, Republicans were taught to imitate ideal Republicans, such as Terence MacSwiney, which hastened the use of hunger striking in the 1980s. Stories about both Bobby Sands and Francis Hughes reveal that these two hunger strikers exhibited the influence of religion and Republicanism. The collective memory of Irish Catholics communicates the
necessity for continued Republican martyrdom in order to justify the case against the criminalization of their cause.

Northern Irish women were locked into fairly static roles and the symbols associated with them were just as fixed as the men’s. The most important female figure during the blanket protest and hunger strikes was that of the mother. Linked with the mother was the symbol of Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mary. The mother represented Ireland itself, who sacrificed its sons in order to gain freedom, while she also identified with the Virgin Mary who also had to let her son die. It was the mother figure, rather than the deceiving and often disloyal lover, who was accorded a dual Republican and religious role in the same way that the male prisoners were. Of all the women during the prison protests, the mother alone held both of these characteristics.

The Catholic Church has been an important facet of Irish culture and has certainly taken on even more importance for Northern Irish Catholics. However, the Church was at odds with the tradition of terrorism and civil disobedience in Northern Ireland. Father Denis Faul himself used religious images, yet ultimately came out against the 1981 hunger strike because he believed it to
be in vain. Paul encapsulated the Church’s relationship to hunger striking, at the same time as Republican reaction to Faul encapsulated their uneasy relationship with the Church. Despite the fact that the Church and the IRA were often at odds, this did not deter Republicans from using religious imagery to legitimize the IRA.

The 1981 hunger strike was such a painful and compelling event in Northern Ireland that symbols used within it and the blanket protest later became important symbols within themselves. After Bobby Sands wrote of the lark yearning to be free, the lark bound in barbed wire came to represent the feelings of all Republican prisoners. Above all, symbols disclose what values are important in a culture. This case shows that even though religion and Republicanism were forces that often opposed each other, they were ultimately both still deemed important and were very powerful forces in Catholic Northern Ireland.

The hunger strike of 1981 affected former M.P. and H-Block activist, Bernadette McAliskey so severely that it moved her to wonder if “maybe God died somewhere in the middle of it.” At the end of the day, the prison protests

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1Bernadette McAliskey, foreword to Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H Block Struggle, 1976-1981, by Brian Campbell,
were so successful because they affected Irish society at several different levels, which was expressed both secularly and religiously through the use of symbols. These symbols connected the present to the past and tried to impart sacredness to the role of the Blanketmen and hunger strikers. If nothing else, they were indicative as to what extent Irish Republicanism and Catholicism could meet through emotive symbols, even if not always so comfortably in reality.


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