Patrick Kavanagh

Inniskeen Road July Evening

This sonnet is concerned with the poet/peasant complex and the loneliness and isolation of the poet in society. The background is a typical summers evening in the Inniskeen of Kavanagh's youth, where a local barn doubles as a village dance hall.

The octet of the sonnet sets forth two contrasting pictures which allow for its subdivision into two quatrains. In the first, Kavanagh is a detached spectator, watching his peers on their way to the dance. In the opening statement there are two relevant points: a) That nobody seems to be cycling alone, suggesting an easy camaraderie and normal social practice, from which the poet is detached, the cause is "a dance in Billy Brennan's barn". The highlight of the Inniskeen calendar, a normal and informal event. In lines 3 and 4 Kavanagh identifies not just a physical but an intellectual divide between Kavanagh and the people of Inniskeen "the half talk code of mysteries, and the wink and elbow language of delight" is suggestive of a language and a means of interaction that is foreign to the poet.

In the second quatrain, the background scene remains the same, the time has moved on to 8:30 and the road is quiet. Only Kavanagh remains. From this we learn, that he is not attending the dance, that he is alone with the inanimate backdrop - the road and the stones. The sestet of the poems offers Kavanagh's explanation for the scenes painted in the openings eight lines. The commonly held belief is that poets choose to be aloof from society, they prefer to be commentators not participators, that poetry is meant to be composed as Wordsworth suggested, in solitude. Kavanagh contradicts this conception, claiming that poets hate the loneliness and isolation that they undergo - "I have what every poet hates in spite of all the solemn talk of contemplation.". He alludes to the story of Alexander Selkirk - the real life model for Robinson Crusoe. The analogy highlights the sense of isolation experienced by the poet, the worthlessness of "being King and government and nation". Kavanagh's Inniskeen, does not include its people, it is merely a physical backdrop, he cannot fit into its society. Kavanagh is intellectually and socially removed, his frustration is evident in the double 'entendre' of the final line "I am king of banks and stones and every blooming thing.".

Kavanagh is unhappy with his inability to become part of Inniskeen society. He sees himself as being both physically and intellectually isolated, reduced to the role of observer, enduring a solitude comparable to that experienced by Selkirk on the island of San Fernandez. The poet/peasant complex is central to this poem as Kavanagh is unable to parallel what he finds to be paradoxical roles. In Inniskeen society, appreciation is reserved for the peasant, suspicion for the poet who is, in a sense, banished and forced to exist on the periphery.
Advent

The title "Advent", immediately introduces a religious motif - Advent being the four week period in the Catholic Church which immediately precedes Christmas. Advent is traditionally a period of penance and preparation of contrition and denial. In this poem, Kavanagh draws an analogy between the season of Advent and the nativity which follows and his own wish to rediscover the innocence and wonder of a child's mind. The theme has much in common with Vaughan's "Retreat", in which the poet seeks to return to prenatal existence.

The opening lines represent Kavanagh's confession of guilt, he has committed the sin of gluttony, a metaphor - for original sin. The lover of the opening line is Kavanagh's inner-self, his id or soul. He recognises that wonder, awe, imagination and magic of a child's mind is directly related to their innocence and lack of knowledge. If the window of knowledge is open wide, the reality of life becomes apparent and a child's sense of wonder is no longer, "Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder". Kavanagh hopes that by submitting himself to the penance of Advent, he can cleanse his mind of this knowledge, as the soul is cleansed of sin - that he can return that knowledge to the tree of knowledge, as it had been stolen by man and was of no use to him. Kavanagh sees original sin - the eating of the tree of knowledge by Adam and Eve and their subsequent banishment from Eden, as the reason why mankind must suffer the loss of childhood innocence. The legacy of original sin is this loss which Kavanagh wants to retrieve. Kavanagh hopes to cleanse his mind of the knowledge he has gained through experience of life "tested and tasted too much" and require "the luxury of a child's soul". The word, Doom, represents Kavanagh's vision of mankind's legacy from Eden, for Kavanagh the consequences of original sin were disastrous for mankind.

In the second stanza, Kavanagh considers the rewards of forgiveness and grace, he alludes to the ordinary aspects of life, the environment and society in which he spent his childhood. The contrast between newness and stale, is a contrast between the mind of the child and the mind of the adult. The sense of awe, wonder and mystery, that Kavanagh associates with childhood is conveyed through the imagery and language of the second stanza, phrases such as "spirit-shocking", "black slanting", "prophetic astonishment" and "tedious talking" gives substance to the excitement that is wished for by the poet. Kavanagh anticipates the ordinary and the benal will be transformed into the wonderful and fantastic by the sense of innocence that Kavanagh will acquire, the contrast between prophetic astonishment and tedious talking, between spirit-shocking and black slanting is a contrast between the mind of the child and the mind of the adult. Kavanagh's language is designed to highlight the contrast. In the final two lines Kavanagh alludes to his poem "A Christmas Childhood" in which he pictures the Christmas he experienced as a seven year old in Inniskeen. In that poem, three whin bushes represented the three wise men, the family cow byer was the stable of Bethlehem, and the frost encrusted ground was a magical carpet, where the sound of breaking ice was the evidence of people going to midnight mass. Here he seeks to rejuvenate that imaginative scene. The word "Time", is like Doom, of metaphorical significance, the phrase "old stables where
time begins", is a reference to the nativity - the event for which Advent is the preparation - the moment of Kavanagh's renaissance.

In stanza three, Kavanagh begins confident of both penance and forgiveness, sure that "after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching", once again he lists a series of images of ordinary everyday life which have been transformed through the imagination into scenes and events of universal significance. Kavanagh's world of awe and wonder, "wherever life of pours ordinary plenty". In the final half of the third stanza, Kavanagh considers the value of the return of childhood innocence, casts off the benalities and materialism of the society around him, which he portrays in monetary terms - "reasons payment", "analyse God's breath", "clay-minted-wages" - drawing the analogy between the material world and the world of the imagination, which is reflected in the final line of the poem, "And Christ comes with a January flower". Religion is the dominant motif throughout the poem, the poet's wish to regain the innocence of a child's mind is portrayed in a religious context. Kavanagh attributes the staleness and materialism of the adult world to original sin. The Advent, Christmas and the New Year will provide him with a means of recovering his lost innocence, he begins by confessing his sin, "we have tested and tasted too much", recognises that this sin has been responsible for the staleness with which he viewed the world.

**Canal Bank Walk**

Kavanagh begins with a neologism "Leafy-with-Love" suggesting that the growth of plants and grasses on the banks of the Grand Canal, have been nurtured by God's love. The adjective, green, suggests that the water of the canal is the water of life, it is then given a sacramental significance as Kavanagh portrays it as baptismal water - "Pouring redemption for me". The poet has prostrated himself before God - "That I do the will of God, wallow in the habitual, the benal". Kavanagh no longer wants to apply adult logic to his life, the everyday and the ordinary will now, for him, reflect the glory of God. In the second quatrain, Kavanagh uses three images of everyday life by the canal bank, but portrays them as representations of Gods word, "The bright stick trapped, the breeze adding a third party to the couple kissing on an old seat, and a bird gathering materials for the nest for the Word". The Word represents the word of God and is equivalent to the phrase "Grow with nature again as before I grew". He begins the sestet of the poem, with an apostrophe to the world of nature "O unworn world enrapture me". Kavanagh wishes to immerse himself in the world of nature, he adopts a reverential tone and expresses his religious beliefs in a pantheistic fashion. He uses clothing imagery to draw an analogy between the canal and he himself, he began the poem leafy-with-love banks, suggesting that the walls of the canal were embraced by the plant-life on its banks. Now he wishes to be enraptured in a web of fabulous grasses, to be clothed in a nature based garment "With a new dress woven from green and blue things". Kavanagh places himself at the mercy of God and nature, recognising his own renaissance and that he can once again experience life through the innocence of a child's mind "And arguments that cannot be proven". This poem
represents the rebirth of Kavanagh as a poet, he has achieved "the luxury of a child's soul", which he sought for in Advent, he is appreciative of the natural beauty of the Grand Canal and its surroundings. Religion is again a dominant element in the poem as Kavanagh uses the imagery of baptism as his central motif in the poem, the combination of redemption and grace sees the poet in a celebratory mood.

**A Christmas Childhood**

- Patrick Kavanagh was born on a farm in Co. Monaghan. His family farmhouse was located in hilly countryside, near a bog.
- He lived in a country area known as the townland of Mucker. He grew up as part of a community and knew his neighbours well. They included the Cassidys, Lennons and Callans referred to in this poem.
- The Kavanaghs were small farmers who milked cows, grew their own potatoes, saved their own hay and straw, had a little orchard and a yard with some outhouses for farm activities—as indicated in this poem.
- His family were Catholic. Sunday mass and Christmas were important events in his family life, as shown in this poem. In this poem, Kavanagh’s imagination pictured parts of his home area in terms of the Christmas story told in the bible.
- Kavanagh only had primary school education. After his childhood, he became an apprentice shoemaker to his father and worked on the family farm.
- Kavanagh started writing poetry in his teens while continuing his farm duties.
- As a teenager and adult, Kavanagh didn’t fit in with farm life. In his poetry, he sometimes looked back on childhood as a marvellous and happy period of his life. He had an active childhood imagination and that enriched his early years.
- In his adult life, Kavanagh left the farm and pursued a writing career as a journalist, novelist, lecturer and poet.

In the first section, Kavanagh recalls a series of random childhood experiences. He remembers, the white coat of frost on the potato pits in the yard, the humming sound of fence wire in the wind, the corridor between the ricks [mounds] of hay and straw, the red apples of the orchard that reminded him of Christmas ornaments, clay, hoof prints of cattle and scenes from the ditches. He compares the world to Eve, tempting him with knowledge to leave his childhood which was like the Garden of Eden.

In the second section, Kavanagh recalls his father playing the small accordion at his gate, probably on Christmas morning. Kavanagh recalls how he linked symbols of Christmas to the scene around the farmyard and farmhouse: the star in the east, the nativity stable, the three wise men and the Virgin Mary.

The poet remembers hastily putting on his trousers upon hearing his father playing music at the gate. It is a magical moment. He notices neighbours on the way to Mass, passing his farm gate and complimenting his father’s playing. He remembers someone using the bellows to light the open fire in the kitchen, creating a sad, longing sound. His mother milks the cows. Meanwhile the shy young Kavanagh, wearing his new coat, observes the scene from the doorway. He makes six notches on the doorpost with his Christmas present, the new penknife. This fact informs us that he had turned six when this childhood scene happened.
Epic

Rhyme & Form: A sonnet formation with no break (akin to Shakespeare)
Tone: Annoyed, frustrated yet content (at the end)
Imagery: Nature, Ireland of old
Themes: Loneliness, conflicts, frustrations, rural life

The poem is primarily focused on a dispute over a portion of land. Kavanagh contrasts this Irish scene to the 1939 Munich crisis and also to the legend of Troy. In this way Kavanagh not only relates Ireland to ancient Greece and Homer but he also praises both contrasting images. The interesting thing about this poem is that an epic poem usually recounts a heroic tale over the course of some hundred, if not thousand lines. The same poem will cover a range of vast, geographical locations and span over a period of time.

The opening lines are open to interpretation by any reader:

I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided

Kavanagh refers to Ireland here as he writes after 1922 in a time when Ireland have gained their independence, he also writes from a time of international conflict, having just seen one World War, a second seems imminent. Nevertheless, it is easy to see what Kavanagh is saying here.

He goes on to describe the scene that he witnessed, ‘who owned/ That half a road of rock, a no-man’s land’ – in short there is a dispute over a portion of land. The next part of the poem injects the reader straight in to the Irish-ness of the situation. We see the Duffs and Old McCabe arguing, the Duffs shout at McCabe, McCabe himself appears ready for a fight as he is ‘stripped to the waist’ – we are given a scene of ‘instancy’ as we view the action and the movement in this stanza.[1]

Kavanagh brings Ireland to Germany as he recalls the ‘Munich bother’ – the crisis in Germany at the time leading up to World War II. Kavanagh wonders which scene is more important, the one he witnessed or the scene on the global stage. Kavanagh, for a moment begins to doubt the importance of Ireland, in particular Irish rural life. In deliberating this notion, Kavanagh begins lose faith in the rural areas of Inniskeen (Ballyrush and Gortin), but only for a moment as we see in the next line that Homer’s ghost[2] reassures him. Homer said that he ‘made the Iliad from such a local row’, thus Kavanagh sees that epic poetry can in fact be made from local events. It is the work of deities, not mortals, Kavanagh suggests, that endow human action with epic stature. Seen in that light, no event should be considered too humble, no ‘local row’ too unimportant – if gods choose to dignify it. Kavanagh seems capable now of aligning himself alongside such gods as it is he who decides what is important. Séamus Heaney said that ‘even though the stage gives itself over to two Monaghan farmers and successfully sets Ballyrush and Gortin in balance against Munich, it is not
saying that the farmers and the Monaghan region are important in themselves. They are important only in the light of the mind that is now playing upon them.’

When we compare the lines ‘Which/ Was most important’ and ‘Gods make their own importance’, we are faced with Kavanagh’s hesitation and resolution, and yet we must take in account Kavanagh’s frustrated tone of rural life that would last until after his battle with cancer. However, is his tone beginning to change? Whereas before he may have dismissed such a notion regarding rural life, now he seems to look beyond the confines of Ireland for a reason not to disregard such scenes of pastoral life.

On Raglan Road

• The poem is an account of a brief love-relationship in Dublin in the 1950’s.
• The poem both celebrates and laments the memory of the relationship. The poet’s account is both sweet and sad.
• In the first stanza, Patrick recalls his first meeting with a charming woman on Raglan Road late in the year. He remembers details such as the road covered in autumn leaves.
• Patrick immediately fancied her and yet sensed that she would trap him in a relationship that would later leave him in distress.
• Her beautiful hair was too much to resist. She strikes him as a figure from mythology, perhaps like the Medusa. She seems to cast a magical spell over him.
• Patrick couldn’t resist the first feelings of love and took a risk with the woman/
• In the second stanza, Patrick remembers walking with his new beloved along Grafton Street in Dublin. The edge of the path seemed to be a ledge over a steep valley, indicating his feeling that the relationship contained dangers.
• The street litter and leaves in the gulley were like a warning to Patrick that love’s promises don’t last.
• Kavanagh uses a snippet from a nursery rhyme to show that his lover was just playing with him and that he was not making the most of the relationship. Perhaps in the end he means that she was just a tart playing with his feelings.
• He admits that he had a strong feeling of love, perhaps too strong. He blames this strong feeling for his later loss of happiness.
• In the third stanza, Patrick admits that he wrote poems as gifts for this fascinating lady. He expressed his feelings through the symbols used by poets and sculptors. He did not hold back in what he had to say to her.
• He praised her beauty in the poems he gave her as gifts, including in them references to her lovely dark hair. This same dark hair that once snared him would soon be like a cloud over the fields of May. The cloud image suggests Patrick’s new friend was depressed and her moods would soon sour the relationship.
• In the final stanza, Kavanagh refers to a time after they broke up. She is like an old ghost now that he sees on his walks down Grafton Street. Patrick’s former lady friend now walks away to avoid him.
• He realises he probably frightened her off with his love-poetry. He treated her as an angel but she was more ordinary than that and didn’t appreciate his romantic ways.
• Patrick feels that he has lost his romantic ability since his failed relationship. He concludes that she was inferior to him and dragged him down. He wanted to be poetic with her rather than deal with her as an ordinary man would.
As a result of having too much passion and expressing it the way he did, he has temporarily lost the ability to write poetry and suddenly ends the poem.

Lines written on a seat on the Grand Canal

‘Erected to the memory of Mrs. Dermot O’Brien’

Rhyme & Form: A sonnet formation with no break (akin to Shakespeare)
Tone: Euphoric
Imagery: Nature
Themes: Beauty in nature, Imagination, Celebration & Euphoria
Literary Techniques: Apostrophe (similar to that of Advent)

Upon reading this, Kavanagh’s final poem in our studies, we must take into account the sub-title, as it is a symbol of love, affection and commemoration. We are not told who Mrs. Dermot O’Brien is, yet this poem and this ‘seat’ knows and remembers her. For Kavanagh, in his latter years, the Canal Bank brought solace, rest and peace and to sit on such a Canal Bank seat would be perceived as finding relaxation and tranquillity, even though we are unaware of the inscription on the seat or to whom this inscription belongs, we are a part of this moment – this is what Kavanagh is aiming for in this poem. Ironically, this poem inspired a statue to be erected on a seat on the Grand Canal.

This poem acts as a follow-up from Canal Bank Walk and further documents Kavanagh’s state of mind at the time. The poem is once again focused on his re-birth and convalescence; however in this poem he concentrates in the future, not just the here and now. Kavanagh knows that soon he will no longer be able to enjoy such moments, nor will he be able to experience the scene before him.

O commemorate me where there is water
Canal water, preferably, so stilly
Greeny[1] at the heart of summer

The first lines of the poem illustrate Kavanagh’s sense of longing and adoration for the scene. One must take remember that he viewed this place as a utopia, given that he felt renewed in this very area. Note the words used here; still, green, water, summer, and we are given an image of tranquillity. ‘Brother’ is addressed here, and much like the ‘lover’ in Advent, we are never told who he is referring to (it is safe to assume he is speaking to his soul once again, yet he may also be talking to his brother, Peter). Some critics have also argued that the brother here is nature, this point has some basis as Kavanagh felt, in Canal Bank Walk that he was one with nature, thus being directly related to nature. Kavanagh uses the phrase ‘commemorate me’ three times in the sonnet,
expressing his deep desire to be forever associated with this part of Dublin, the only rural part that Kavanagh could find in the city.

Kavanagh goes on to connect the lock in the Canal to the Niagara Falls by ‘creating’ a word: niagarously. There are two ideals at work here, the first one is that he sees the Canal in the same light as that of the mighty Falls in Eastern North American just on the border between the US and Canada. Kavanagh seems to think that the Falls and the Canal are just as majestic as one another. And yet this does not seem entirely true for Kavanagh only uses the Niagara Falls as a metaphor, instead he sees the Canal as far more spectacular, ‘a lock niagarously roars’, and yet there is a ‘tremendous silence’ in mid-July[2] (Kavanagh creates a type of paradox in this special place). Kavanagh knows that through his experience in this place, those reading and ‘travelling’ on his journey would also be affected; the area becomes a poetic experience.

No one will speak in prose
Who finds his way to these Parnassian Islands,

Mount Parnassus is named after Parnassos, the son of the nymph Kleodora and the man Kleopompous. There was a city of which Parnassos was leader, which was flooded by torrential rain. The citizens ran from the flood, following wolves’ howling, up the mountain slope. There the survivors built another city, and called it Lykoreia, which in Greek means “the howling of the wolves.”

As the Oracle of Delphi was sacred to the god Apollo, so did the mountain itself become associated with Apollo. According to some traditions, Parnassus was the site of the fountain Castalia and the home of the Muses; according to other traditions, that honor fell to Mount Helicon, another mountain in the same range. As the home of the Muses, Parnassus became known as the home of poetry, music, and learning.

Kavanagh transports an ancient land to present-day Ireland (seen before in Advent), such a transportation is necessary as Kavanagh wishes to relate the Grand Canal to the home of poetry, music and learning that he felt the Grand Canal was.

The poet, having given us an image of what this special place meant to him, now brings the reader along as he looks outwards:

Line nine gives us an image of the swan’s movement through the now majestic Canal waters, followed immediately by brilliant images of light through bridges. Kavanagh is excited as he sees the barge coming from Kildare and other such-mythological towns, thus the ordinary world of commerce is transported into something strange and mysterious.[3] Whereas earlier on in the poem Kavanagh had been talking about his experience on the Canal, he now opens the poem up to the reader as we share in his surroundings; the swan, the barge, the canal bank seat – we are involved in the life around Kavanagh.
As the sonnet draws to a close, Kavanagh repeats himself, ‘O commemorate me’ – but in this instance he does not wish to be connected with the heroic and the courageous, his preference is for the extraordinary in the ordinary ‘canal-bank seat for the passer-by.’ Kavanagh inserts the word ‘just’ (a word that ordinarily would belittle the subject, yet we know that Kavanagh is none too ordinary) here to convey a meaning that contrasts with the typical meaning of the word, in fact he is praising the Canal seat above any other forms of memorials.

In ‘Lines Written’ we see, once again Kavanagh’s eye for the extraordinary in the natural world of Ireland.