



The Poetic Vision of Patrick Kavanagh

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Received: 07 Apr 2024; Received in revised form: 10 May 2024; Accepted: 22 May 2024; Available online: 29 May, 2024

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Abstract— Patrick Kavanagh, a prominent 20th-century Irish poet from Inniskeen Parish, County Monaghan, profoundly impacted global audiences with his poetry, transcending national boundaries. Despite limited formal education, Kavanagh's passion for literature led him to become a self-taught poet, capturing the essence of rural Irish life. His early works, such as "The Green Fool," reflect his struggle and detachment from peasant life, while his poetry often combines simplicity with profound insights, celebrating childhood wonder and the beauty of nature. Kavanagh's criticism of the Irish Literary Revival and his rejection of romanticized rural stereotypes positioned him as a genuine post-colonial thinker. His major works, including "The Great Hunger," depict the harsh realities of rural existence, contrasting with idealized notions of Irish identity. Kavanagh's influence extended beyond his lifetime, liberating subsequent generations of Irish poets from traditional constraints and emphasizing the significance of finding beauty in ordinary life. Despite facing challenges and limited recognition during his career, Kavanagh's legacy endures, celebrated for his honest portrayal of life's struggles and his ability to inspire through his poetic vision.



Keywords— Irish, literary renaissance, criticism, post-colonial, peasant-life.

INTRODUCTION

You who desired so much- in vain to ask
Yet fed your hunger like an endless task,
Dared dignify the labour, bless
the quest-

Achieved that stillness ultimately best,
Being; of all, least
sought for...¹

These lines aptly describe an eminent Irish poet from the twentieth century, whose poetry surpasses national confines and profoundly impacts individuals across the globe, embracing diverse cultures. Patrick (Joseph Gregory) Kavanagh hailed from Inniskeen Parish, situated in Northern Ireland, specifically County Monaghan. As the eldest among ten siblings, he followed his father's footsteps, acquiring the skills of both a cobbler and a farmer. Despite facing intellectual limitations during his childhood, he received no formal education beyond the age of twelve. Nevertheless, he nurtured a deep passion for literature and writing poetry, delving into his own self-studies. Despite facing an unusual reaction from his family, Kavanagh took immense pleasure in writing and immersed

himself in poetry, seizing every available opportunity. He humorously described his life as a typical representation of the impoverished Irish countryside, where the true poverty lay in the lack of enlightenment to explore life's wonders under the moonlight.

Until his father's passing in 1929, Kavanagh balanced his work as a cobbler and farmer. In the autumn of 1930, he ventured to Dublin. Eventually, by 1939, he bid farewell to farm life and made Dublin his home. However, Kavanagh's experience in the city wasn't without challenges. The literary landscape was overshadowed by Yeats, who had a dominant presence. When Yeats passed away in 1939, the focus of critics intensified on evaluating his poetry, which unfortunately pushed younger poets, including Kavanagh, into the background and placed them at a disadvantage.

These poets found themselves inevitably measured against Yeats, often overshadowing their own unique merits and talents. Kavanagh, too, faced the perception of being a minor poet from a rural background, capable of evoking profound poetic expressions but seen as

simple at heart. However, he refused to be disheartened by the unwelcome treatment he received. Instead, he resolved to establish his distinct identity in Dublin, employing two key strategies: anti- revivalism and downplaying the significance of nationality in literature. He criticized the stagnant state of literature produced by his contemporaries and viewed much of modern Irish

¹ These lines are by the poet Hart Crane from his poem "To Emily Dickenson".

writing as mere imitation. In a letter to his brother, Kavanagh expressed his perspective, "of the Irish Movement you know plenty...they presented an essentially sentimental Ireland. The Yeats-Synge phoney Ireland was eminently suited for export to America and it has falsified the picture of this country" (Garrat, 1986).

Kavanagh emerged as a genuine post-colonial thinker and poet, breaking free from the mental frameworks imposed by both colonialists and anti-colonialists. He was the first to reveal the entanglement of Irish revivalism with its presumed adversary, as it whitewashed derogatory remarks and recycled tired stereotypes, leading him to denounce it as a "thoroughgoing English-bred lie."² Coming from a rural background, Kavanagh recognized that what seemed to be distinctive characteristics of the Irish peasantry were prevalent in many societies with limited economic development. He also realized that the idea of an Irish essence was a veiled ideological construct perpetuated by the ruling class to serve their own interests. Therefore, he questioned the fetishization of such a concept.

This evaluation of revivalism aligned with Frantz Fanon's depiction of the second stage of decolonization, where intellectuals adopted a foreign tourist perspective within their own nation, excessively and superficially assimilating local customs. By rejecting such a role, Kavanagh found himself just as incomprehensible to the majority of English critics as Fanon was to many French intellectuals.

Kavanagh's Early Work

In 1938, Kavanagh released his autobiographical work, *The Green Fool*. Within its pages, he portrays his detachment from the peasant community and his personal struggle for artistic growth. Crafted with the intent to resonate with those who lean towards romanticism and emotion, *The Green Fool* presents a dramatized and reshaped account of certain episodes from his life journey. Initially, he felt that the realm of actual existence lacked significant drama. In his writing, the force of imagination overran the boundaries of fact, leading to a perplexing

fusion of his concept of reality. However, in his subsequent works, Kavanagh deliberately distances himself from the dominion of imagination, aiming to restore the essence

² Kavanagh, Patrick. *Self-Portrait*. Dolmen Press, 1964. http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/authors/classic/Kavanagh_P/S_Portrait.htm

of truthful poetic expression. As his early poetry gained traction, he endearingly came to be known as Dublin's 'peasant poet.'

Patrick Kavanagh's rise in popularity was significantly propelled by the Literary Renaissance occurring in Ireland during that period. This cultural movement, entwined with the surge of Irish Nationalism, experienced a resurgence of Irish literature with deep roots in the peasant communities of the nation. Escaping the influence of dominant English literary styles, this movement sought to capture the genuine essence of Irish identity. Irish themes became more relatable and resonated widely throughout the entire Irish populace, transcending the boundaries of the literary elite.

The aspiration of many artists within Ireland's Renaissance was to secure autonomy from British rule, extolling the distinctive facets of Irish culture. Through their works, they depicted the diligent rural populace nestled within Ireland's verdant hills, a force driving the country's quest for independence. Yet, it was evident that many of these visionary writers were urban inhabitants with a somewhat skewed perception of rural life. In contrast, Kavanagh introduced a more invigorating vision of Ireland. He portrayed 'the daily victories and tribulations of the common man' without succumbing to either sentimentalism or didacticism.

Following *The Green Fool*, Kavanagh refined his writing style to achieve simplicity and honesty, capturing the authentic spirit of Ireland without ulterior motives. This straightforwardness finds resonance in the diverse themes of his poetry. Kavanagh held the belief that preserving the sense of childhood wonder was crucial for adult contentment, and he bemoaned society's dismissal of this childlike perception. His poetry exalted childhood and endeavored to revive the inner child, as he expressed in his poem "Advent",

The newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children

and further in "Canal Bank Walk": Grow with
nature again as before I grew.

Kavanagh takes pleasure in the simple beauty found in nature, as he articulates in his poem "Canal Bank Walk":

Leafy-with-love banks and the green waters of the canal
Pouring redemption for me.

He held a strong aversion to the solitude, disputes, and disappointments of rural existence, a sentiment that is poignantly evident in his work "Shancoduff",

Who owns them hungry hills?

and also in his magnum opus "The Great Hunger":

We will wait and watch the tragedy to the last curtain,
Till the last soul passively like a bag of wet clay
Rolls down the side of the hill...

Kavanagh demonstrates his aptitude for imaginative insight in his writings, showcasing the skill of inventive observation, as he articulates in "The Great Hunger":

And we will watch from the doorway the years run back

Having penned numerous protest poems that criticized the demoralizing essence of Irish poetry, Kavanagh finds harmony with life and his homeland by composing verses that exude jubilation and elation. In "Shancoduff," he proclaims:

They are my Alps and have climbed the Matterhorn

Influence of Samuel Beckett

A substantial source of Kavanagh's unease regarding his writing emanated from Samuel Beckett. Beckett, an Irish artist, resisted prevailing literary trends and harbored a distinct aversion to the languages employed by masters, perpetually embodying an outsider status within his own language. Although Beckett and Kavanagh never collaborated, Kavanagh pursued the thematic essence encapsulated by Beckett in his own literary creations. In contrast to aligning with the Irish Literary Renaissance, to which he never truly adhered, Kavanagh centered his poetry on the hardships and challenges encountered by ordinary individuals.

Beckett maintained that when readers criticized Irish society as a 'mere pastiche' devoid of a cohesive 'overall purpose,' the solution was to "depict despair and fertility on the stage" for a comedic effect. In instances where a poet falls short of effectively conveying their intended image, the poem forfeits its original purpose and transforms into a tragedy. The most enriching literature is that which is thoroughly explored and breathes life as a comedy. As voiced by Declan Kiberd, "The answer to

the sense of doom was not to avoid tears, but to revert to laughter after they had dried. Otherwise a people would know only emotional and spiritual underdevelopment for...Tragedy is under-developed comedy, not fully born" (Kiberd, 1995). Kavanagh remained steadfast in his pursuit of crafting such a comedy within his composition, "The Great Hunger" (with comedy embodying a profoundly specific concept for Kavanagh). His unyielding preoccupation with the concept of underdevelopment gave rise to a clever yet compassionate narrative centered around the ordinary Irish individual.

Major Works and Style

According to Seamus Heaney, Kavanagh's remarkable rural poetry merely constitutes the initial phase of his accomplishment. This aspect of his body of work vividly conjures the landscape of County Monaghan, displaying exceptional vitality. Notable instances include the early lyrical piece "Ploughman" (1936) and Kavanagh's magnum opus, the extensive poem "The Great Hunger" (1942).

In "The Great Hunger," Kavanagh's full spectrum of poetic talent comes to the forefront.

The poem's introductory lines:

Clay is the word and clay is the flesh

Where the potato –gatherers like mechanised scarecrows
move Along the side-fall of the hill- Maguire and his men.

These lines demonstrate Kavanagh's adeptness at harmonizing the mundane and the sacred. Throughout the poem, he revisits the imagery of clay, portraying the peasant farmer Patrick Maguire with both empathy and a resistance to excessive sentimentality. Maguire's character is a complex blend of vulnerability and magnanimity. On one hand, he emerges as a commanding presence in the rural expanse of Monaghan, while on the other, Kavanagh underscores Maguire's bachelor status, his sense of emasculation under his mother's influence (she lives until Maguire reaches 65), and his suppressed yearning for intimacy. Impressively, Kavanagh elevates Maguire's persona above triviality, crafting him into a symbol of a disregarded, though overly idealized, facet of Irish existence.

From the very outset, we are presented with imagery of rusty ploughs, fractured buckets, ditches, frozen terrain, and the gradual yet persistent fading of human vitality. This stark portrayal veers away from revivalist pastoral romanticism and sentimentality, presenting a stark contrast to the idealized notions.

Kavanagh's poetry emerged from the heart of peasant Ireland, displaying an exceptional ability to vividly capture the essence of his homeland. He adeptly employed

colloquialisms and vibrant imagery to present the most authentic portrayal of the country. His words served as a genuine representation of the rural Irish peasant culture, reflecting his own experiences and life within the Irish countryside. Kavanagh embodied the voice of the common man, making his work resonate with a wide audience across Ireland. In certain instances, his portrayal is so masterful that the reader feels as if they are directly encountering Kavanagh through his own prose.

Examining "The Great Hunger," one can discern a undercurrent of bitterness that stems from Kavanagh's personal struggle against the hardships of agricultural labor. His writing mirrors a life intertwined with the values and harsh realities of the farming laborer. His disenchantment with the circumstances faced by the Irish rural population arose only after he had described those circumstances in "The Great Hunger," where his emotions are a mixture of affection and repulsion.

Watch him, watch him, that man on a hill whose spirit Is
a wet sack flapping about the knees of time

He lives that his little fields may stay alive fertile when
his own body Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under
two coulter's in Christ's

Name. (58-61)

According to Robert F. Garrat, the poem's potency emanates from,

"The narrative of Maguire himself, a figure whose hunger encompasses the spiritual, intellectual, and sexual realms. He dutifully cares for his mother, refrains from marrying as long as he has other obligations, and perpetually awaits improved fortune, a bountiful harvest, a future year, or the right life partner. The strict moral code of his church gradually tightens its grip, enclosing him in a web of guilt-ridden responsibilities. Ultimately, Maguire remains unmarried and spends his later years in solitude, crushed by the confines of his narrow existence" (1986).

In his portrayal of rural life, Kavanagh sought to counter what he perceived as a distorted representation of the land promoted by Yeats and Lady Gregory. His subsequent depictions of Dublin's literary scene and political landscape were equally marked by profound disillusionment. Kavanagh's primary object of disdain became the charming, semi-comedic Irish figure, which he viewed as a tragicomic caricature crafted primarily for international appeal. Behind his unyielding stance lies a profound comprehension of the contemporary snares that threaten human dignity from all angles, as well as an unwavering belief in the enduring but tarnished essence of human innocence.

Just as significantly as the influence of peasant

Ireland shaped his creative output, Kavanagh's estrangement from his family and friends in Ireland also left a profound impact. His growing passion for literary art perplexed numerous friends and family members, causing bewilderment within the community. They questioned his writing abilities and even derided him, labelling him as an outcast, while his own family regarded him as an outsider. The shift to Dublin didn't markedly improve matters, as the competitive atmosphere among emerging writers further isolated him from his peers. He frequently bemoaned the unfortunate reality that his poetry, especially during his lifetime, failed to gain substantial recognition from scholars.

The poem "Who Killed James Joyce" serves as a prominent instance where his own poetry acts as an indication of his perceived rejection as a poet. In a concise author's note accompanying his *Collected Poems* (1964), he channels his frustration into statements such as:

Poetry made me a sort of outcast And,
I've never been much considered by the English poets
also,

On many occasions I literally starved in Dublin

In 1955, Kavanagh confronted mortality as he underwent surgery to remove one of his lungs. Despite these challenges, he persevered and managed to live for an additional twelve years. During this time, he crafted a heartfelt lyrical poetry that exuded a sense of celebration. This poetry was characterized by its humility and ecstasy, a sincere attempt to counteract the protest-oriented nature of his earlier work. At this juncture, he underwent a reawakening of the long-lost perceptions and wonder of his childhood. He honed the ability to discern the extraordinary within the ordinary, directing his focus intently, joyfully, and playfully towards the present moment.

Kavanagh harbored a desire to regress to a state of ultimate simplicity, one where concerns about appearing foolish ceased to matter. He aimed to embrace his own essence, no matter how modest. His aspiration was to serve God, to thrive within nature, and to immerse himself in the habitual and mundane aspects of life. He employed the concept of God as a means to illustrate that definitive answers often remain elusive, highlighting the futility of excessive analysis and advocating for the celebration of life's uncomplicated nature. He believed that the presence of a benevolent deity allowed humans to approach life with a lighter perspective. In his pursuit of this philosophy, he deliberately avoided any romantic writing style, liberating himself from rigid forms.

Kavanagh's influence has granted many younger

Irish poets the freedom to explore their own subjects and modes of expression without the constraints of established tradition. However, what hasn't been transmitted to the following generation is Kavanagh's readiness, akin to Yeats's legacy before him, to actively engage in political and social matters, even in an individual capacity. While a few poets have penned sporadic verses in response to the situation in Northern Ireland, these works have generally lacked aesthetic quality, as referred to by Darcy

O. Brian in the book "Patrick Kavanagh." These poems underscore how the presence of romantic nationalism rhetoric detrimentally affects Irish poetry when it directly addresses political issues.

The study of Kavanagh's writing is complicated by a multitude of contradictions and paradoxes, arising from his frequent ability to distance his idealistic vision from the often harsh reality upon which it's built. For instance, he can assert that his youth on a Monaghan farm was unbearable due to a lack of intellectual illumination, a point he extensively elaborates in "Tarry Flynn." Yet, in a subsequent passage, he passionately laments leaving that very farm, a sentiment emphasized by his insistence that this departure was involuntary. John Nemo, writing in the *Journal of Irish Literature* (1977), argues that Kavanagh was somewhat conscious of these inconsistencies but found ways to rationalize them. He attributed the perceived weaknesses in his writing to the unsatisfactory audience he encountered in Dublin, labelling their influence as the cause of the loud, sensational, and inaccurate elements he detected in his work.

Interestingly, Kavanagh himself was caught between two conflicting stances. On one hand, he advised his readers that matters of public significance were beyond the scope of a poet's concern. Conversely, he spent nearly fifteen years attempting to educate the Irish public on what he perceived as the truth about literature, culture, art, and politics. This internal tension shaped his complex approach to his own work and his engagement with broader issues.

Numerous contradictions and paradoxes in Kavanagh's work stem from his adeptness at separating his idealized vision from the often-harsh realities upon which it's grounded. For instance, he can express that his early life on the Monaghan farm was unbearable due to a lack of intellectual enrichment (a point he strongly emphasizes in "Tarry Flynn"). Yet, a few paragraphs later, he passionately declares that his gravest error was departing from that very farm, a sentiment underscored by his insistence that this departure was against his own wishes.

In the *Journal of Irish Literature* (1977), John Nemo suggests that Kavanagh had some awareness of his inconsistencies but found it relatively easy to rationalize

them. He attributed what he perceived as the shortcomings in his writing to the unsuitable audience he encountered in Dublin, alleging that they were responsible for what he considered the sensationalism, loudness, and inaccuracy in his works.

Kavanagh himself grappled with a dual perspective. On one hand, he advised his readers that matters of public importance were beyond the purview of a poet's concern. Conversely, he spent nearly fifteen years endeavoring to enlighten the Irish public on what he believed to be the truth about literature, culture, art, and politics. This internal tension significantly shaped his approach to his own work and his engagement with broader issues.

CONCLUSION

Kavanagh's poetry might pose a challenge to comprehension for certain readers, but his impact on subsequent generations has been pivotal. He has eternally preserved his legacy through his writings, a sentiment he articulated in one of his own poems, "Innocence":

I do not know what age I am I am no mortal age.

While Kavanagh faced challenges and criticism during his lifetime, his work has gained significant recognition and acclaim posthumously. Today, he is regarded as one of Ireland's greatest poets, with his poems being included in literary curricula and anthologies worldwide. Kavanagh's ability to capture the essence of the human condition and his enduring relevance ensure that his legacy will continue to inspire future generations. His poetic vision offers a profound and enduring legacy. His journey from a humble rural background to becoming a celebrated poet reflects his resilience and dedication to his craft. Kavanagh's ability to find beauty in the ordinary, his honest portrayal of life's struggles, and his celebration of the human spirit make his work timeless and universally resonant. Through his poetry, Kavanagh invites us to see the world with fresh eyes, to find joy in simplicity, and to appreciate the richness of our shared human experience.

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