



A Study Of Poetic Phantasmagoria In Patrick Kavanagh And Seamus Heaney's Select Poems

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Abstract

The article discusses an emerging feature and aspect of two fascinating Irish poets in the twentieth century namely Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney with respect to their naturalistic poetic qualities. Both poets portrayed the rural Ireland and their home counties with absolute precision and economy of words. Whereas Kavanagh's creative faculties rely on inspiration and intuition Heaney's poetry explains and explores his own roots, celebrating the ancient skills and craft that sustained the farming community that nurtured him and his family for generations. Phantasmagoria has been quite predominant in modern Irish poetry and both writers have been pulled by the gravity of it in their poems. These writers are known for their simple but evocative natural imageries that they chronicled in their works.

Keywords: Phantasmagoria, naturalism, chronicle, Irish poetic tradition, Intuition.

INTRODUCTION

The works of Irish poets Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney are unique in English poetry in the sense that they derive their inspiration and themes from the local rural surroundings. The year 1939 was very crucial in Irish literature because of three events – the death of W.B. Yeats, Kavanagh coming to Dublin to pursue his literary career and the birth of the poet Seamus Heaney. While Patrick Kavanagh was an important transitional figure in Irish literature between Yeats and Heaney, Heaney was widely considered to be Ireland's most accomplished contemporary poet and has often been called the greatest Irish poet since William Butler Yeats.

In his works, Heaney often focuses on the proper roles and responsibilities of a poet in society, exploring themes of self-discovery and spiritual growth as well as addressing political and cultural issues related to Irish history. His poetry is characterized by sensuous language, sexual metaphors, and nature imagery. The American critic Helen Vendler, praised Heaney 'the Irish poet whose pen has been the conscience of his country'.

Patrick Kavanagh's "In Memory of My Mother" is a reflection on the happy memories Kavanagh had of his mother after her passing. He does not want to accept that she has died, instead of throwing himself into a stream of memory. The poem begins by focusing on the poet's inability to admit that his mother has died: -

I do not think of you lying in wet clay
A Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station, or happily...

And I think of you walking along a headland
Of green oats in June,
So full of repose, so rich with life –
And I see us meeting at the end of a town...

O you are not lying in the wet clay,
For it is a harvest evening now and we
Are piling up the ricks against the moonlight
And you smile up at us – eternally.

("In Memory of my Mother")

The exclamative 'O' and the repeated line 'lying in wet clay', marks a moment of bitter realisation. He cannot go on focusing on his memories thus ignoring her death. The final hyphen is a momentary intake of breath within the poem. Kavanagh has accepted his mother's passing and takes a moment for himself before finishing the poem on a religious reflection. Although gone, Kavanagh knows that his mother will live on 'eternally', looking down on him and smiling at him in the moonlight. The final line is sorrowful and joyous simultaneously. Kavanagh ends the poem on a note of beautiful acceptance of the love that they had had and the love that has now passed. In yet another poem addressing his father the opening stanza and the closing stanza goes like this -

Every old man I see
Reminds me of my father
When he had fallen in love with death
One time when sheaves were gathered.

Every old man I see
In October-coloured weather
Seems to say to me:
'I was once your father'.

("Memory of my Father")

The poem "In Memory of Brother Michael" which is about the poets' disapproval for those Irish who idolized the past and believed that Irishness was something to be 'worn like a glove' as Yeats puts it. Culture is more than an external fleshly covering; it is an innate exclusive quality that cannot be truly imitated or even consciously attained. It has its deep roots in the collective unconscious of a people-culture.

History is always something that was,
Something pedants can measure,
Skull of bard, thigh of chief,
Depth of dried-up river,

Shall we be thus forever?

Shall we be thus forever?

(“Memory of Brother Michael”)

The poem “The Strand at Lough Beg” by Heaney is a moving eulogy to Heaney’s cousin who was murdered during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Heaney takes the reader through the frightening last moments of Colum McCartney’s life with as much detail as possible. He also speaks about Colum’s passivity, good nature, hard-working attitude, and innocence in the conflict at large. His death remained something of a mystery to Heaney. He was only aware of a few details about where his cousin was killed and there are many unanswered questions that he airs in the text.

Despite their family not fighting on either side of the conflict, they’ve been caught up in it. In the second half of the poem, there’s a greater focus on the strand at Lough Beg. Humankind and our connection to the natural world are emphasized and the violence that we’re capable of, is condemned. Heaney crafts a beautiful ending to this piece that sees his cousin respectfully and carefully returned to the earth. There is peace at the end of what was a violent death.

I lift under the arms and lay you flat
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud

(“The Strand at Lough Beg”)

Similarly in the title poem “North” in Heaney’s 1975 Poetry Collection, the speaker revisits a stretch of the Donegal coast. The sounds he is hearing recall the god Thor who in Viking mythology creates the land, sea and heavens conscious of his own sensitivities and temperament the poet has come to seek release from the build-up of inner tensions emanating from uncertainty about the way his poetry is presenting. The first forceful voice he hears is of the earth, not yet the counselling voice that he seeks. His gaze is carried northwards towards less enticing distant landfalls. The poetic change comes suddenly conjuring up pictures of those (‘fabulous raiders’), both remarkable and the stuff of fable who explored not only those very coastlines but ventured south via the north Scottish islands to Ireland. They lived and died and were laid in tombs alongside their symbols of prowess. Their ‘ocean-deafened-voices’ and the culture they represent rise above the sounds of Thor’s thunder. They are the voices of warning.

In commenting about the poem, the Irish Literary and cultural historian Terence Brown says, “Heaney’s poem of visionary iconography, where he seeks an almost Yeatsian phantasmagoria, are compromised, therefore by a tone of reiterative admonition, as if the poet wishes to trust the song though lacking the final assurance of the ‘unself-conscious singer’. His counselling voice speaks to him 1200 years across in time, about literary enterprise, the poetic processes, the artistic temperament and personal integrity; be at one with your own linguistic resource -

It said, ‘Lie down
In the word-hoard, burrow
The coil and gleam
Of your furrowed brain.
Compose in darkness
Expect aurora borealis
In the long foray
but no cascade of light

Finally, from within your poet's sense-memory, have a particular confidence in the 'touch' and 'texture' of known things and events you have witnessed

Keep your eye clear
As the bleb of the icicle,
Trust the fell of what nubbed treasure
Your hands have known'.

("North")

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