

**Wordsworthian Solitude in Patrick Kavanagh's *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*: Rejection and Acceptance**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores Wordsworthian solitude in Patrick Kavanagh's poem *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*. The significance of the study lies in revealing the Romantic component of Kavanagh's poetry. The main question of the research is to show how the poet gradually moves from rejection into acceptance of the Romantic tradition, represented by solitude, as adopted and developed by the leading figures of Romanticism such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and others. To achieve this, the researcher employs the analytical approach through which she presents a detailed thematic and technical analysis of Kavanagh's *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*, indicating how the poem reveals Wordsworthian solitude. Based on the thematic and technical analysis of the poem, the study shows that Kavanagh rejects the Romantic idea of solitude throughout the poem but comes in the final stanza to have a different attitude. He eventually finds poetic inspiration, relief, and satisfaction in Wordsworthian solitude and finally accepts it, admiring its inspiring power and healing effect. Kavanagh's adoption of the Romantic tradition, reflected by *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*, opens a new insight for him to re-communicate with nature and enjoy the bliss of solitude offered by the natural world.

**Keywords:** Patrick Kavanagh's *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*, Patrick Kavanagh, Romanticism, modern Irish poetry, Wordsworthian Solitude

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## Introduction

Heacock (2009) defines solitude as "the situation of being alone" (p.902). Gumm (2008) gives another definition of solitude, describing it as a state in which "we are each of us by our self, but not yet alone" (pp. 40-41). Writers often differentiate between solitude and loneliness, classifying the former as a positive state people seek and try to achieve and the latter as something negative they hate and attempt to avoid. Furui (2019), for example, sees that "solitude (...) presents a positive, desired state of being as opposed to a negative sense of loneliness (p. 3). Shedding more light on the issue, Arendt (1968) states,

Loneliness is not solitude. Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others (...). In solitude (...), I am 'by myself,' together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others. (p. 174).

This means that the person, in solitude, is alone, but he/she can find companionship with himself or herself. On the other hand, loneliness reveals itself when other people surround the person, but he/she cannot communicate or interact with these people.

Remarkably, the solitary experiences provide the person with many benefits such as "creative and artistic gains," Wang (2006) states, pointing out that "many writers and artists, such as Thoreau, Dickinson, and Kafka, have been noted for the role solitude played in their creative processes" (pp. 1-2). Likewise, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and other great Romantic poets affirm that solitude is what enables the poet to get closer to the natural world where his feelings flow – naturally and spontaneously. The solitary poet finds in nature an honest companion that sufficiently provides him with joy and generously helps him overcome the sense of loneliness and isolation that may arise in his soul. This idea will be explained in detail later in the paper by discussing examples of the poems written by the leading Romantic poets in addition to Kavanagh's poem *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*, in which solitude is a central theme

The research problem of the present study focuses on identifying Kavanagh's attitude toward the Romantic tradition and how this tradition is addressed in his poetry. Accordingly, the study seeks to show how Wordsworthian solitude, which is regarded as an essential feature of Romantic poetry, is reflected in the poems written by Kavanagh, particularly his famous poem *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*. This study is important because it attempts to address the gap related to the issue of how far Kavanagh sticks to the Romantic tradition in his poetry. The following list clarifies the study objectives:

1. Introducing the concept of solitude and how it is represented in literature, mainly poetry.
2. Discussing Wordsworthian solitude as a chief feature of Romantic poetry.
3. Showing the influence of Romanticism on Patrick Kavanagh.
4. Indicating how Wordsworthian solitude is reflected in *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*.

To achieve these objectives, the paper begins with a theoretical framework followed by a review of literature that presents examples from the famous works of the leading Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, and Coleridge. Other studies about Kavanagh and his poetry are also given. Then, the researcher presents a detailed thematic and technical analysis of the poem under discussion, indicating how *Inniskeen Road: July Evening* reveals Wordsworthian solitude which Kavanagh rejects throughout the poem but comes at the concluding lines to accept and adopt.

## Literature Review

According to Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, solitude not only acts as a primary source of inspiration but also achieves other essential roles for the writer and the characters in the literary work. For Wordsworth, poetry is meant to be composed in solitude. Accompanied by contemplation, solitude becomes the vehicle through which the poet's feelings spontaneously flow till the poetic process is smoothly formed. Wordsworth (1989) addressed this issue, shedding light on the various stages that the emotional or poetic process goes through till it is finally created:

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (p. 57)

For Wordsworth, poetry relies on inspiration and deep emotions. Accordingly, it flows smoothly from the poet's heart. Thus, feelings in the heart, not thoughts in the mind, form the primary source of the poetic process. The poet, in Wordsworth's point of view, does not react immediately to the situation in which a poem is going to be created. Instead, he first needs to enter a phase of contemplation to allow his emotions to be recollected calmly. After being quietly contemplated, the poetic process is produced and settled in mind.

It is noted that Wordsworth, in his poem *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, recalls a sense of pleasure and enjoyment experienced by him when he was essentially alone, wandering across the landscape when he suddenly came across a long strip of beautiful daffodils. The poem ends with the poet's confirmation that being able to recollect the details of this delightful experience in the future and see the lovely daffodils once more with the eye of his mind is indeed a blessing given to him by solitude. Similarly, in *The Solitary Reaper*, Wordsworth indicates how solitude adds beauty and meaning to the song of the solitary girl the poet saw working and singing alone in the field. The speaker in Wordsworth's poem is shocked and has to stop to contemplate the hidden beauty and attractive music of the girl's song whose sweet and smooth melodies vividly reflect the natural overflow of emotions that he has identified at the heart of poetry. Finally, in *Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle*, Wordsworth (1994) indicates how Shepherd Lord reached the stage of growth and survival thanks to the solitude that was forced on him:

Love had he found in huts where poor Men lie,  
His daily Teachers had been Woods and Rills,  
The silence that is in the starry sky,  
The sleep that is among the lonely hills. (p. 203)

This is the Wordsworthian solitude which Patrick Kavanagh rejects throughout *Inniskeen Road: July Evening* and then comes, suddenly, in the last stanza of the poem to accept and embrace, yielding to the charm of contemplation and enjoying the pleasure of solitude praised by Wordsworth and other Romantic poets.

In Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, for instance, solitude is the shelter that endows the poet with satisfaction, tranquillity, and peace of mind. In the poem, the speaker escapes from humanity and goes back, alone, to nature, enjoying the solitude of the natural world where none disturbs or intrudes. In a similar context, Keats's poem *O Solitude! If I Must With Thee Dwell*

personifies solitude and depicts it as a companion the poet intimately talks to and gladly dwells with. The two companions escape from the crowded urban surroundings and go to the natural wilderness amongst rivers, flowers, trees, deer, and bees where the poet is sufficiently pleased and content. Coleridge's *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* is a poem in which solitude compensates the poet for the absence of his friends who were supposed to accompany him on a walk for a few hours, but they did not due to a sudden accident. In the poem, solitude takes the poet on an imaginative journey as he starts to imagine as if he is already accompanying his absent friends. The poem's concluding stanza is a celebration of what solitude can give and afford. As Coleridge (1912) tells us:

A delight  
Comes suddenly into my heart, and I am glad  
As I myself were there! (p. 179)

In this highly magnificent atmosphere, the solitary poet finds himself in a state that enables him to address nature directly and enjoy the beauty of its elements.

Vowson and Rafiq (2020) hold an interesting comparison between Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney as two great Irish poets "with respect to their naturalistic poetic qualities" (p. 2225). Though both poets are known for their vivid portrayal of rural Ireland in their poems, each employs specific mechanisms in his portrayal of the Irish countryside. A careful reading of Kavanagh's poetry shows that he usually gets inspiration from his instinct and experience as a farmer in Inniskeen Village where he was born and raised. This can be seen in many of his poems such as *the Great Hunger* and *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*. On the other hand, Heaney's poetry shows him as intensely interested in highlighting the old skills which characterize the farm and its community, as observed in many poems such as *Digging* and *The Harvest Bow*

Nakamura (2021) indicates how Kavanagh has been a source of inspiration for the younger generation of Irish poets like, for example, the famous Irish poet Eavan Boland (1944-2020) who was influenced by the older poet, shedding light on "Boland's interest in Kavanagh's use of the sonnet form" (p.105). It is worth mentioning that Kavanagh wrote his poem *Inniskeen Road: July Evening* in the sonnet form which Boland admires. Boland also stresses the distinctive position achieved by Kavanagh as a leading figure of twentieth-century Irish poetry, attracting attention to the great poet's unique skill in recording the details of Irish reality.

### ***Patrick Kavanagh: The Romantic Peasant Poet***

Like his Romantic ancestors, the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967) found himself in a state of solitude through which he could communicate with nature and enjoy the blessings it offers. Born in Inniskeen, County Monaghan, Ireland, Kavanagh is known for his unique portrayal of Irish rural life. In 1931, Kavanagh visited Dublin for the first time, and there he was referred to as the peasant poet. In *Patrick Kavanagh – Born Again Romantic*, Quinn (1991) describes Kavanagh's first visit to Dublin, showing how "he looked like a farmer who had come to the town to buy seeds or implements, not like a poet" (p. 32). Strangely enough, Kavanagh went on foot from his village to the Irish capital. "His sixty-mile walk from Monaghan to Dublin in December of 1931," Shokouhi (2019) explains, was a sign of "the younger poet's awareness of what the literary society in Dublin was looking for and his readiness to enact it" (p. 148). Kavanagh's masterpiece is *The Great Hunger*, a long poem of fourteen sections that was published in 1942. The hunger that the poem depicts is not literal hunger but the psychological and spiritual hunger

of the Irish peasants. Patrick Maguire, the main character of the poem, is a young farmer who feels helpless and dominated by his mother and the church. This is how Kavanagh (1987) portrays the desperate life of Maguire and the Irish farmers whom he lives with:

Like the afterbirth of a cow stretched on a branch in the wind  
Life dried in the veins of these women and men:  
'The grey and grief and unloved,  
The bones in the backs of their hands,  
And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them. (p. 92)

The lines expressively describe the physical, emotional, and religious frustration of the Irish peasants. Those miserable people are not only fated to lead a harsh life characterized by pain and suffering but they are also dominated by an authoritarian religious institution that restricts their freedom and represses their feelings.

Other famous works by Kavanagh are *A Soul for Sale* (1947), *Come Dance with Kity Stobling* (1960), *Collected Poems* (1964), and *Collected Prose* (1967). His *Complete Poems* was published in 1972, five years after his death. He also wrote two novels. *The Green Fool* was published in 1938, and *Tarry Flynn* appeared in 1948 recounting the tale of Tarry whom Kavanagh (1975) describes as follows:

Growing Potatoes was a thing he took a great pride in. By merely admiring the buds as they grew up he felt that they responded and progressed (...) Clay climbed in the back of his boots (...) Up and down the alleys he went for an hour in a great hurry. Then he sat on the beam of the plough to dream. (pp. 22-23)

The novel's protagonist feels proud to work on the land and gets happy seeing his plants growing one day after another. Being a farmer-poet like Kavanagh, Tarry finds his joy in communicating with the land and its elements. His dreams and aspirations stem from this highly inspiring rural environment.

## Analysis

### ***Wordsworthian Solitude in Inniskeen Road: July Evening***

Kavanagh's poem *Inniskeen Road: July Evening* is a sonnet with fourteen lines revealing the poet's isolation in society. It is noted that Kavanagh combines the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets in one form. From the Petrarchan sonnet, he takes the sonnet division into an octave and a sestet, and from the Shakespearean, he takes the rhyme scheme of ababdcdefefgg. The title of the poem sets both place and time. The place is the road of the village of Inniskeen where Kavanagh was born and brought up; the time is a typical summer evening of July when the people of Inniskeen are on their way to attend a social event, namely, 'a dance in Billy Brennan's barn' in which the poet does not seem to take part. Kavanagh (1964) tells us in the first stanza:

The bicycles go by in twos and threes -  
There's a dance in Billy Brennan's barn tonight,  
And there's the half-talk code of mysteries  
And the wink-and-elbow language of delight.  
Half-past eight and there is not a spot  
Upon a mile of road, no shadow thrown  
That might turn out a man or woman, not

A footfall tapping secrecies of stone. (p. 19)

The above stanza is an octave of eight lines presenting two contrasting scenes which suggest its subdivision into two quatrains, as in the Shakespearean sonnet, with the rhyme scheme abab cdcd. In the first quatrain, the poet is a detached observer who is deprived of the social intimacy that his villagers enjoy. In lines one and two of the first quatrain, the poet indicates that nobody seems to be cycling alone as 'the bicycles go by in twos and threes', suggesting that the people of Inniskeen are happy and excited to attend the party with easy camaraderie and regular social interaction from which Kavanagh is separated. In lines three and four, the poet points out that the divide between him and the party-goers is not only physical but it is also intellectual due to 'the half talk code of mysteries, and the wink and elbow language of delight' which are indicative of a language and a way of communication that are alien to him. Their signs, talks, and movements seem to be 'mysteries' that he is unable to comprehend.

In the second quatrain, we are told that the time has moved to 8:30 p.m., and the road is so quiet that no one is there. All the village people are now at the party, dancing and enjoying social interaction. Only the poet remains, excluded from the social scene and standing alone with the inanimate background - the road and the stones, where there is 'no shadow thrown / That might turn out a man or woman, not / A footfall tapping secrecies of stone'.

In the above lines of verse, Kavanagh skillfully uses his poetic techniques to reflect his intended themes and meanings. Diction fulfills this function. The choice of words such as 'bicycles', 'twos', 'threes', 'dance', 'language', and 'delight' conveys a happy atmosphere characterized by easy companionship and social interaction among the people of Inniskeen who are excitedly going to attend an evening dance party. On the other hand, the selection of phrases and words like 'a mile of road', 'no shadow thrown', 'secrecies', and 'stone' reveals a state of isolation and detachment in which the poet suddenly finds himself.

In the stanza quoted above, the poet uses very suggestive words and expressions that convey the idea of the lines. For example, line four contains the phrase 'the half-talk code of mysteries', which is very inspiring. The chatting of the people of Inniskeen resembles a code that excludes the poet who can only hear snatches of their conversation ('half-talk'), so it seems as if it is 'mystery' for him. Similarly, in line five, Kavanagh speaks of 'the wink-and-elbow language of delight' practiced by Inniskeen people who are going to the party. They communicate together differently as if they possess a language all of their own that the poet cannot understand and share. These ways of communication among the people of Inniskeen keep them socially interacted and at the same time exclude the poet from this social scene and cut him off from the rest of society. The last two lines of the octave are indeed evocative:

...not

A footfall tapping secrecies of stone. (p. 19)

Here, one imagines that Kavanagh attempts to tell his readers that the road is so quiet and so silent that there is no one there at all, even a single 'footfall' that might knock on the 'stone', perhaps to reveal its mysteries and disclose the stories it experienced in the past. This atmosphere of silence and mystery deepens the poet's sense of isolation.

In the sestet of the poem, Kavanagh makes a turn, moving into the first person to depict his personal situation, telling his readers why being a poet imposes particular challenges on him and makes his case different from that of other people. The nature of his role as a poet intensifies his sense of aloneness and detaches him from his community. Kavanagh (1964) states:

I have what every poet hates in spite  
 Of all the solemn talk of contemplation.  
 Oh, Alexander Selkirk knew the plight  
 Of being king and government and nation.  
 A road, a mile of kingdom. I am king  
 Of banks and stones and every blooming thing. (p. 19)

The lines paradoxically place Kavanagh far and close to Wordsworthian solitude. The commonly apprehended conviction is that poets prefer to be aloof and detached from society and that poetry is mainly meant to be written in solitude, as Wordsworth proposed. Kavanagh comes at the first four lines of the stanza to oppose this idea, arguing that poets do hate the isolation which they experience – 'I have what every poet hates in spite / Of all the solemn talk of contemplation', he tells us at the very beginning of the stanza. The allusion to Alexander Selkirk, the Scottish sailor who stands for the real-life model of the protagonist in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, increases the speaker's sense of isolation and remoteness. Both Kavanagh and Selkirk or Crusoe, according to the poet's point of view here, have endured the dilemma of being alone: separate and removed from society and civilization.

However, the concluding couplet of the sestet firmly takes Kavanagh to Wordsworthian solitude, closely connecting him with the Romantic fathers. He comes here to positively accept and respond to his solitary situation after he has discovered that it is solitude that brings about his poetic imagination and makes it bloom and flourish, turning him from the state of isolation into a magnificent company with nature where he suddenly finds himself 'king / Of banks and stones and every blooming thing'. This companionship with the natural world, approached by the poet in solitude, could successfully compensate for the human camaraderie that he has lost in the first stanza of the poem. In this way, solitude becomes a source of inspiration for Kavanagh, as was the case with the leading Romantic ancestors – Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, and Coleridge. As Mazur-Wyganowska (2014) puts it,

Kavanagh followed here the Romantic legacy of his ancestors. The speaker defined what it meant for him to be a poet – abstract, high-minded subjects were for him of diminutive value in the process of creating verse....For him minor matters, and ordinary details were of exceptional value. The poet appreciated these details after observing and contemplating nature in solitude. (p. 123)

Wordsworthian solitude, which mainly relies on 'contemplating nature in solitude', to use Mazur-Wyganowska's words, comes to be an essential source of inspiration, fulfillment, and contentment in Kavanagh's poetry. These meanings are embodied in 'Question to Life', a poem in which Kavanagh (1964) writes:

...When all is said and done a considerable  
 Portions of living is found in inanimate  
 Nature and a man need not feel miserable. (p. 164)

## Conclusion

The present paper attempted to reveal Wordsworthian solitude in Kavanagh's *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*. As the thematic and technical discussion of the poem indicated, the poet adopts an attitude of rejection that later changes into acceptance of the Wordsworthian solitude

that was embraced by his Romantic ancestors, Wordsworth in particular, and reflected in *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*. At first, Kavanagh finds himself detached and isolated from the people of his village who, unlike him, are socially interacting remarkably. Unable to cope with the mechanisms of social interaction practiced by his locals, the poet remains alone on the road and sadly compares himself to Alexander Selkirk who was abandoned as an outcast on an uninhabited, remote island. However, towards the end of the poem, Kavanagh discovers that though he has been left isolated from people, he has been accompanied by nature and could re-communicate with its details in an inspiring manner. This meaning is confirmed throughout a wide range of Kavanagh's poetry, especially at the end of poems as if the poet attempts to tell his readers that it is conclusions that matter. For example, in the concluding couplet of his poem 'Question to Life', as was the case in *Inniskeen Road: July Evening*, Kavanagh asserts that he is relieved and satisfied with this Wordsworthian solitude that provides him with poetic imagination and inspiration, reuniting him with 'every blooming thing'.

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