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Paradoxical Rural Imagination of Ireland and Its Cause in *The Great Hunger*

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Abstract

The Great Hunger, masterpiece of Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh's, stands for his great achievement in poetry. The narrative poem, both lyrical and realistic, portrays the mediocre and repressed life of Patrick Maguire, a typical Irish peasant. The careful contrived tension the poet created lies in the fact that Maguire is both closely related to and helplessly subjected to the natural world. The paradoxical situation is brought by the loss of balance between human nature and the natural world, exemplified by the heavy sexual repression under rigid religious life and abnormal maternity. The morbidity in representation of nature originates from the repression of human nature.

Key words: Patrick kavanagh; Ireland; *The Great Hunger*; Sexual repression; Pastoral

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INTRODUCTION

Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967), an outstanding Irish poet and novelist, was born in rural Inniskeen, County Monaghan. His poetry is known for its realistic depictions of Irish rural life, which is mostly drawn from the writer's own rural experience in County Monaghan. Quite opposite to W. B. Yeats's portrayal of the country life, the rural life in Kavanagh's poem is devoid of romantic and mysterious aureoles. His straightforward treatment of Irish peasantry reveals the harsh realities of rural life. Kavanagh's writings have exerted much influence on some of his successors, among whom Seamus Heaney is a notable poet who praised Kavanagh for "his articulation of 'parochialism'" and he argues that "Kavanagh's work was closer to the lives of the majority of Irish people than was Yeats's" (Russell, 2008, p.52). Thanks to his vivid and poignant portrayal of typical Irish countryside, Monaghan became an embodiment of the whole Ireland. In 2000, the *Irish Times* compiled a list of favorite Irish poems, and ten of Kavanagh's poems were in the top fifty, which proves Kavanagh's significance in Irish literature.

The Great Hunger, a long narrative poem, stands for Kavanagh's highest artistic achievement, which recounts the mediocre life of its protagonist, Patrick Maguire, "a rural Everyman figure who is tyrannized by the land and sexually repressed by his domineering mother." (Holliday, 1997, p.140) The whole poem consists of fourteen sections and the omniscient narrator recounts and comments with satire and anger on Maguire's life and the natural scenery. Scholars often focus on the theme of this poem, and its revolt against Pastoralism. Gifford (2002, p.56) points out that "The most sustained, but neglected, anti-pastoral poem of modern times is Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*". According to Gifford, "the poem's success is a result of the tension created by Kavanagh's harsh, realistic knowledge of rural culture and his romantic notions about the function of poetry" (Holliday, 1997, p.142). A thorough investigation of the poem could reveal the writer's paradoxical attitudes towards rural life and the reason for this paradox could be explained through a close reading of the poem itself.

1. REALISTIC PORTRAYAL OF NATURE AND THE RURAL LIFE

Rural life and natural scenery are given much attention in *The Great Hunger*, but those elements like love,

labor, nature and the seasonal cycle as can be found in traditional pastoral poetry are treated rather morbidly. And the harmonious relationship between man and earth which pastoral poetry has long praised is also undermined, replaced by the cruel domination of the land over the peasants, which runs contrary to the portrayal of nature by such leading poets as Yeats. In the writings of those writers in the Irish literary revival as Yeats and Synge, rural society serves as the repository preserving the traditional wisdom and culture of ancient Ireland, so the peasant became a stereotype for constructing the Irishness, as Gillis (2005, p.62) argues, "Ireland's rural self-image was both an anti-English weapon and a defence mechanism against the increasing modernization of societies in the West, including Ireland's own." Writers like Yeats believe that the independence of Irish literature should be based upon the ancient Irish tradition and the revival of the Irish language, which can be found in the rural areas less affected by English domination. They try to guide politic nationalism by applying the power of culture, and re-construct the imagined Irish communities by the help of some energetic concepts—rural, traditional Ireland (Tao, 2004, p.51). Therefore, "The revival's idealisation of the peasant grew naturally from its hatred of progress, modernity, centralisation, commercialism and industrialised materialism, all of which were embodied and given definitive shape in England." (Watson, 1979, p.23) The Irish countryside and the peasant became in the national imagination of these writers Irish stereotypes which can be differentiated from its English counterpart. The image of peasant thus became in the dominant Irish literature and culture a stereotypical symbol representing the notions of self-sufficiency, industry, nobility and anti-materialism.

The representation of the peasants in the writings of Yeats and his followers hides to some extent the harsh reality of the Irish rural societies, while "*The Great Hunger* vandalizes stereotypical notions of the peasant as an Irish symbol or cultural icon, dismantling the nation's self-image by assaulting the 'ruralism' that was central to it." (Gillis, 2005, p.62) Kavanagh exposes the realities of the Irish rural society from its core and *The Great Hunger* provides a different perspective for the readers on Irish rural life. In depicting ideal rural life, traditional pastoral writings focus much attention on the presentation of a harmonious natural world. Pastoral is an established genre, "a deliberately conventional poem expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting." (Abrams, 2004, p.202) Pastoral places the peasants in an idealized natural setting, while *The Great Hunger* explores the harshness of nature with satire and anger.

At the beginning of the poem, the narrator hints that the wet clods can not produce "light of imagination", while "the gulls like old newspapers are blown clear of the hedges" (p.34). Thus, the depiction of the natural world at the beginning introduces into the poem an air of discord. Instead of the image of beautiful swans preferred by Yeats, Kavanagh depicts hateful crows in the first section of the poem, "Children scream so loud that the crows could bring / The seed of an acre away with crow-rude jeers. / Patrick Maguire, he called his dog and he flung a stone in the air / And hallooed the birds away that were the birds of the years." (p.35) The seeds that the peasants have sowed are stolen by the crows, indicating the confrontation between mankind and nature. Meanwhile, crows are considered to be the embodiment of Morrigan and Badb, the war deity in Irish myth. Therefore, crows are often associated with battles, causing fear, ill omen or even death. The image of the crows tones in exactly with the title and the underlying theme of the poem.

The common natural scenery is depicted in the poem with melancholy and even morbidity. The images in the poem often suggest such implications as dullness, gloom, monotony, infertility and even loss of life: a horse trailing a rusty plough (p.34); crumpled leaf darting like a frightened robin (p.36); a yellow sun reflecting the poignant light in puddles (p.36); a cold black wind blowing from Dundalk (p.38); a dead sparrow and an old waistcoat lying in the ditch among the blackthorn shadows (p.38); the fields being bleached white (p.50); the cows following the hay that had wings (p.50); a sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die (p.53). The detailed description of the sickening natural world serves as the background of the melancholic and angry tone. Meanwhile, the poet also adopts some sickening images in depicting rural life: Maguire's mother has a wizened face like moth-eaten leatherette (p.37); life of these peasants is like the afterbirth of a cow stretched on a branch in the wind (p.45); the peasant is tied to a mother's womb by the wind-toughened navel-cord (p.53). The reciprocal relationship between man and nature in traditional pastoral is completely lacking here and the organic "imagination" linking man and nature together also snaps. Earth is the center of rural life and thus the focus of pastoral. In pastoral tradition, mankind relies on and trusts earth, and the bonds of partnership between man and earth are romantically constructed. However, in *The Great Hunger*, the relationship between man and earth is by no means harmonious. Maguire works very hard and "He lives that his little fields may stay fertile" (p.35). But "April, and no one able to calculate / How far is it to harvest. They put down /The seeds blindly…" (p.38), which undermines the trust the peasant holds to the soil. Maguire wishes to break the monotony of rural life, but he has no choice but to return to his fields again and again. Thus, the land becomes to Maguire powerful fetters, and "Twenty times a day he ran round the field / And still there was no winning-post where the runner is cheered

home." (p.40) The peasants are trapped "In a mud-walled space— / Illiterate, unknown and unknowing." (p.48)

With angry and despairing language Kavanagh rebels against pastoral's beautification of rural life. However, in deconstructing the writing strategy of pastoral poetry, Kavanagh appropriates its mode of representation, which can be regarded as parody of pastoral, satirizing the traditional pastoral. In section two Kavanagh writes, "O he loved his mother / Above all others. / O he loved his ploughs / And he loved his cows / And his happiest dream / Was to clean his arse / With perennial grass / On the bank of some summer stream" (p.37). The romantic feeling praised by pastoral is deliberately placed in parallel with vulgar behavior, which lends irony to the traditional romantic imagination. In section thirteen, Kavanagh goes much deeper concerning the pastoral code when he writes, "The peasant has no worries; / In his little lyrical fields / He ploughs and sows; / He eats fresh food, / He loves fresh women, /He is his own master /As it was in the Beginning /The simpleness of peasant life…" (p.52) This reflects the poetic depiction of rural life by the pastoral tradition, which sings highly of the ideal of "organic society", in which "ruralism constitutes a realm of simplicity, clarity, and purity, in contrast with modernity's complexity, confusion, and contamination." (Gillis, 2005, p.63) The pastoral ideal celebrates the integration between human beings and nature. Then, Kavanagh continues to narrate the metaphysical conception of pastoral, "*There* is the source from which all cultures rise, /And all religions…/Without the peasant base civilisation must die…/The peasant is all virtues—let us salute him without irony / The peasant ploughman who is half a vegetable—/Who can react to sun and rain…" (p.52) The narrator calls for a salutation to the peasant "without irony", which indeed carries in itself a touch of irony. At the end of this section, the pastoral mode disappears and instead a sense of despair is obvious in the strong and sharp exclamation, "Is there no escape? /No escape, no escape." (p.53) The peasant can not escape, and "the peasant in his little acres is tied /To a mother's womb by the wind-toughened navel-cord / Like a goat tethered to the stump of a tree—" (p.53) The word "mother" refers both to Maguire's mother and the mother earth. There is no living connectedness between the peasant and the soil, and "the wind-toughened navel-cord" reveals the withered and repressed humanity. Longley (1994, p.620) argues that "That Maguire is tied by 'the wind-toughened navel-cord' to farm, family, and community makes the poem an extraordinary cross between documentary and psychodrama, reportage and symbol, lyric and epic". With a touch of irony, Kavanagh rebels against the pastoral tradition and records the harsh reality of Irish rural life. Thus, this anti-pastoral is a rebellion against romanticism, and a kind of realism with strong modernist orientation (Liu, 2007, p.103).

2. PARADOXICAL IMAGINATION OF THE RURAL LIFE

Although Kavanagh deconstructs and undermines the discourse modes of pastoral, *The Great Hunger* also reflects the writer's craving for harmony between man and nature. Kavanagh's bitter and sarcastic language conceals his expectation to mend the rift between humanity and nature. Ironically, this expectation chimes in with the basic notion of traditional pastoral. In reality, some other poems of Kavanagh also testify to Kavanagh's paradoxical feelings towards rural life. On the one hand, the poet is quite accustomed to rural life and his attachment to the rural area is consciously or unconsciously exposed; on the other hand, the poet is by no means content with the status quo of Irish rural life and the fetters the land imposes upon the peasant. The paradoxical feelings create in his poem a delicate tension, making his poem lyrical and realistic at the same time. *Stony Grey Soil*, a short lyrical poem written by Kavanagh, also records the poet's paradoxical feelings, "O stony grey soil of Monaghan… You flung a ditch on my vision /Of beauty, love and truth. / O stony grey soil of Monaghan /You burgled my bank of youth! /Lost the long hours of pleasure /All the women that love young men." (Kavanagh, 1972, p.82) The rural life and the soil do exert confinement on the peasant, but there is also a healthy and positive connection between the peasant and the soil, which can be perceived also in *The Great Hunger*.

Living in the natural world, the peasant embraces a direct perception and understanding of nature. Maguire tells his companion, "The wind's over Brannagan's, now that means rain" (p.35), which indicates the peasant's familiarity with nature and direct mastery of natural phenomenon. Maguire's mother trust nature, "She trusted in Nature that never deceives" (p.42), and "she praised the man who made a field his bride" (p.35). This belief reveals a world view characterized by simplicity and closeness with nature. And the peasants like Maguire are not always antagonistic towards nature. They sometimes also see glory and eternity in nature, as revealed in the following lines, "The goldfinches on the railway paling were worth looking at— /A man might imagine then / Himself in Brazil and these birds the birds of paradise / And the Amazon and the romance traced on the school map lived again." (p.45) Nature bestows upon people the capacity for imagination, which shortens the distance between Irish rural area and South America, and even reaches for the paradise. However, the narrator in section one indirectly tells the reader that there is not any light of imagination in these wet clods. The paradox here also points to the narrator's mixed feelings towards rural life. In section three the narrator tells the reader, "Yet sometimes when the sun comes through a gap /These men know God the Father in a tree: /The Holy Spirit is the rising sap, /And Christ will be the green leaves that will

come /At Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb." (p.38) These lines reveal a pantheistic apocalyptic vision, in which the peasant can experience a kind of transcendental integration. The living tree manifests an ideal system, which is enveloped in a bigger system like God and the universe. Gifford terms this tree "the fruited Tree of Life" and comments that "farmers above all…have what might be called a pagan, or perhaps a pantheistic, understanding that nature's revelations to them in the fields should be connecting rather than disconnecting, giving them an understanding of the naturalness of their own rising sap" (p.57). Human nature should also be integrated into the bigger universe, which is characterized by integration and harmony. Although the peasant's imagination is temporary and transitory, it shows the possibility for communion between man and nature.

In the last section of the poem, the emotion of the poem reaches to its climax as the narrator bitterly calls, "Applause, applause, /The curtain falls" (p.54), echoing the beginning of the poem, "We will wait and watch the tragedy to the last curtain" (p.34). However, under the bitter and sarcastic language, readers can still detect the profound connection between the peasant and the soil, as the following lines suggest, "Maguire is not afraid of death, the Church will light him a candle /To see his way through the vaults and he'll understand the /Quality of the clay that dribbles over his coffin. /He'll know the names of the roots that climb down to tickle his feet." (p.54) Maguire's understanding of the clay and the plants is so profound that readers will be amazed at the peasant's knowledge of the soil. The close connection between the peasant and the soil is fundamental, different from the urban tourist's knowledge of the soil, as "The travellers touch the roots of the grass and feel renewed / When they grasp the steering wheels again." (p.52) The travellers' perception of the soil is based on a romantic imagination of the soil long established by culture. Thus their knowledge is ambiguous, accidental and shallow. They feel "renewed" simply because their experience with the grass is different from their experience with urban life. The culture embodied in these travellers dominates nature. Therefore, their imagination of the soil can be regarded as a kind of romantic alienation.

In fact, the first line of the poem shows the poet's expectation to mend the rift between culture and nature. "Clay is the word and clay is the flesh." (p.34) In this line, Kavanagh borrows the idea from the gospel of John in The Holy Bible, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us". "The word" and "the flesh" are united into Jesus. But in the poem, Jesus disappears, and "the word" and "the flesh" are united into clay. "The word" symbolizes man's self-consciousness, namely culture in broader sense; "the flesh" stands for man's naturalness. This line indicates the poet's longing for full integration between culture and nature. *The Great Hunger* represents the poet's pursuit of meaning in life, just as the poem tells us, "Five hundred hearts were hungry for life" (39). In order to avoid the tragedy of life, Maguire eagerly searches for the meaning of life, but the poem ends in bitter despair, as suggested in the following line, "The hungry fiend /Screams the apocalypse of clay /In every corner of this land." (p.55) "The hungry fiend" stands for these hungry peasant and they are hungry because they can not find the meaning of life, which points directly to the title of the poem—the great hunger. Then, what is the fundamental cause of the peasant's tragic life?

3. CAUSE OF THE PARADOX IN RURAL IMAGINATION

Maguire hopes to find the meaning of life, which is the driving force of the whole poem. The accumulative emotion centers upon the meaninglessness of rural life, which is the essence of Maguire's tragedy. The root of his tragedy lies in the violation of human nature by such forces as family, morality and religion. Occasionally Maguire also realizes that "God's truth is life—even the grotesque shapes of its foulest fire." (p.36) But "Maguire was faithful to death" (p.36) and "death" symbolizes the repression of humanity and the abandonment of life. In the whole poem, the withering of humanity is mainly embodied in sexual repression, which is the major theme binding the whole poem. As man's natural attribute, sex functions as the most important activity to develop man's nature and produce new generations. However, Maguire "pretended to his soul /That children are tedious in hurrying fields of April /Where men are spanging across wide furrows. /Lost in the passion that never needs a wife—" (p.34) The poem reflects a very common phenomenon in Ireland that sexual repression affects many people, both males and females, disrupting their inner nature. Maguire's sister, Mary Anne, also remains unmarried in the poem and other women also go through such withering process, "Agnes held her skirts sensationally up, /And not because the grass was wet either. /A man was watching her, Patrick Maguire…And the wet grass could never cool the fire /That radiated from her unwanted womb…Where flesh was a thought more spiritual than music…out of reach of the peasant's hand." (p.42) "The young women ran wild /And dreamed of a child" (p.43), but "No one would take them; /No man could ever see /That their skirts had loosed buttons, /O the men were as blind as could be." (p.43) "And there would be girls sitting on the grass banks of lanes, /Stretched-legged and lingering staring—/A man might take one of them if he had the courage. /But 'No' was in every sentence of their story" (p.45). What Maguire can do is to open "his trousers wide over the ashes /And dreamt himself to lewd sleepiness." (p.41) Or "He sinned over the warm ashes again" (p.48). Corcoran (1997, p.61) points

out that the poem "sustain a painfully ironic correlation between a working life devoted to the fertility of the land and a sexual life atrophied at its very source". Maguire devotes his whole life to the fertility of the land, while his inner life is barren and bleak.

Sexual repression in the poem mainly results from the double confinements of family and religious morality. Maguire's mother, "tall hard as a Protestant spire" (p.37), is by no means a pleasing character in the poem, who dominates her children's life rigidly. She praises the man who makes a field his bride, suggesting that the fertility of the land surpasses the bliss of marriage. Maguire realizes that "his own heart is calling her mother a liar" (p.36), because God's truth is life and rejection of sex and marriage equals rejection of life. Maguire's widowed mother limits the natural development of her son's humanity, and her long life brought nothing but despair to her son because year after year Maguire marches towards his impotent old age. To Maguire, his mother "stayed too long, /Wife and mother in one (p.36)." Her domineering attitude continues till her death, and she controls the family routine tasks and her children's emotional life. Maguire hopes to break the cycle of his meaningless life, because "A new rhythm is a new life / And in it marriage is hung and money (p.44)." However, "A year passed and another hurried after it /And Patrick Maguire was still six months behind life—/His mother six months ahead of it" (p.46). After his mother died, the children cry in front of her bed, "because it was too late for crying" (p.51). Their life has been ruined by their mother's longevity. Maguire's tragedy results from Irish familism. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1979, p.109) points out that "in previous generations village men were delayed in marrying and setting up a household because of the greed of their fathers and the jealous possessiveness of their mothers." The parents would select a son as inheritor of the family property, and this inheritor would often become a forty-and fifty-year-old bachelor "who patiently stayed at home waiting for the farm inheritance from the father and approval from the mother to bring in a woman. In most cases both came too late to be of any use." (Scheper-Hughes, 1979, p.109) S. J. Connolly (1999, p.350) also points out that "the younger wife ruled by a much older husband often went on to enjoy a vigorous and powerful widowhood administering her property and the lives of her offspring. In the 1940s and 1950s government commissions, churches, and other organizations concerned at population decline identified these powerful widows as serious obstacles to marriage among farmers and property owners."

In traditional Irish rural communities, morality is interwoven with religion and notions of sexuality are often influenced by Catholic doctrines. Both the church and the Catholic government at the time regarded sex as an unclean and secret activity. Thus, the Irish people were quite reticent on the subject of sexuality. After its publication, *The Great Hunger* was censored by the state, because it mentions masturbation. Perhaps the underlying reason lies in that Kavanagh's representation of sexual repression bears an attack upon the policy of the church and the government on sex. In the metaphysic Ireland, "flesh was a thought more spiritual than music" (p.42). The bachelors like Maguire are bound in fetters of religious morality on sex. Once Maguire met a girl carrying a basket and he was earnest and heated, but after an instant "he saw Sin /Written in letters larger than John Bunyan dreamt of." (p.39) He also thought of seducing those school girls, but the notion lives only for an instant, because "there was the danger of talk /And jails are narrower than the five-sod ridge /And colder than the black hills facing Armagh in February (p.47-48)." In the last section, Maguire imagines himself lying in the grave, "If he opens his eyes once in a million years— /Through a crack in the crust of the earth he may see a face nodding in /Or a woman's legs. Shut them again for that sight is sin." (p.55) The narrator implies without doubt a strong sarcasm about Irish Catholic morality. Maguire's inner self loses its balance, and the narrator puts forward a doubt, "Ah, but the priest was one of the people too— /A farmer's son— and surely he knew /The needs of a brother and sister (p.42)." Ironically, the church to some extent rejects the natural expression of human emotion and man's natural craving for sex is regarded as evil by religious morality. Maguire, thus, lives in the hell of withering humanity, and he "called the gods of the Christian to prove /That his twisted skein /Was the necessary pain /And not the rope that was strangling true love (p.43)." But Maguire can not receive any revelation from the gods, and love becomes for him a luxury. He can only travel on the path of frustration and atrophy, until "an impotent worm on his thigh (p.37) ." The withering of sexual vigor coincides with the decline of life force, and Maguire's quest for meaning of life ends in failure. The narrator bitterly spells out that "No monster hand lifts up children and put down apes /As here (p.36)." Under the double confinement of familism and dehumanizing religious morality, Maguire's castration is complete and irreversible.

CONCLUSION

In *The Great Hunger*, the omniscient narrator presents to the readers a landscape with bleak natural scenery and corrupt social environment. The narrator does not pretend to be an objective observer. Instead, he is never hesitant to express his emotions and comments concerning the Irish rural life. Therefore, the poem combines lyricism and realism, making the poem filled with delicate tension both textually and emotionally. The rural utopia in traditional pastoral is deconstructed and criticized by the poet. However, the poet's complicated feelings to an extent

serve to abate the bitterness and sarcasm that are woven into the poem. Incorporated into the realistic portrayal of Irish rural life are the protagonist's quest for meaning of life and his craving for harmony between man and nature. The protagonist's life turns out to be a tragedy because humanity is dominated by familism and religious morality. Just as the last section of the poem describes, "Maguire spreads his legs over the impotent cinders that wake no manhood now…His sister tightens her legs and her lips and frizzles up /Like the wick of an oil-less lamp" (p.54), the deprivation of sexual vigor contributes much to the absence of life force and the healthy relationship between man and nature.

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