

The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/Aoifecork67>
Website: www.aoifesnotes.com

List of Prescribed Poems

Patrick Kavanagh

- Inniskeen Road: July Evening
- Shancoduff
- Epic
- A Christmas Childhood
- from The Great Hunger Section I
- Advent
- On Raglan Road
- The Hospital
- Canal Bank Walk
- Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin

Themes

- The role of the poet, poetry, the poetic process, the power of poetry
- The influence of past and present: Kavanagh acknowledges how Monaghan shaped him and, in his later poems, appreciates the wonder and beauty in the ordinary and everyday at the time he experiences them.
- Transformation of the everyday and the ordinary into the focus of wonder, delight and celebration. The poet's eye and the poet's sensibilities can make much of little.
- Desire to recapture childhood innocence and sense of wonder.

“He cherished the ordinary, the actual, the known,
the unimportant.”

Seamus Heaney: “The Sense of Place”, in *Preoccupations*, 1980

Sense of Place

- Inspired by places of significance in his life.
- Heaney said of him: ‘Kavanagh’s fidelity to the unpromising, unspectacular countryside of Monaghan and his rendering of the authentic speech of those parts gave the majority of Irish people, for whom the experience of life on the land was perhaps the most formative, an image of themselves that nourished their sense of themselves. ... Yet all the time, as he stitched himself into the outer patterns of his place, there was a sensitivity and a yearning that distinguished him’.

Sense of Place

Continued

- Celebration: 'Shancoduff', 'Epic', 'Advent', 'A Christmas Childhood', 'Canal Bank Walk', 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin', 'The Hospital'
- Pride and sadness: 'Shancoduff'
- Isolation: 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening'
- Recognises harsh reality: 'The Great Hunger'



The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

- It is the poet's love for and celebration of a place or an object that transforms it into something wonderful or important.
- Advent
- Canal bank sonnets
- Epic
- The Hospital
- A Christmas Childhood
- Shancoduff
- Raglan Road

“Kavanagh is a truly representative modern figure in that his subversiveness was turned upon himself: dissatisfaction, both spiritual and artistic, is what inspired his growth. The purity of inspiration in his early Monaghan lyrics is unquestionable and unfading, but when the success of these poems led to his being co-opted into what he might have called “the roots-in-the-soil racket” and being typecast as the peasant poet, Kavanagh rebelled. First, he wrote his anti-pastoral masterpiece, *The Great Hunger*, a poem that throws up language as dark-webbed and cold-breathed as the clay the potato-digger kicks up in its opening lines; then he went on to tear into the literary establishment of Dublin in the 1940s ... and then, finally, in the 50s, he returned to lyric poetry and wrote sonnets about the recovery of health and the recovery of inspiration, but this time in urban Dublin rather than rural Monaghan.”

Seamus Heaney: ‘Strangeness and beauty’ in *The Guardian* (1 Jan 2005)

What Might You be Asked?

Any combination of themes and style

For each poem you study, aim to examine in detail two to three images which convey a theme, and explore the techniques the poet uses in that image. Why does he approach the subject that way? What effect does it have on the reader?

Past and Sample Questions

2010 SEC: In your opinion, is Kavanagh successful in achieving his desire to transform the ordinary world into something extraordinary?

Support your answer with suitable reference to the poems on your course.

2012 SEC: ‘Aspects of Kavanagh’s poetry could be seen as dated and irrelevant, but his unique poetic language has enduring appeal.’

Do you agree with this assessment of his poetry? Support your points with suitable reference to the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh on your course.

2010 Examcraft Pre: ‘Patrick Kavanagh expresses his themes using language and imagery in a distinctive and imaginative way.’

Do you agree with this assessment of Kavanagh’s poetry? Your answer should focus on both his style and his themes. Support your points by reference to the poems you have studied.

Consider...

As you study Kavanagh's poetry, think of possible questions *you* would pose in an exam. Your exam-style question should cover themes and style and be general enough to allow for any combination of the prescribed poems to be used. Remember, there are ten poems on the course, and most students will have studied only six of them.



A Note on Quotes

If the poem is a sonnet, try to learn it by heart.

Highlighted quotes in this slideshow are the bare minimum.

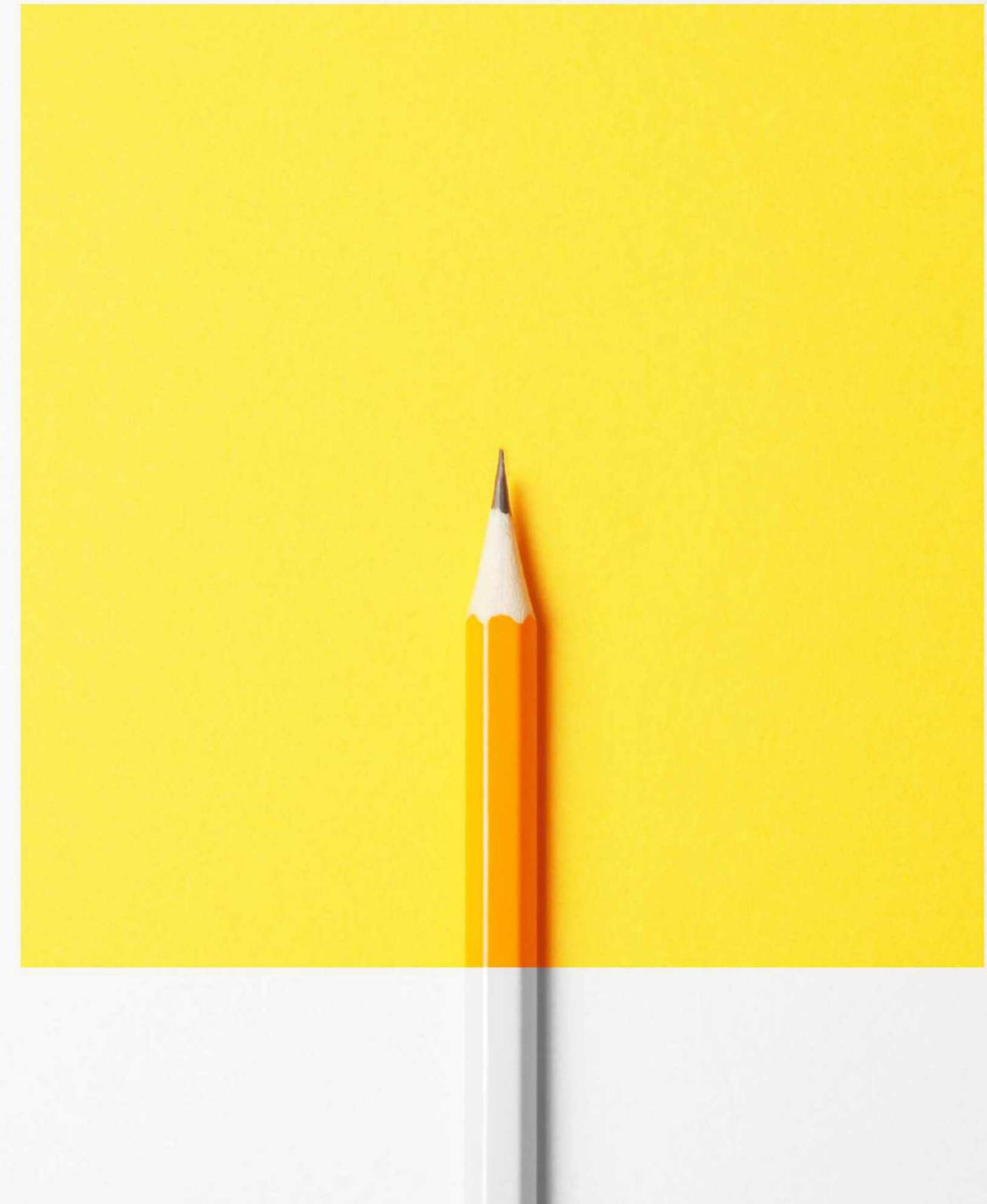
Quote to support every point you make. Comment on the reason your chosen point proves your point.

Weave quotes into the fabric of your sentences. Don't leave them hanging.

NB: The HOW

Use a verb to comment on the effect of the quote

- For each point you make, focus on what the poet says but also HOW he gets that message across and creates a certain mood. For example, in 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening', Kavanagh wants to highlight his isolation.
- The repetition of the word 'not' in 'not a spot' and 'not / A footfall' as well as 'no' in 'no shadow' highlight the sense of loneliness in this stanza.
- The long 'o' sounds in 'road', 'thrown' and 'stone' create a mournful mood.



Note: Because of spacing issues on the slides, the line breaks are not in exactly the same places as in your book, so make sure you check the original text.

Aoife O'Driscoll



Inniskeen Road: July Evening

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

Inniskeen Road: July Evening

Pre-Reading Tasks

- If you are planning to go to a party or a match with your friends, how do you feel on the day of the event?
- If you and your friends were chatting about an upcoming party, would an outsider understand all the references, or might they feel left out?
- Do you think poets and artists need solitude and time alone to reflect?
- What do you know about Alexander Selkirk and/or Robinson Crusoe? You might find these articles helpful: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-Selkirk>
<https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/usbiography/s/alexanderselkirk.html>

“For thirty years he lived the life of a small farmer’s son in the parish of Inniskeen, the life of fairs and football matches, of mass-going and dance-going ... Yet all the time, as he stitched himself into the outer patterns of his place, there was a sensitivity and a yearning that distinguished him. For this poet whom we recognize as being the voice of a communal life had a fiercely individual sense of himself.”

Seamus Heaney: “The Sense of Place” [1977], in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber 1980)

Lines 1-4

www.aoifesnotes.com



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.

- Poem is a sonnet divided into an octave (eight lines) and a sestet) six lines.
- The first quatrain describes a busy, active scene: a road full of people going to the dance.
- Those going to the dance are in pairs or small groups – contrast with the poet's isolation.
- Mention of 'Billy Brennan's barn' anchors the poem in Kavanagh's homeland and adds a sense of realism.
- Alliteration: 'Billy Brennan's barn' and rhyme create a sense of movement: the poem flows quickly and naturally at this stage, mirroring the flow of passers-by on the way to the dance.
- Excitement of the passers-by is palpable - also a sense that the poet is cut off from the 'half-talk code of mysteries' and the 'wink-and-elbow language of delight'.
- Colloquial language reflects the speech of the local people: poet is not part of their world.

Lines 5-8

www.aoifesnotes.com

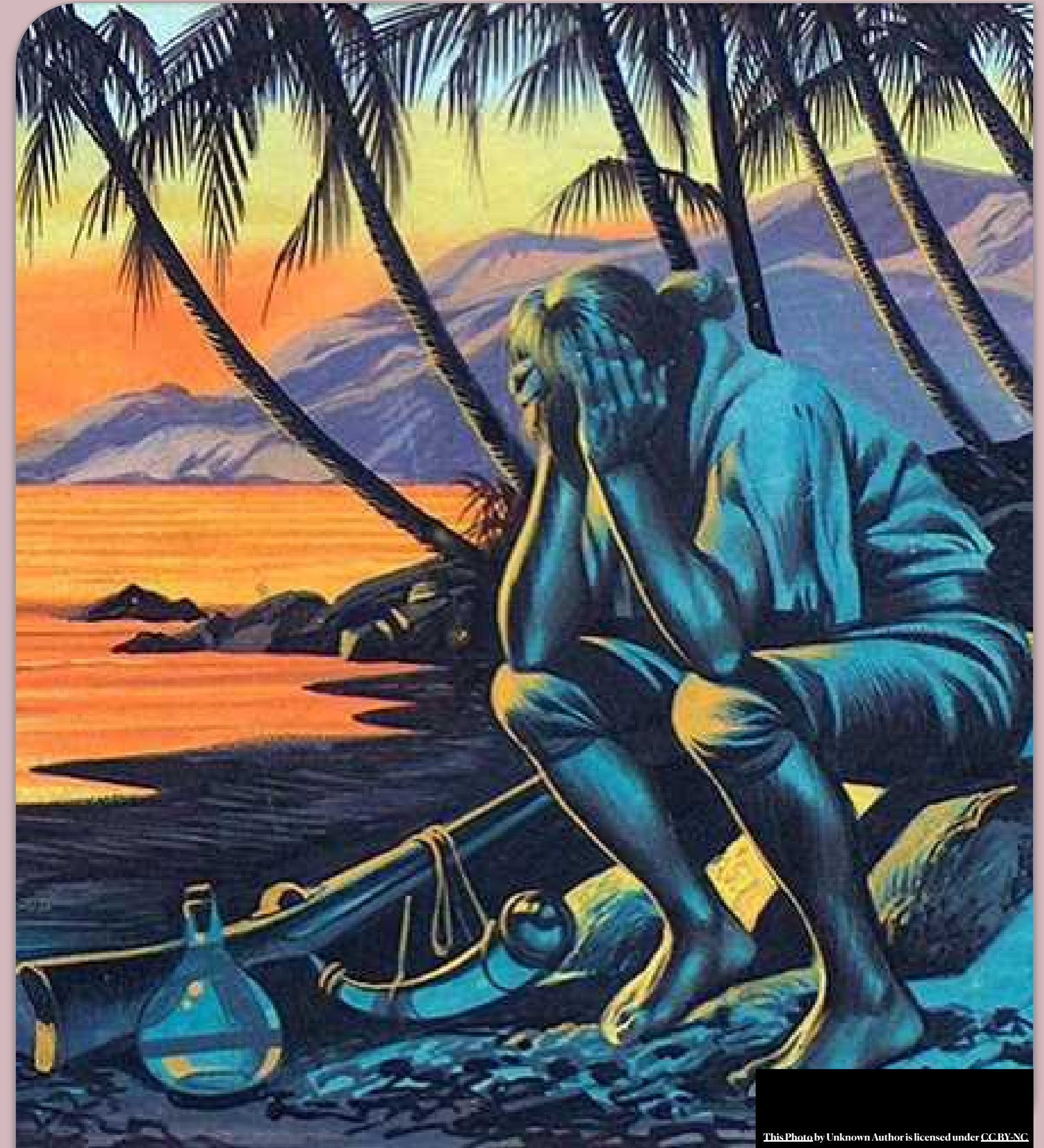


Half-past eight and there is not a spot
Upon a mile of road, no shadow thrown
That might turn out a man or woman, not
A footfall tapping secrecies of stone.

- Sudden change from activity and noise to silence and stillness is reflected in the slower pace of the lines. There is none of the repetition that moved the previous lines along.
- The long 'o' sounds in 'road', 'thrown' and 'stone' create a mournful mood.
- 'Not' in 'not a spot' and 'not / A footfall' as well as 'no' in 'no shadow' highlight the sense of loneliness in this stanza.
- We can easily imagine the poet looking and listening hopefully for some sign of companionship on this empty road.
- The 'footfall tapping secrecies of stone' reminds us of the coded 'wink and elbow language' and the 'half-talk code of mysteries' the poet is not a part of these conversations.
- The alliteration in 'secrecies of stone' mimics a whisper, which is appropriate when referring to secrets.

Lines 9-12

www.aofesnotes.com



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC

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

- The poet turns the focus to himself: the first line begins with the word 'I'.
- Dismissal of the pretentiousness of poets and the 'solemn talk of contemplation'.
- Alexander Selkirk: Scottish sailor who, by his own choice, spent four months as a castaway on a South Pacific island – inspiration for the story of Robinson Crusoe.
- The poet, like Selkirk, has chosen a path in life that cuts him off from others, but this does not make his 'plight' any easier to bear.
- The repetition of 'and' in 'king and government and nation' emphasises the solitary nature of the poet's life
- Kavanagh may believe that a poet has an exalted status in his community, but with that comes great loneliness. He is not one of the people.
- Link between these lines and Cowper's poem about Selkirk (see next slide) proves Kavanagh's literary credentials.

William Cowper

(1731-1800)

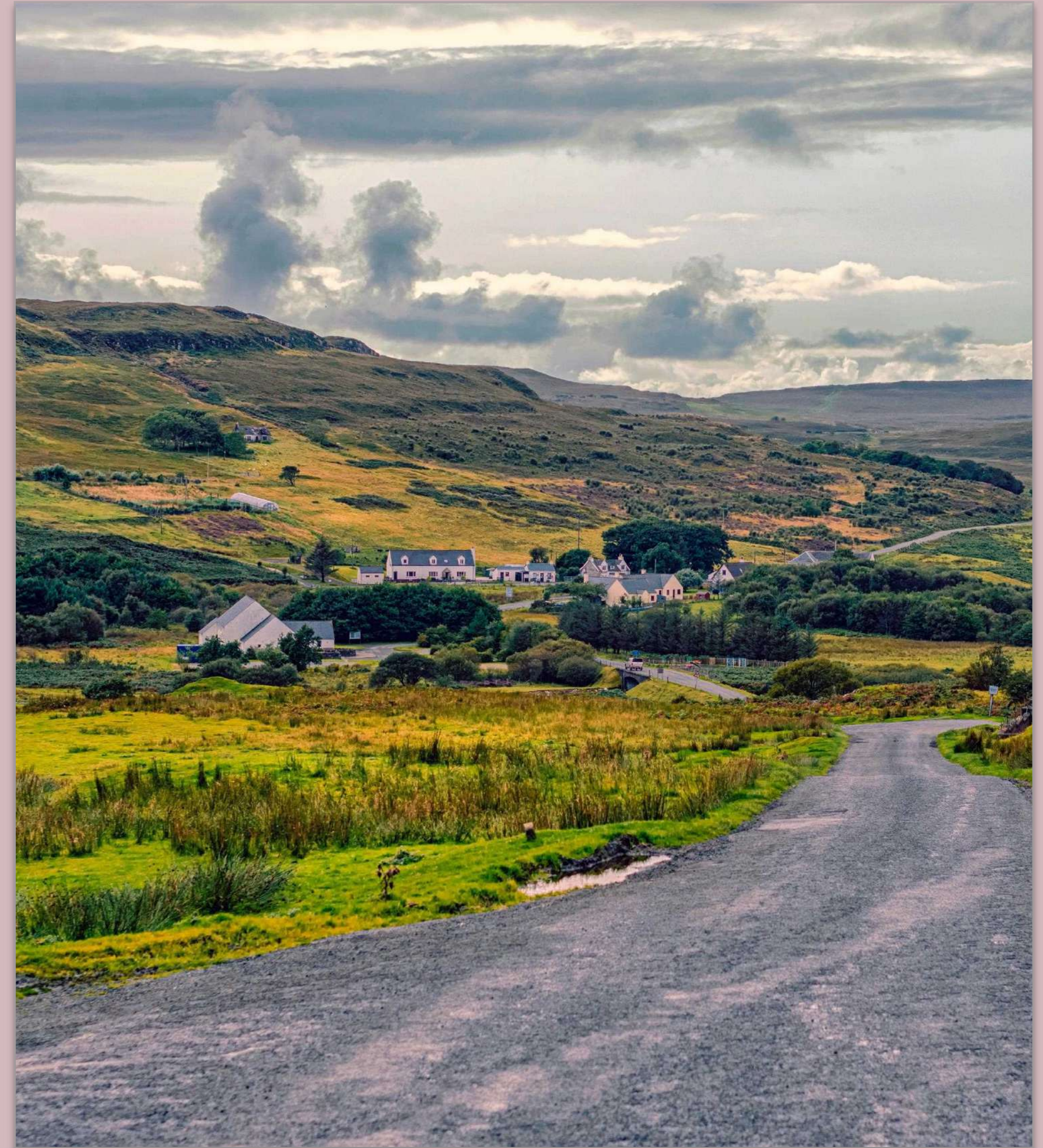
The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk First Stanza

I am monarch of all I survey;
My right there is none to dispute;
From the centre all round to the sea
I am lord of the fowl and the brute
O Solitude! where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face?
Better dwell in the midst of alarms,
Than reign in this horrible place.



Lines 13-14

www.aoifesnotes.com



A road, a mile of kingdom, I am king
Of banks and stones and every blooming thing

- The word 'blooming' can be interpreted in a number of ways.
- Positive: 'blooming' has connotations of blossoming, flourishing, flowering of both the natural world and the inner, creative life of the poet.
- Negative: 'blooming' could be a bitter, colloquial way of referring to the poet's surroundings: he takes no joy in being alone in this rural setting.
- It is up to the reader to decide if Kavanagh's tone is bitter, self-pitying, envious and if he considers himself far above his neighbours. The quote on the next slide may help you decide.

“A poet is never one of the people. He is detached, remote, and the life of small-time dances and talk about football would not be for him.”

Patrick Kavanagh, *Self-Portrait* (RTE, 30 Oct. 1962; Dolmen Press 1964)

Themes and Exam Focus

Isolation of the poet

Being both an insider and an outsider

Poet's place in the world

Sonnet

Simple, colloquial language

Blend of natural and literary imagery



Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Composing – 2021 -Write a discursive essay in which you consider the meaning and importance of community.
- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Composing – 2019 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on some of the places that have helped to shape and define you, and the significance of these places in your life.
- Composing – 2018 – Write a short story in which the central character’s status as an outsider has a direct influence on the plot.
- Composing – 2015 - Write a personal essay about your response to an ending, or endings, in your life that you consider significant.
- Comp A – 2012 – Text 1: Margaret Laurence remembers and reflects on the small prairie town where she grew up.
- Comp B – 2012 – Text 1: Write a letter to Margaret Laurence, in response to Text 1, commenting on what you find interesting in the extract, and telling her about your home place and its impact on you.
- Composing – 2012 – Write a short story in which a young character is eager to leave home.

Shanoduff

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Does the opinion of others matter to you and influence what you like and dislike?
- Does a place have to be picture-perfect for you to love it? What might make you feel love

for a place that is less than perfect in the eyes of others?

- How do you feel if others criticise a place you love?
- Read this brief overview of the story of Lot's wife:
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lots-wife>
- What do you think is the message of the story of Lot's wife?

Lines 1-5

www.aoifesnotes.com



My black hills have never seen the sun rising,
Eternally they look north towards Armagh.
Lot's wife would not be salt if she had been
Incurious as my black hills that are happy
When dawn whitens Glassdrummond chapel.

- Written in 1934, some years before Kavanagh moved to Dublin.
- The hills face north, and will never be warmed by the rising sun. Yet they are unchanging and eternal. People may come and go, but they will last.
- Kavanagh turns 'Incurious' into a positive, reminding us that in the Bible story, Lot's wife disobeyed the order from God and turned to look back at the city. The hills, however, are 'happy / When dawn whitens Glassdrummond chapel'. Kavanagh firmly takes the side of rural rather than urban life. To be 'incurious' about city life is a positive. Kavanagh had not yet moved to Dublin to embrace literary life.
- Place names ground this poem in reality. Seeing the marvellous in the ordinary is typical of Kavanagh (see quote on next slide). They also create a sense of intimacy and pride.

‘But from his earliest success in the sonnet “Inniskeen Road, July Evening”, with its luminous, laddish notice of “every blooming thing” ... right down to the spontaneous opulence of the Canal Bank sonnets, the poems are where he finds and keeps a marvellous balance between his resolute down-to-earthness and his equally undeniable impulse to transcendence.’

Seamus Heaney: *The Guardian* (1 Jan. 2005)

Lines 6-10

www.aoifesnotes.com



My hills hoard the bright shillings of March

While the sun searches in every pocket.

They are my Alps and I have climbed the Matterhorn

With a sheaf of hay for three perishing calves

In the field under the Big Forth of Rocksavage.

- Repetition of 'my' reinforces possessive, protective love of this place.
- Personification of the land: the hills were 'Incurious' and 'happy', now they 'hoard' their little pockets of ice as a miser may hoard coins. This adds to the idea that the relationship Kavanagh has with Shancoduff is that of a lover. Negatives become positive as he sees the best in his beloved.
- Admiration for the stubbornness and independent spirit of the place: it holds on to pockets of ice regardless of the changing season.
- Hyperbole elevates this little hill farm to the level of the Alps. It also creates a mock-heroic vision of Kavanagh: in the third line in the stanza he is climbing the Matterhorn, but then he brings the poem down to earth in the next lines when he says he is bringing hay to calves suffering in the 'perishing' cold of the hills.
- The name 'Rocksavage' conjures up stark, cruel images of Shancoduff. This is a hard place to live.

Lines 10-16

www.aoifesnotes.com



The sleety winds fondle the rushy beards of Shancoduff

While the cattle-drovers sheltering in Featherna Bush

Look up and say: 'Who owns them hungry hills

That the water hen and snipe must have forsaken?

A poet? Then by heavens he must be poor.'

I hear and is my heart not badly shaken?

- Blend of harsh reality - 'sleety winds' – and affection – 'fondle'.
- Negative note is introduced as passing farmers and cattle drovers talk contemptuously about Kavanagh's beloved Shancoduff. They see the land for what it really is.
- Direct speech ensures that the views are the drovers', not Kavanagh's.
- Drovers' description of the 'hungry hills' abandoned by the marshland birds brings an objective note of reality to a hitherto romantic view of Shancoduff.
- This reality distresses Kavanagh, as it might do if he heard a loved one being sneered at or criticised. His heart is "badly shaken". The biting criticism hurts the poet in a way the biting wind could not.
- There is also an implication in the farmer's comments that Kavanagh is out of place and not a real farmer. He is not one of them.
- Although his heart may be 'badly shaken', Kavanagh knows that he, unlike the drovers, can see beyond the poverty and coldness of the place. His ability to see the true value of a place is more than how fertile the land is sets him apart.

‘Kavanagh said once that a poet’s journey is the way “from simplicity back to simplicity”. The simplicity of Kavanagh’s “Shancoduff” ... stems from a totally coherent and lucid vision. In an essay called “Pietism and Poetry”, Kavanagh says that ‘The odd thing about the best modern poets is their utter simplicity’. I would further add that only the man who sees completely can be completely simple.’

Brendan Kennelly: ‘Patrick Kavanagh’ (1970)

Themes and Exam Focus

- The importance and value of everyday life. Although others may see little to value in the "black hills", they are important to Kavanagh.
- The life of a poet: The loneliness of the poet's life is one which Kavanagh has explored in a number of his poems: most notably in "Inniskeen Road: July Evening".



Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Read Kavanagh's 'Stony Grey Soil' as an unseen poem. Study the contrast between his attitude in the two poems. <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/stony-grey-soil/>
- Composing – 2019 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on some of the places that have helped to shape and define you, and the significance of these places in your life.
- Composing – 2015 – Write a personal essay about one or more moments of uncertainty you have experienced.
- Composing – 2013 – Write a feature article for a popular magazine in which you discuss the competing attractions of both urban and rural lifestyles.
- Comp A – 2012 – Text 1: Margaret Laurence remembers and reflects on the small prairie town where she grew up.
- Comp B – 2012 – Text 1: Write a letter to Margaret Laurence, in response to Text 1, commenting on what you find interesting in the extract, and telling her about your home place and its impact on you.

Epic

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

Epic

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Why are boundaries between neighbours and between countries so hotly contested?
- Do you think that some boundaries are worth fighting over and others not worth the conflict? If so, what makes the difference?
- Why are some conflicts (international or local) considered more important than others?
- What do you know about the ancient Greek poet Homer? You might find these websites helpful when researching his life and works:
<https://www.biography.com/writer/homer>
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/homer>

“I recall the row over the half a rood of rock in 1938. The row was temporarily settled when the contestants agreed to arbitration by the local schoolmaster ... Neither side was fully satisfied, and the row smouldered for some years.”

Peter Kavanagh (Patrick's brother)

Lines 1-4

www.aoifesnotes.com



I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided: who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims

- The title 'Epic' implies a long poem about historic or legendary heroes, yet this is a sonnet.
- First lines pick up the ironic tone of the title: Kavanagh claims to have lived in 'important places' and times in which 'great events' were decided
- Ridiculous nature of the actual conflict is quickly revealed: the neighbours fought over who owned an eighth of an acre of worthless, rocky land
- Phrases 'no-man's land' and 'armed claims' evoke images of world wars
- These claims are 'pitchfork-armed', bringing the conflict back to the rural realm and highlighting the small scale of this local fight
- The feud occurred in 1938, just before the outbreak of war

Lines 5-8

www.aoifesnotes.com

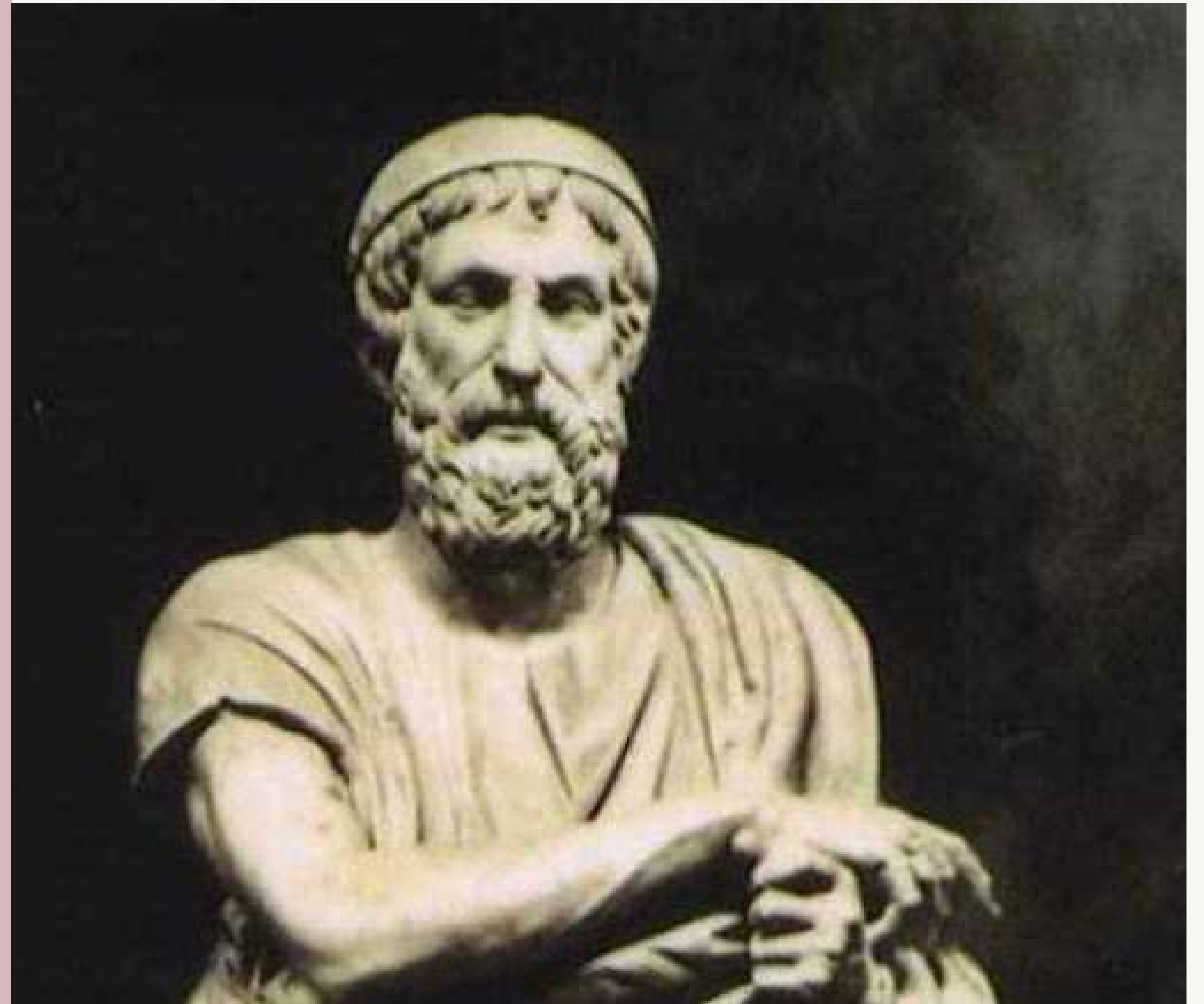


I heard the Duffys shouting 'Damn your soul'
And old McCabe, stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel –
'Here is the march along these iron stones'.

- Drama and authenticity added by dialogue: 'Damn your soul' and the names: 'Duffys', 'old McCabe'
- Farcical rather than heroic: it is an old man 'stripped to the waist' defiantly walking along what he believes is the 'march' or boundary of the land
- Again, the worthless nature of the land is stressed: these are 'iron stones' rather than fertile land
- Reference to 'cast-steel' and 'iron' brings to mind weaponry of war

Lines 9-12

www.aoifesnotes.com

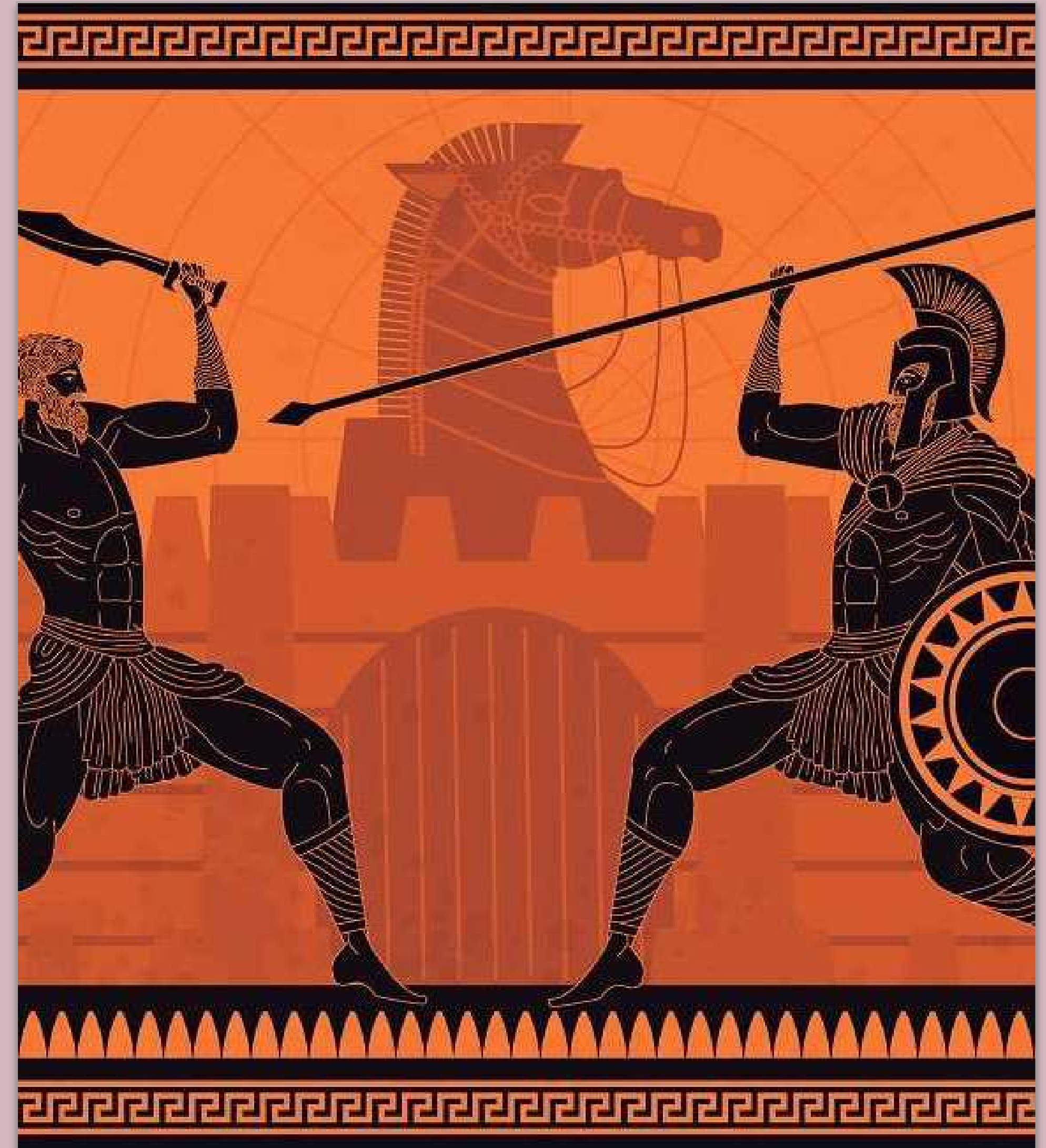


That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
was more important? I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind.

- Surprising shift to international events with offhand reference to the 'Munich bother'. Once more, the use of real names – 'Ballyrush and Gortin' adds immediacy and authenticity to the poem.
- Question – 'Which / was more important?' – will be answered at the end of the poem
- The question may seem ridiculous but it warrants discussion – what makes one conflict more important than another? Everyone knows the name 'Munich' but few know 'Ballyrush and Gortin'. Yet the latter two are far more important to the Duffys and McCabes than any foreign dispute over territory.
- Kavanagh admits to doubting the importance of the parochial issue
- However, Homer's ghost speaks to him (note onomatopoeia in 'whispered')
- Is there a sense of Kavanagh's ego in allying himself with one of the greatest epic poets of all time?

Lines 13-14

www.aoifesnotes.com



He said: I made the *Iliad* from such

A local row. Gods make their own importance.

- Kavanagh now gives what one critic calls ‘Homeric grandeur’ to this ‘local row’.
- The importance of the event lies in the telling of it, not in the row itself.
- Is there a sense of inflated ego in Kavanagh’s linking himself to Homer and ‘Gods’?
- Kavanagh asked earlier whether the ‘Munich bother’ or this feud was ‘more important’. Here, he answers the question.
- Note the structure of the sonnet: the enjambment mirrors the lack of clear boundaries in the poet’s homeplace.

“His sonnet “Epic” is ... his affirmation of the profound importance of the parochial.”

Seamus Heaney, “The Sense of Place” [1977], in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber 1980)

“[In ‘Epic’ place and men are] made important only by the light of the mind which is now playing on them.”

Seamus Heaney: ‘The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh’, in *The Government of The Tongue* (London; Faber & Faber 1988)

Themes and Exam Focus

- The power of poetry and the poet
- Link between the personal and the universal
- Humorous tone / irony
- Poet's sense of his own importance
- Classical allusion



Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Composition – 2019 – Write a personal essay in which you reflect on what feeds your imagination.
- Composition – 2019 – Write a personal essay in which you reflect on some of the places that have helped to shape and define you, and the significance of these places in your life.
- Unseen Poem – 2017 – ‘Bounty’ by Robyn Sarah
- Composing – 2015 – Write a descriptive essay about what you find beautiful or exotic in everyday life.

A Christmas Childhood

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

A Christmas Childhood

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What are your earliest Christmas memories?
- Do you think children notice details in the world around them in a way that adults do not?

Lines 1-10

www.aoifesnotes.com



One side of the potato-pits was white with frost –
How wonderful that was, how wonderful!
And when we put our ears to the paling-post
The music that came out was magical.

The light between the ricks of hay and straw
Was a hole in Heaven's gable. An apple tree
With its December-glinting fruit we saw –
O you, Eve, were the world that tempted me

To eat the knowledge that grew in clay
And death the germ within it!

- Matter-of-fact description of ordinary scene in the first line is followed by enthusiastic repetition stressing 'How wonderful' this was. The exclamation mark adds to the heightened emotion. The six-year-old Kavanagh sees the extraordinary in the ordinary.
- This idea of wonder and magic continues when Kavanagh describes the children leaning their heads against the fence post to hear the hum of the wire reverberating through the wood. Every sound and sight seems to add to the young child's delight.
- Kavanagh imagines that a gap between the hay ricks is a 'hole in heaven's gable'. An apple tree is compared to the tree in the garden of Eden. This adult world tempted Kavanagh and took away his innocence. There is a sense of regret and resentment.
- Religious imagery shows how sacred this time, this place and this sense of innocence were to Kavanagh.

Lines 10-16

www.aoifesnotes.com



Now and then
I can remember something of the gay
Garden that was childhood's. Again

The tracks of cattle to a drinking-place,
A green stone lying sideways in a ditch
Or any common sight, the transfigured face
Of a beauty that the world did not touch.

- Adult life cannot compare with the 'Garden that was childhood's'. When he was a child, everything was filled with beauty. Simple, not obviously beautiful elements of the countryside become transfigured into objects of wonder and delight. The Monaghan countryside becomes the 'Garden' of Eden, albeit briefly.
- Enjambment means that the rhymes are less obvious than they might otherwise be. The rush of enthusiasm, delight and wonder are best conveyed by the absence of a more obvious rhyme scheme. This section of the poem seems to flow naturally and easily.

Lines 17-24

www.aoifesnotes.com



My father played the melodion

Outside at our gate;

There were stars in the morning east

And they danced to his music.

Across the wild bogs his melodion called

To Lennons and Callans.

As I pulled on my trousers in a hurry

I knew something strange had happened.

- The second part of the poem is filled with the child's memories. The adult voice, with its regret and resentment, vanishes as the poet loses himself in the excitement of the childhood Christmas.
- We meet For the first time, people are introduced. The father's music radiates out, calling to and uniting neighbours.
- The very stars in the sky celebrate
- The rhyme scheme vanishes

Lines 25-32

www.aoifesnotes.com



Outside in the cow-house my mother
Made the music of milking;
The light of her stable-lamp was a star
And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle.

A water-hen screeched in the bog,
Mass-going feet
Crunched the wafer-ice on the pot-holes,
Somebody wistfully twisted the bellows wheel.

- The poet's mother makes a music of her own as the milk hits the metal pail. The ordinary becomes filled with wonder.
- Reference to the star of Bethlehem again highlights how sacred this time and place is to the poet.
- Beautiful, sensual language brings the scene to life for us.
- Onomatopoeia in 'screeched', 'crunched' and internal rhyme and soft 's' sounds in 'wistfully twisted' are wonderfully evocative and gentle.
- The word 'wistfully' captures the poet's longing for that innocent time.
- 'Wafer ice' brings to mind the Eucharist.

Lines 33-40

www.aoifesnotes.com



My child poet picked out the letters
On the grey stone,
In silver the wonder of a Christmas townland,
The winking glitter of a frosty dawn.

Cassiopeia was over
Cassidy's hanging hill,
I looked and three whin bushes rode across
The horizon – the Three Wise Kings.

- The poet in the child Kavanagh sees the shapes of letters in the frost on the stones and sees the 'wonder of a Christmas townland'.
- The boy sees the beauty of a constellation in the sky (again, the mention of stars links back to the Nativity) and his imagination turns three gorse bushes into the Three Wise Kings. The naming of 'Cassidy's Hill' adds a personal touch and shows again Kavanagh's affection for his childhood home.
- In the poet's imagination, the gorse bushes on the horizon might be the 'Three Wise Kings'. Christmas magic and wonder has transformed everything.

Lines 41-52

www.aoifesnotes.com



An old man passing said:

‘Can’t he make it talk -

The melodion’. I hid in the doorway

And tightened the belt of my box-pleated coat.

I nicked six nicks on the door-post

With my penknife’s big blade –

There was a little one for cutting tobacco.

And I was six Christmases of age.

My father played the melodion,

My mother milked the cows,

And I had a prayer like a white rose pinned

On the Virgin Mary’s blouse.

- The poem ends with a self-portrait of the six-year old Kavanagh standing shyly in the doorway, playing with his penknife. The knife is an adult one and is presumably a Christmas present. The young boy uses it to make six marks in the doorpost – one for each year of his life.
- The onomatopoeic ‘nicked’, along with the detail of the ‘box-pleated coat’ add a note of realism and the everyday to this magical scene.
- The circular nature of this section of the poem mirrors the changing seasons and the recurring Christmases by which the child measures his age.
- There is a sense of reverence in the final lines, and an appreciation of the preciousness of the family bond. The poem ends on a tender, loving note. The little boy offers his prayer to the Virgin Mary in the same way that an admirer may offer a rose to a loved one.

Themes and Exam Focus

- Nostalgia for the innocence of childhood
- Child's sense of wonder
- Finding the extraordinary in the ordinary
- Celebration of family
- Religious imagery
- Vivid, sensual language
- Contrast between two halves of the poem



Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Comp A – 2021: TIME PIECES - Text 1 is based on edited extracts from *Time Pieces – A Dublin Memoir* by John Banville. In this text the writer reflects on some childhood memories and shares his thoughts on the past.
- Composing – 2021 -Write a discursive essay in which you consider the meaning and importance of community.
- Composing – 2019: Write a personal essay reflecting on what you perceive to be the pleasures particular to youth.
- Comp A - 2017: THE WORLD OF CHILDHOOD – Text 3 is adapted from a memoir entitled *Report from the Interior* by American writer Paul Auster. In this extract he focuses on the world of childhood.
- Comp B - 2017: You have been asked to participate in a radio programme entitled *Reflections on the World of Childhood*. Write the text to be broadcast on radio, in which you reflect on the world of childhood, discuss what captured your childish imagination, and recall a selection of the songs or sounds or stories that live on in your memory.
- Comp A – 2014 THE INFLUENCE OF THE PAST – Text 3 is based on an essay by Seamus Heaney entitled *The Sense of the Past*. In it he reflects the influence of the past on our lives.
- Composing – 2012: Write a feature article for a newspaper or magazine on the role played by memory and the past in our lives.

The Great Hunger

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

The Great Hunger

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What do you know about ‘The Great Hunger’: the Great Famine in the 1840s?
- Can people hunger for things other than food?
- What do you know about Éamon de Valera’s vision of the ideal Ireland?
- During the 1940s was the Catholic Church’s attitude towards sexuality and how much power did the Church have in Irish life?
- Note: In Christianity and Judaism, the Book of Life records the names of all those who are destined for heaven.

Lines 1-17

www.aoifesnotes.com



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.

If we watch them an hour is there anything we can prove

Of life as it is broken-backed over the Book

Of Death? Here crows gabble over worms and frogs

And the gulls like old newspapers are blown clear of the
hedges, luckily.

Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?

Or why do we stand here shivering?

- Instead of the Word being made flesh, as in the bible verse about the birth of Christ, all is turned to clay. This ominous opening conjures up the idea of death rather than life.
- Maguire and the potato gatherers are described in inhuman terms: they move like automatons. Their resemblance to scarecrows indicates poverty and also hints that they are tied to the land they farm.
- The framing of the scene is cinematic and Kavanagh invites us to look closely at his version of rural Irish life in the 1940s. The men are 'broken-backed' by hard labour.
- The Book of Death, as opposed to the Book of Life, suggests bleakness and a lack of hope of salvation.
- The hungry birds quarrel over food and are blown about by the harsh winds. There is no harmony in nature; this is no pastoral idyll.
- The men are like 'wet clods'; they are part of the land but they lack warmth, energy, vitality.
- The second last line may be asking if there is any spark of imagination in the men who resemble 'wet clods' or the poet may also be wondering if such an uninspiring subject can generate poetry.

Which of these men
Loved the light and the queen
Too long virgin? Yesterday was summer. Who was it
promised marriage to himself
Before apples were hung from the ceilings for Hallowe'en?
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, diverted by the angles
Where the plough missed or a spade stands, straitening the
way.

- Rhetorical questions capture despair and hopelessness of the bachelor farmer's life.
- They loved the Virgin Mary and the light of religion, but sacrificed real love in their lives as a result.
- 'Yesterday was summer' indicates the passing of the summer of the men's lives. Now they are in their autumn years and still alone.
- Watching the men's lives is like watching a tragedy on stage. The reference to the 'last curtain' is Kavanagh's way of criticising Irish playwrights who romanticised rural life in their plays. This, he says, is the reality.
- The 'last soul' rolls down the hill 'passively' as a bag of wet clay would do. This suggests a downhill, directionless life. They are heading inexorably for death.

Lines 18-42

www.aoifesnotes.com



A dog lying on a torn jacket under a heeled-up cart,
A horse nosing along the posied headland, trailing
A rusty plough. Three heads hanging between wide-apart
Legs. October playing a symphony on a slack wire paling.
Maguire watches the drills flattened out
And the flints that lit a candle for him on a June altar
Flameless. The drills slipped by and the days slipped by
And he trembled his head away and ran free from the
world's halter,

- There is no real sense of vitality or direction in this section of the poem. The dog is 'lying', the horse is 'trailing a rusty plough', the fence wire is 'slack'.
- The cinematic description of the dog and the horse vividly capture the scene.
- The 'rusty plough' may be a symbol of frustrated sexuality. Indeed, many people found 'The Great Hunger' offensive when it was written.
- October is associated with endings. All that lies ahead is winter. The image of hope - a lighting candle on a June altar – is in the past. All is now 'Flameless'.
- The land is ploughed every year but nothing changes. Time slips away.
- Maguire is like the horse: tethered to the land. He believes he is free, however, and has escaped the 'world's halter'.

And thought himself wiser than any man in the townland
When he laughed over pints of porter
Of how he came free from every net spread
In the gaps of experience. He shook a knowing head
And pretended to his soul
That children are tedious in hurrying fields of April
Where men are spanning across wide furrows.
Lost in the passion that never needs a wife –
The pricks that pricked were the pointed pins or harrows.
Children scream so loud that the crows could bring
The seed of an acre away with crow-rude jeers.

- Maguire has a false impression of himself and believes he has escaped the tie of a family, pretending that ‘children are tedious’ and get in the way on the farm.
- Maguire is married to the land and the ploughing or harrowing of the land replaces the sexual act. The loss of real passion and intimacy is obvious, despite Maguire’s claims that he is better off as he is.
- In early to mid-twentieth century Ireland, the son only inherited the farm when his parents were dead. This meant that farmers were generally not in a position to offer much to a potential bride until they came into their inheritance, at which time many were old men themselves. Therefore, a large number of these farmers remained bachelors. We learn later in the poem that Maguire’s mother lives to be ninety-one.

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,

Turn over the weedy clods and tease out the tangled skeins.

What is he looking for there?

He thinks it is a potato, but we know better

Than his mud-gloved fingers probe in this insensitive hair.

- Maguire turns over the ‘weedy clods’ of earth and sifts through the roots of the potato plant, looking for potatoes.
- Kavanagh links us, the readers, to his view of Maguire: ‘we know better’. We are the audience, watching the play of Maguire’s life unfold before us.
- Kavanagh’s tone here seems superior – ‘we know better’ – but it may also be understanding and sympathetic. We see through Maguire’s view of himself and understand that there will be a part of him forever searching for love and sexual fulfilment.
- The plant roots are ‘insensitive hair’. Unlike a lover running his hand through his partner’s hair, Maguire will get no response.

“With *The Great Hunger* (1942) the reality of rural life appeared for the first time in Anglo-Irish poetry. The ripples from that extraordinary work are still spreading, for, as well as being a masterpiece, it changed the whole course of Irish poetry. Henceforth, whatever their background, education, and obsession, poets would have to measure themselves against Kavanagh’s breathtaking honesty of vision.”

John Montague, A Tribute to Patrick Kavanagh, in *The Irish Times*, 2 Dec. 1967

Lines 42-61

www.aoifesnotes.com



‘Move forward the basket and balance it steady
In this hollow. Pull down the shafts of that cart, Joe,
And straddle the horse,’ Maguire calls.
‘The wind’s over Brannagan’s, now that means rain.
Graip up some withered stalks and see that no potato falls
Over the tail-board going down the ruckety pass –
And that’s a job we’ll have to do in December,
Gravel it and build a kerb on the bog-side. Is that Cassidy’s ass
Out in my clover? Curse o’ God –
Where is that dog?
Never where he’s wanted.’ Maguire grunts and spits
Through a clay-wattled moustache and stares about him from
the height.

- Maguire speaks for the first time in the poem. He is rough and practical. He tells the other worker to ‘Graip’ or fork up some stalks and make sure that none of the potatoes fall off the cart going down the uneven path. He curses as a neighbour’s donkey has broken into his field and his dog is not around when he needs it to chase the donkey off his land.
- Maguire’s coarse manners are shown in his grunting and spitting when he has finished giving orders.
- This realistic but unattractive description of the farmer with his ‘clay-wattled moustache’ shows Kavanagh knows the harsh realities of farm life in the 1940s compared to those who romanticised rural life.

His dream changes again like the cloud-swung wind
And he is not so sure now if his mother was right
When she praised the man who made a field his bride.

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 fertile when his own
body
Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under two coulter's crossed
in Christ's Name.

- Despite his claims to be better off without a family and his rough utterances, Maguire has an inner life and all the doubts and fears that come with that.
- He wonders if his mother was right to encourage him to focus solely on the farm rather than take a wife. (Many farmers at the time remained bachelors and their mothers continued to live with them on the farm.)
- Kavanagh's tone becomes more sympathetic as he urges us to 'Watch him, watch him'. Again, we are the audience who can only watch but can do nothing to change the outcome.
- Maguire's spirit is compared to a 'wet sack flapping about the knees of time'. The image is one of pointlessness: his life 'flaps' through time but goes nowhere.
- He lives for the land, but when he dies his body will simply fertilise that same land. His body will be 'spread' like fertiliser under two crossed cutting blades from a plough. In life, Maguire has never had the opportunity to father children or to find fulfilling intimacy. He has sacrificed his fertility for that of the land.

”*The Great Hunger* first published in 1942 and collected in *A Soul for Sale*, is Kavanagh’s rage against the dying of the light, a kind of elegy in a country farmyard, informed not by heraldic notions of seasonal decline and mortal dust but by an intimacy with actual clay and a desperate sense that life in the secluded spot is no book of pastoral hours but an enervating round of labour and lethargy.”

Seamus Heaney (‘The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh’, in *Preoccupations*, 1980)

Lines 62-79

www.aoifesnotes.com



He was suspicious in his youth as a rat near strange bread
When girls laughed; when they screamed he knew that meant
The cry of fillies in season. He could not walk
The easy road to his destiny. He dreamt
The innocence of young brambles to hooked treachery.
O the grip, O the grip of irregular fields! No man escapes.
It could not be that back of the hills love was free
And ditches straight.
No monster hand lifted up children and put down apes
As here
‘O God if I had been wiser!’

- The poem shifts to Maguire's youth.
- Farming imagery describes his unease at a time in his life when he was becoming sexually aware. He was as wary 'as a rat near strange bread', fearing a trap in the flirtatious behaviour of young girls. Yet, being a farmer, he knows the behaviours that are precursors to sex: the girls' raised voices are like 'The cry of fillies in season'.
- Despite his awareness, Maguire is prevented from walking 'The easy road to destiny'. The Church's repressive views on natural sexuality keep Maguire from a life of intimacy and companionship. The grip of the Church chokes the life from his hopes of happiness and fulfilment.
- The repetition of 'grip' highlights the chokehold life on the farm has on Maguire. Yet he cannot imagine that there is a perfect version of life in which ditches are straight and love easy and free.
- The land is compared to monster that transforms innocent children, full of promise, into brutish creatures.
- Maguire's desperate cry (which may be contained in his sigh rather than spoken aloud) shows that he knows deep in his heart that if he had been wiser, he could have made a better life for himself instead of listening to those who told him sex was foul and life on the farm the only true calling for him.

That was his sigh like the brown breeze in the thistles.
He looks towards his house and haggard. 'O God if I had been
wiser!'
But now a crumpled leaf from the whitethorn bushes
Darts like a frightened robin, and the fence
Shows the green of after-grass through a little window,
And he knows that his own heart is calling his mother a liar.
God's truth is life – even the grotesque shapes of its foulest
fire.

- Maguire's words are repeated as his conviction that he has made a mistake grow stronger.
- The 'crumpled leaf' is an image of death and is linked to Maguire's life.
- The 'haggard' is a hay yard, but it also means 'exhausted and worn out', as Maguire is. The double meaning is intentional.
- Maguire knows, too late, that his mother was wrong to tell him to devote all his energies and passion to the land.
- Kavanagh does not believe that sexuality is grotesque or foul, but implies that is how it is painted by the Church. In truth, God's will is best expressed in taking joy in intimacy and in living life to the full. (In 'Canal Bank Walk', Kavanagh says a bird is 'gathering materials for the nest for the Word'.)

Lines 80-92

www.aoifesnotes.com



The horse lifts its head and crashes
Through the whins and stones
To lip late passion in the crawling clover.
In the gap there's a bush weighted with boulders like
morality,
The fools of life bleed if they climb over.

- The horse, reaching its neck over the wall and through the gorse bushes in search of sweet clover, is a symbol of Maguire being unable to find happiness. The horse can touch the clover with his lips and maybe get a little, but he cannot graze properly and ease his hunger. In the same way, Maguire longs for even a taste of passion, but is unable to move past the religious and social barriers between him and fulfilment.
- The horse's way is blocked by large boulders just as Maguire's 'easy road to destiny' is blocked by a repressive morality. Those who break the rules 'bleed if they climb over'. The Church and society punishes the 'fools of life' who go against their dictates.

“the coltsfoot leaves are holed with rust”



The wind leans from Brady's and the coltsfoot leaves are holed with rust,

Rain fills the cart-tracks and the sole-plate grooves;

A yellow sun reflects in Donaghmoyne

The poignant light in puddles shaped by hooves.

Come with me, Imagination, into this iron house

And we will watch from the doorway the years run back,

And we will know that a peasant's left hand wrote on the page.

Be easy, October. No cackle hen, horse neigh, tree sigh,
duck quack.

- Bleak images of blighted leaves, wind and rain symbolise the sadness of Maguire's autumn years.
- Long vowel sounds in 'holed', 'sole-plate', 'grooves', 'hooves' etc. add to the mournful mood.
- There is a note of sadness and regret in the only hint of light or beauty: it is not found in the sun's rays but in the reflected sunlight in puddles.
- All of the images in lines 85 to 88 are focused on looking downwards. It's easy to imagine someone trudging, head down, through this dismal landscape.
- The last lines of this section of the poem invite the reader's imagination to follow him into the unwelcoming 'iron house'.
- The poet will decipher the peasant's scrawl and tell the story of his life in a way the peasant could not. The next section of the poem (not prescribed for LC study) looks back over Maguire's entire life.
- The closing line calls for quiet in the way a farmer may soothe a fretful animal: 'Be easy'. The poet needs silence in order to tell the rest of the story and asks the hens not to cackle, the horse not to neigh, the trees not to sigh in the wind, and the duck not to quack.

Themes and Exam Focus

- Condemnation of the repressive attitude towards sexuality in Ireland of the early to mid 20th century. The Church's view of sexuality is 'grotesque' and twists what is natural and good to make it seem sinful and wrong.
- The harsh reality of a bachelor farmer's life, as opposed to the romantic view often portrayed on stage.
- Theatrical imagery reminds us of the difference between stage versions and what rural life is actually like.
- Farming images dehumanise Maguire and the other men at times.
- Sexual imagery focuses on frustration, unfulfilled desire and yearning.



Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Composing – 2019 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on some of the places that have helped to shape and define you, and the significance of these places in your life.
- Composing – 2013 – Write a feature article for a popular magazine in which you discuss the competing attractions of both urban and rural lifestyles.
- Composing – 2013 – Write a personal essay about the tension you find between the everyday treadmill and the gilded promises of life.
- Composing – 2013 – Write a descriptive essay based on a number of glimpsed moments.
- Comp A – 2012 – Text 1: Margaret Laurence remembers and reflects on the small prairie town where she grew up.
- Comp B – 2012 – Text 1: Write a letter to Margaret Laurence, in response to Text 1, commenting on what you find interesting in the extract, and telling her about your home place and its impact on you.
- Composing – 2008 – Write a speech in which you argue for or against the necessity to protect national culture and identity.
- Read Kavanagh's 'Stony Grey Soil' as an unseen poem. Compare and contrast it with this poem.
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/stony-grey-soil/>

Advent

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

Advent

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Do you think you appreciate things as much as you did when you were a child? Were there things that were treats for you then that you now take for granted?

Lines 1-7

www.aoifesnotes.com



We have tested and tasted too much, lover –
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
But here in this Advent-darkened room
Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea
Of penance will charm back the luxury
Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
The knowledge we stole but could not use.

- The weeks of Advent were traditionally a time of fasting in preparation for Christmas.
- Advent took place in the four weeks leading up to Christmas, and the poem is divided into four sections of seven lines each (the last fourteen lines are connected but were originally separated into two seven-line sections).
- The first line is intimate and honest. The poet addresses a lover, suggesting intimacy. There is a sense of spitting out the alliterative 'tested and tasted too much', as if the poet is a little disgusted by his behaviour.
- The second line expresses the belief that there is no sense of wonder, expectation or anticipated delight when all is easily and readily available. Wonder lies in the glimpses and the promises of things to come.
- By returning to an unsophisticated way of living, we can regain our childlike sense of innocence and wonder.
- The final line alludes to the story of Adam and Eve losing all when they stole the fruit from the tree of knowledge. Kavanagh wishes to discard adult sophistication and the jaded weariness that comes with it.

“Underlying the emotional charge of the poem is Kavanagh's sense of his native village in Inniskeen as an Eden he sacrificed for the corrupt metropolis, Dublin.”

Carol Rumens in *The Guardian* newspaper: Mon 16 Dec 2013: ‘Patrick Kavanagh's Advent: unifying the miraculous with the banal’

Lines 8-14

www.aoifesnotes.com



And the newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
Or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
Of an old fool will awake for us and bring
You and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time
begins.

- Paradoxically, there will be 'newness' in 'every stale thing' when viewed through the eyes of a child.
- As in 'Shancoduff', Kavanagh uses hyperbole to describe the hills of his home place. In this case, they contain 'spirit-shocking / Wonder'.
- A child is delighted by new experiences, even if they are what an adult would recognise as 'tedious talking / Of an old fool'. Perceived from a child's viewpoint, the 'old fool' is not dull; they contain astonishing wisdom and interest.
- The shift to the future tense - 'will awake' – marks a change as the poet moves from disillusion and discontent to confidently assert that poet and his lover will be content to lean on the yard gate and find wonder and delight in the ordinary.
- The stables on the farm are linked to the stable where Jesus Christ was born. This will be a time of spiritual rebirth for Kavanagh.

Lines 15-28

www.aoifesnotes.com



O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
For the difference that sets an old phrase burning –
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among simple decent men too
Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.

- The second half of the poem begins with with a delighted, anticipatory 'O'.
- After the self-denial of Advent, everything will be fresh and new. The poet and his lover will have no need to go searching for meaning and wisdom: they will find it in the 'whispered argument' of butter churning, or in the ordinary, everyday life of his home place.
- Life will generously 'pour ordinary plenty'.
- The poet's inventive use of 'barrow' as a verb is appropriate for a poem about fresh perspectives.
- Again, the paradox of 'ordinary plenty' focuses our attention on the fulfilment that can be found in what is all around us.

Won't we be rich, my love and I, and please
God we shall not ask for reason's payment,
The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges
Nor analyse God's breath in common statement.
We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour –
And Christ comes with a January flower

- The poet will no longer need knowledge or reason but will be content with the abundance of the natural world.
- The dripping hedges will have a 'heart-breaking strangeness' when seen through the eyes of innocence. Kavanagh coins a new word 'dreeping' to capture the dripping of the hedges which may resemble weeping.
- 'God's breath' will be heard in the colloquialisms of local people and the poet will appreciate it rather than analyse it.
- The mortal, 'clay-minted' pleasure and knowledge will be rejected.
- The references to clay and dust remind us that all humans return to dust in the end.
- The final line of the poem is in the present tense, indicating acceptance and a belief that the poet has achieved the state of mind for which he yearned.
- The January snowdrop, a sign of life and hope, is another reminder of God's presence and his action in the world, according to the poet.

Themes and Exam Focus

- Innocence lost and regained
- Religion and spiritual renewal (the poem was originally called 'Renewal')
- The natural world as the source of life, inspiration and rebirth
- Neologisms and paradoxes encourage the reader to see the world with fresh eyes, just as the poet intends to do



Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Unseen Poem – 2017 – ‘Bounty’ by Robyn Sarah
- Composing – 2015 – Write a descriptive essay about what you find beautiful or exotic in everyday life.
- Composing – 2015 – Write a personal essay about one or more moments of uncertainty you have experienced.
- Composing – 2013 – Write a feature article for a popular magazine in which you discuss the competing attractions of both urban and rural lifestyles.

On Raglan Road

(Air: 'The Dawning of the Day')

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

On Raglan Road

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What emotions might people go through when they are disappointed in love?
- Listen to this recording of the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuafmLvoJow>
- ‘On Raglan Road’ was written as a song. Listen to words and phrases that are emphasised in the sung version. Do they have the same effect when the lines are studied as part of a poem?
- Which version do you prefer, and why?
- Watch this short clip in which Hilda Moriarty, the inspiration for the poem, briefly explains its origins.

“Kavanagh belongs all over the place, high and low, far and wide. A song like ‘On Raglan Road’ is performed with equal relish by pop stars and traditional balladeers.”

Seamus Heaney, ‘Strangeness and beauty’ [...], review of *Collected Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*

Lines 1-4

www.aoifesnotes.com



On Raglan Road on an autumn day I met her first
and knew
That her dark hair would weave a snare that I
might one day rue;
I saw the danger, yet I walked along the
enchanted way,
And I said, let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning
of the day.

- The poem, like many of Kavanagh's works, is rooted in a specific time and place: 'Raglan Road on an autumn day'.
- Autumn is associated with endings.
- The poet is self-conscious enough to know that if he falls for this woman, he risks pain, but he cannot help walking 'along the enchanted way'.
- Kavanagh accepts the inevitable grief that will come from a disappointment in love, but he sees it as a natural thing, like a fallen leaf'.

Lines 5-8

www.aoifesnotes.com



On Grafton Street in November we tripped
lightly along the ledge
Of the deep ravine where can be seen the worth
of passion's pledge,
The Queen of Hearts still making tarts and I not
making hay –
O I loved too much and by such by such is
happiness thrown away.

- The poet blends the real and the imaginary in this stanza. Grafton Street becomes a 'ledge' above a deep ravine, hinting at the fall and hurt to come. The couple may be carefree now, as they 'trip lightly', but danger and pain are never far away.
- Promises of love – 'passion's pledge' - mean little and are easily broken.
- The reference to the nursery rhyme 'Queen of Hearts' makes the love affair seem ridiculous. It also brings to mind a deck of cards and gambling. The poet takes a risk, but it does not pay off. He is not 'making hay' or achieving anything worthwhile.
- The heartfelt 'O' at the start of the final line signals the poet's depth of emotion. He says bitterly that he threw away his happiness by gambling on love.

Lines 9-12

www.aoifesnotes.com



I gave her the gifts of the mind, I gave her the
secret sign that's known
To the artists who have known the true gods of
sound and stone
And word and tint. I did not stint for I gave her
poems to say
With her own name there and her own dark hair
like clouds over fields of May.

- There is a certain arrogance in the poet's claim that he gave his beloved marvellous gifts when he wrote poems for her. He even allowed her insights into his own thought process – the 'secret sign' that only other artists, sculptors, musicians etc. know.
- The woman's 'dark hair' clouds over the poet's happiness.

Lines 13-16

www.aoifesnotes.com



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)

On a quiet street where old ghosts meet I see her
walking now

Away from me so hurriedly my reason must
allow

That I had wooed not as I should a creature
made of clay –

When the angel woos the clay he'd lose his
wings at the dawn of day.

- Kavanagh sees the former object of his affections on streets 'where old ghosts meet'. Their love is dead and only the ghost of it remains. She moves away from him and he reasons that in the final stanza, the poet's arrogance is clear. He bitterly regrets lowering himself to love 'a creature made of clay' when he, not she, is the heavenly being.
- It is hard to feel much sympathy for Kavanagh here. His claim that a relationship with this woman (or does he mean any woman?) would drag him down from his lofty position of intellectual and spiritual purity hearkens back to the misogyny of the story of Adam and Eve. The woman is presented as a temptress who will ensnare the man and bring nothing but sorrow.

Themes and Exam Focus

- The sorrow and pain of unrequited love
- The role of the poet or artist as a somehow superior being to mere mortals
- All of the imagery associated with the woman is negative: her 'dark hair' will 'weave a snare' for the poet; in her company, he is balancing on the edge of a metaphorical ravine and may fall at any moment; her 'dark hair' is again mentioned and compared to clouds blocking the warmth and light of May sun; she is a 'creature made of clay' and the poet lowered himself when he fell for her.



Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Comp B – 2018 - Write an article for your school website, in which you consider the experience of reading a text and watching a film adaptation of the same text. In your article, you should identify at least one written text which has been adapted as a film. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of each of these formats and explain which format you would recommend and the way in which to experience the text(s) for the first time. You may refer to any text(s) of your choice in the answer.
- Composing – 2015 – Write a feature article for a magazine, about the importance of romance in our lives. The article may be light-hearted or serious.
- Composing – 2013 – Write a personal essay in which you explore the storytelling evident in music and song and its impact on you as a listener.

The Hospital

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

The Hospital

Pre-Reading Tasks

- If you studied Shakespeare's 'Shall I compare thee?' in Junior Cycle, you may remember the end couplet: 'So long as men can breathe and eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee'. The 'this' is the sonnet. What do you think Shakespeare is saying about the power of poetry here?
- What makes something worth loving? Does everyone see the same beauty and value in objects?
- What sort of experiences might make a person appreciate the little things in life and see the extraordinary in the ordinary?

Lines 1-8

www.aoifesnotes.com



A year ago I fell in love with the functional ward
Of a chest hospital: square cubicles in a row,
Plain concrete, wash basins – an art lover's woe,
Not counting how the fellow in the next bed snored.
But nothing whatever is by love debarred,
The common and banal her heat can know.
The corridor led to a stairway and below
Was the inexhaustible adventure of a gravelled yard.

- In this descriptive octet, Kavanagh sets the scene.
- Like the canal bank poems, this was written after Kavanagh's stay in hospital where he was treated for lung cancer.
- Startling opening: poet says he 'fell in love' with a hospital ward.
- Kavanagh does not hide the lack of aesthetic beauty of the objects in ward but 'nothing whatever is by love debarred'.
- Wry humour in the comment on the snoring 'fellow in the next bed'.

Lines 9-14

www.aoifesnotes.com



This is what love does to things: the Rialto bridge,
The main gate that was bent by a heavy lorry,
The seat at the back of a shed that was a suntrap.
Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge;
For we must record love's mystery without claptrap,
Snatch out of time the passionate transitory.

- Sestet reflects on and interprets the power of love to transform.
- The mundane and the imperfect – a damaged bridge, a lorry, a seat at the back of a shed – are transformed into something extraordinary by Kavanagh's naming of them.
- This sonnet is an act of love: the words 'love' or 'lover' occur six times in only fourteen lines.
- Love poems should be honest and sincere, 'without claptrap'. The colloquialism 'claptrap' removes any possibility of pretentiousness from the poem.
- The poet can immortalise this place and these objects by the act of naming them.
- Recording passionate feelings preserves them.
- Complex thought at the end of the poem is written in more literary language than the simple, down-to-earth description of the hospital and its surroundings.

The poet John Montague said that this poem is
full of 'energetic simplicity'.

Themes and Exam Focus

- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder
- Passing of time / immortality
- Power of poetry



Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Brendan Kennelly wrote 'Begin', written after his own brush with death. Here is a short video of a reading of the poem: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tgS_GuwCwM In what ways are his feelings like Kavanagh's?
- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Unseen Poem – 2017 – 'Bounty' by Robyn Sarah
- Composing – 2015 – Write a descriptive essay about what you find beautiful or exotic in everyday life.

Canal Bank Walk

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

Canal Bank Walk

Pre-Reading Tasks

- When might people come to appreciate the simple beauty of nature?
- This poem was written shortly after Kavanagh had been treated for a serious illness. He says that when, 'in the warm summer of 1955, I lay and watched the green waters of the canal', it became 'the place of my birth'. Brendan Kennelly expresses a similar sentiment in his poem, 'Begin', written after his own brush with death. Here is a short video of a reading of the poem: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tgS_GuwCwM

Lines 1-4

www.aoifesnotes.com



Leafy-with-love banks and the green water of the canal

Pouring redemption for me, that I do

The will of God, wallow in the habitual, the banal

Grow with nature again as before I grew

- The beautiful, soft, alliterative description of the 'Leafy-with-love' banks sets the tone of the poem.
- 'Leafy-with-love' is a neologism (a new word or expression)
- Beauty, fertility and healing power of nature is clear
- Link to baptism and associated rebirth in the phrase 'Pouring redemption for me'
- Enjambment mirrors the flow of water
- Pronouns 'I' and 'me' show that this is a personal poem.
- By immersing himself in nature, the poet is doing 'the will of God'.
- The poet believes that relishing the ordinary and everyday will aid his spiritual growth

Lines 5-8

www.aoifesnotes.com



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,
Eloquently new and abandoned to its delirious beat.

- Now the poet details the ‘habitual, the banal’ and celebrates each of them.
- He is like the trapped stick in that he is not moving – he is an observer here – but he is ‘bright’ with the promise of rebirth and regrowth.
- The breeze is personified as a ‘third / Party’ to a kissing couple. Love is in the air!
- The bird, gathering twigs for its nest, is a part of God’s creation and, like the poet, is carrying out ‘The will of God’.
- All is in harmony and the poet is a part of it.
- The bird’s nest is a symbol of new life and fertility. It is completely surrendered to its task and, therefore, to ‘the Word’ of God.

Lines 9-14

www.aoifesnotes.com



O unworn world enrapture me, encapture me in a
web
Of fabulous grass and eternal voices by a beech,
Feed the gaping need of my senses, give me ad lib
To pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech,
For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress
woven
From green and blue things and arguments that
cannot be proven.

- The sestet is prayerful in tone and opens with an exclamatory 'O'.
- Earlier simplicity of language is abandoned as the tone becomes reverential.
- Imperatives and the neologism 'encapture' highlight the strength and urgency of the poet's desire to be reborn and for the 'gaping need' of his senses to be filled with the beauty and simplicity of nature.
- He wishes to surrender his conscious, rational self so that he can 'pray unselfconsciously' and be reborn as a poet.
- Image of 'overflowing speech' mirrors the flowing water of the canal which pours redemption
- The image of a 'new dress' picks up on the earlier reference to baptism: this baptismal robe will be made of all that is natural 'green and blue things' and the poet will surrender to unquestioning faith. God, after all, 'cannot be proven'.

“That a poet is born, not made, is well known. But this does not mean that he was a poet the day he was physically born. For many a good-looking year I wrought hard at versing, but I would say that, as a poet, I was born in or about nineteen fifty-five, the place of my birth being the banks of the Grand Canal. Thirty years earlier, Shancoduff’s watery hills could have done the trick, but I was too thick to take the hint. Curious this, how I had started off with the right simplicity, indifferent to crude reason, and then ploughed my way through complexities and anger, hatred and ill-will towards the faults of man, and came back to where I started.”

Patrick Kavanagh, *Self-Portrait* (RTE, 30 Oct. 1962; Dolmen Press 1964)

Themes and Exam Focus

- Spiritual renewal
- Celebration of nature
- Importance of wonder and innocence
- Religious imagery
- Symbolism of water – cleansing, rebirth, baptism



Seamus Heaney said of Kavanagh's 'Epic' that his homeland and his neighbours are 'made important only by the light of the mind which is now playing on them' and that the same is true of 'Canal Bank Walk'. Kavanagh can make anywhere into 'an important place'.

Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Composition – 2019 – Write a personal essay in which you reflect on what feeds your imagination.
- Composition – 2019 – Write a personal essay in which you reflect on some of the places that have helped to shape and define you, and the significance of these places in your life.
- Unseen Poem – 2017 – ‘Bounty’ by Robyn Sarah
- Composing – 2015 – Write a descriptive essay about what you find beautiful or exotic in everyday life.

Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin

‘Erected to the Memory of Mrs Dermot O’Brien’

Aoife O’Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin

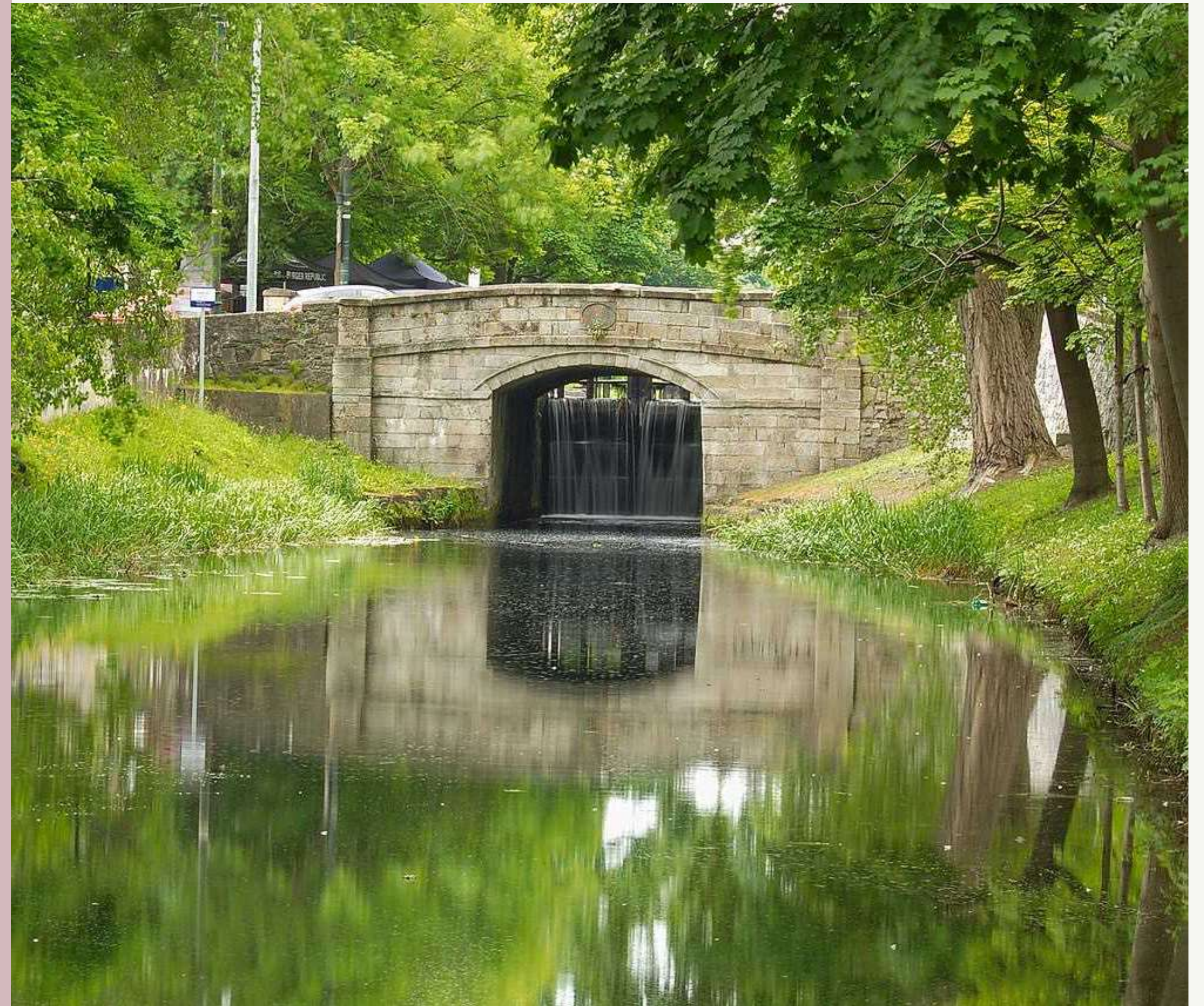
Pre-Reading Tasks

- Why do people want to be publicly commemorated?
- What sort of places might people choose for their commemorative plaque? Why would they choose these places, do you think?

Subtitle: 'Erected to the Memory of Mrs Dermot O'Brien'

Kavanagh sees the importance of a commemorative plaque. It doesn't matter that the person named may not be well known; they are remembered in a place they loved and are forever associated with the peace and serenity of that place.

www.aoifesnotes.com



Lines 1-8

www.aoifesnotes.com



O commemorate me where there is water,
Canal water preferably, so stilly
Greeny at the heart of summer. Brother
Commemorate me thus beautifully
Where by a lock Niagarously roars
The falls for those who sit in the tremendous
silence
Of mid-July. No one will speak in prose
Who finds his way to these Parnassian islands.

- Like 'Canal Bank Walk', this poem was written after Kavanagh's surgery for lung cancer.
- The opening 'O' sets a formal, prayerful tone.
- Water is associated with rebirth, renewal, baptism.
- 'Stilly / Greeny' sounds oddly childlike after the formal opening line but captures the childlike wonder and innocence Kavanagh wishes for in several of the poems on the course.
- The word 'heart' shows how deeply this place touches the poet.
- Sense of serenity and calm throughout
- 'Brother' refers to all mankind
- The hyperbole in the neologism 'Niagarously' and the onomatopoeic 'roar' capture the energy and sound of the lock on the canal and show a touch of humour. Note the contrast with the 'stilly / Greeny' mentioned earlier and the 'tremendous silence / Of mid-July'.
- Kavanagh believes all who sit there will share the inspiration he feels in a place which is his Mount Parnassus, the home of the Muses of poetry, music and learning. As when he compares Shancoduff to the Matterhorn, Kavanagh's exaggeration shows the importance of the place to him.

Lines 9-14

www.aoifesnotes.com



A swan goes by head low with many apologies,
Fantastic light looks through the eyes of bridges –
And look! a barge comes bringing from Athy
And other far-flung towns mythologies.
O commemorate me with no hero-courageous
Tomb – just a canal-bank seat for the passer-by.

- A swan's bowed head is compared to a human apology.
- Light shining through bridges is 'Fantastic'.
- Sense of wonder and celebration captured in the excited 'And look!' as we are invited to share in his delight at the everyday and the ordinary.
- Humour and hyperbole in the reference to a barge from Athy 'and other far-flung towns' carrying 'mythologies'.
- Slow movement of the poem – it contains five sentences – is appropriate for the subject. Broad vowel sounds contribute to the measured pace.
- Half-rhymes contribute to the relaxed, serene mood.
- Rejects the formality and self-aggrandisement of a 'hero-courageous / Tomb' in favour of something that will give pleasure to others and allow them to share his vision and his joy. The word 'just' does not take from the 'canal-bank seat'; all that has gone before shows how valuable, inspirational and wonderful such a commemoration will be.

Themes and Exam Focus

- Celebration of nature and the everyday
- Importance of wonder and innocence
- Tone ranges from the formal and stately to the childlike and excited
- Hyperbole highlights the importance of this place to the poet



“Kavanagh sought to bridge the gap between God’s kingdom and the earthly kingdom. His God was in the fields and in the ditches and in the hedgerows. His poetry, became a radical affirmation of life, of earth, of the human condition and of God’s presence everywhere. He became the forgotten voice of the sacred ‘commonplaces of life’.”

Una Agnew: (*The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, 1998)

Linked Tasks

www.aoifesnotes.com



- Composition – 2021 - In TEXT 2, Doireann Ní Ghríofa celebrates the colours in her garden, the sounds of the past and the “purring” of bees. Write an article, for publication in a popular magazine, about the many and varied colours and sounds that punctuate and surround our daily lives and the impact they have on us.
- Question B: 2021 - You have been invited to write a feature article, entitled *Monumental Matters – The Story of Statues*, to appear in the magazine supplement of a weekend newspaper. In your article you should: reflect on the long-established tradition of erecting statues to celebrate or memorialise people, explore some of the reasons why commemorative statues may be controversial, and give your views on continuing this tradition into the future.
- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Comp B – 2012 – Write a proposal, to be submitted to the relevant authority (e.g. local council or national body), suggesting one event or person you believe should be commemorated. Explain why you feel this person or event should be commemorated and suggest what form this commemoration might take.
- Read ‘Ozymandias’ by Percy Bysshe Shelley

The question

- No matter how the questions are phrased, they are all basically asking you to do the same thing – talk about the poet's themes and style.
- Each question also requires you to prove that you have engaged with the works of the selected poet.



Varying your vocabulary

Identify key words and think of synonyms if possible. This will help to ensure that your language is varied while still focusing on the terms of the question.

Ask yourself what the coding for the question might be. Make sure that every point in your plan could be coded by the examiner. This will ensure that you are remaining focused on the question.



TIP!

tip

- Each of the poets you have studied has a signature style.
- They also deal with a limited number of themes.
- Work these out, and you will be prepared for any question.

Choosing your poems

Choose four to five poems which are relevant to the question.

You are making a case in your essay, so you must have a thesis.

The examiner is not interested in reading a re-hash of your poetry notes.

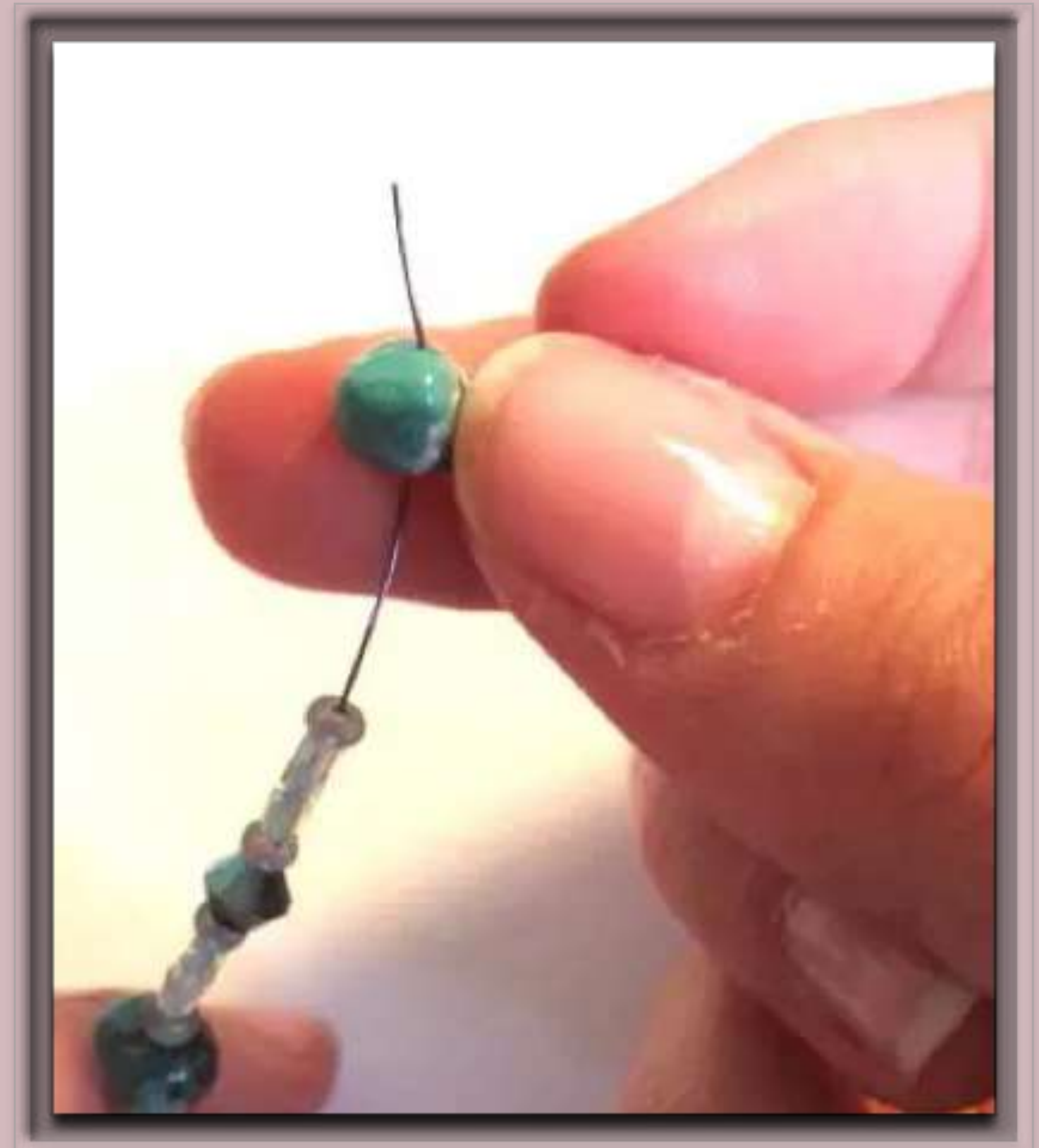
Organisation

HAVE A REASON FOR PUTTING THE POEMS IN A
CERTAIN ORDER



Order

YOUR THESIS SHOULD BE THE THREAD
HOLDING YOUR ESSAY TOGETHER



Structure

- There is no hard and fast rule here; use whatever structure has worked for you in the past.
- Introduction: Refer to the question and outline your approach.
- Two paragraphs on each poem
- Link sentence at the start of each new poem
- Conclusion: it is effective to end on a quote if possible

Some suggestions

Move from poems written about the poet's childhood to poems written about middle age or old age.

Move from poems written when the poet was young to poems written when he / she was an older person.

Move from positive to negative or vice versa.

Move from personal to public or vice versa.

Planning - continued

If you cannot make a link at the planning stage, forget that poem and move on to another one. This is the benefit of plans.

A poem-by-poem approach can make a daunting essay title seem quite manageable. Remember, you are aiming to write two strong paragraphs on each poem, as well as an introduction and conclusion.

You should aim to write on four to five poems in your exam answer.

**What poems would you use
next?**

Think of the ORDER in which
you would place your poems,
and the links between them.



Introduction



You can - and should - work the terms of the question into your opening paragraph



Avoid the temptation to include too many points in your introduction. You must only mention themes / aspects of style that you intend to explore fully in the rest of the essay. Be wary of phrases like 'a multitude of themes' or 'many interesting ways'. Those are big claims. Can you back them all up? A focused thesis is a better idea.

Pitfalls

‘I agree with the above statement’. NEVER begin an essay this way.

Mentioning topics in your introduction but failing to deal with them in the answer

Writing an unbalanced answer in which you deal with one or two poems in great detail and skip quickly over others

Body of the Essay

Each paragraph should advance your argument

The topic sentence in each paragraph should answer the question

Each paragraph should be linked to those before and after it

Use link words or phrases to connect your paragraphs: however; it is not only; we can also see; it becomes increasingly clear; as the poem progresses...

LINK PHRASES TO CONNECT EVIDENCE AND/OR QUOTATION

This idea is reinforced by / when...

This is cemented by / when...

X adds to the sense of...

This is further driven home by / when...

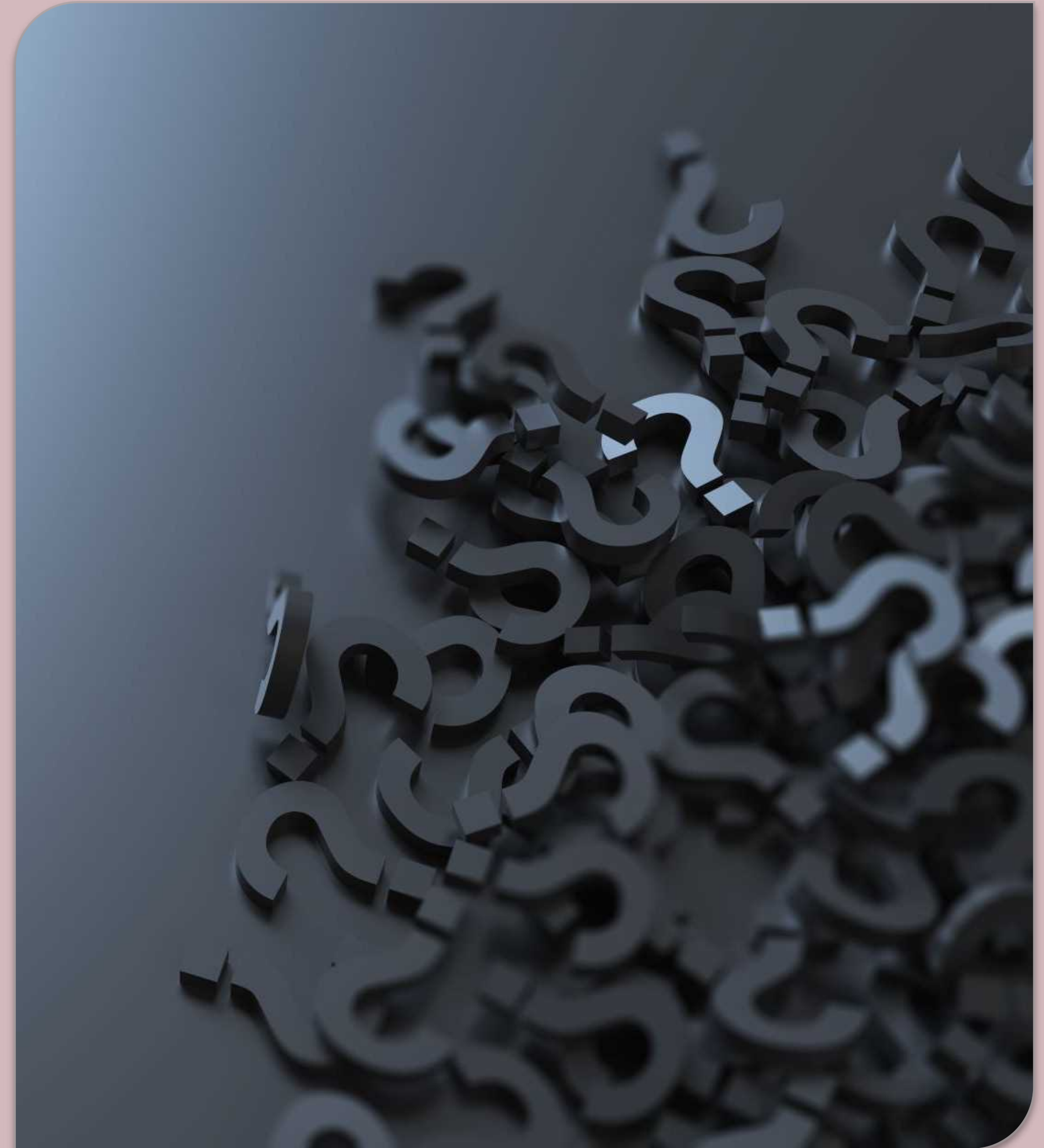
This message is even more powerfully
expressed by / when...

We see this same idea...

In much the same way...

Furthermore...

In addition...



**STRUCTURING EACH PARAGRAPH –
THERE IS NO ‘RIGHT’ WAY, BUT THIS
IS ONE OPTION**

Sentence One: Topic sentence which addresses the question

Sentence Two: Explain your point in a little more depth (this may take more than one sentence)

Sentence Three: Use evidence, including quotations, to support your point

Sentence Four: Comment on the evidence / quote and explain how it proves the point you made in your topic sentence

Sentence Five: Use a link phrase to introduce your second piece of evidence / quotation (see next slide for link phrases) and give your second piece of evidence

Sentence Six: Comment on the evidence etc.

Conclusion



Your conclusion should tie up your ideas and be a very brief rewording of your thesis/introduction.



There is no need to say, 'As I have shown in this essay'. Let your points speak for themselves.



Make sure not to raise any new points in your conclusion.



if you have an apt quote by or about the poet, this is a good time to use it.

SEC 2012: In your opinion, is Kavanagh successful in achieving his desire to transform the ordinary world into something extraordinary?

Support your answer with suitable reference to the poems on your course.

You may wish to consider:

- celebrates/criticises local, rural life
- sacramental view of nature/childhood innocence
- from jaded cynicism to spiritual rebirth
- moments of wonder/epiphany or clichéd/sentimental vision
- language/imagery is fresh/energetic or over-simplistic/contrived

Approaching the 2012 question

- List the poems in which Kavanagh transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary
- What is ordinary about the world in your chosen poems?
- What does Kavanagh consider extraordinary about that world?
- HOW does he convince us of his viewpoint? For each poem, chose two or three images in which Kavanagh makes the ordinary extraordinary. Comment on the effectiveness of each image.
- In each of your chosen poems, what drives Kavanagh to see the extraordinary in the ordinary? Thinking about this should help you to group your poems together and arrange them in order.
- Now ask yourself if you find some of the poems more convincing than others. If so, why is that the case? Perhaps you find them all convincing. Whatever your decision, you draw your thesis from that. This will form your introduction.