

# PATRICK KAVANAGH

(1904 - 1967)



*Shancoduff*

*A Christmas Childhood*

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.

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.

The sleety winds fondle the rushy beards of Shancoduff  
While the cattle-drovers sheltering in the 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?

### Background

1. Kavanagh's family bought a farm close to their home in Co. Monaghan. This out-farm was on the north side of a drumlin and the land was quite poor. Part of that farm was near a trail which cattle farmers or drovers used to herd their stock from one area to another.
2. Kavanagh loved this farm and the view from it, which stretched as far as the Mourne mountains.

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Kavanagh's love for Shancoduff (Old Black Hollow) is seen in the possessive way he refers to it as "My black hills" in the opening line of the poem. This possessive,

protective sense of ownership is continued into the second stanza when he describes the place as "My hills", and "my Alps".

The land itself is personified through the use of verbs such as "seen", "look" and "hoard". This personification adds to the idea that the relationship Kavanagh has with Shancoduff is almost that of a lover. Like someone in love, he sees only good in the loved one and he defends it against the casual criticism of others.

The hills face north, and will never, therefore, be warmed by the rising sun. Yet they are unchanging and eternal. People may come and go, but they will last. They may be "incurious", but Kavanagh turns that into a positive, reminding us that in the Bible story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife disobeyed the order from God and turned to look back at the sinning cities being destroyed. For this disobedience, God turned her into a pillar of salt. Perhaps this lack of curiosity, this refusal to look at the city, reflects Kavanagh's refusal to fully embrace city life in Dublin.

Kavanagh's love of his local place is seen in the affectionate way he describes dawn breaking over the little church in Glassdrummond. The use of place names shows a pride and a love for this north-facing farm and adds to the sense of intimacy. It is a special, magical place for the poet, and he compares it to the beauty and majesty of the Alps.

The act of climbing the hills with hay for cold, hungry calves is compared to climbing the Matterhorn – the highest mountain in the Swiss Alps. This hyperbole shows the importance Kavanagh attaches to his hills and reinforces the idea of the hills being cold and forbidding. They are personified again as they "hoard" little pockets of snow and ice, while it melts elsewhere in the spring sunshine. The sun searches desperately for these "bright shillings" but cannot find them in the cold shade of the hillside. Kavanagh seems to admire the hills for holding onto their "shillings". They do what they want. They don't change just because it's spring; the laws and rhythms of nature do not rule them, it seems. The poet respects their independence and rebelliousness.

In the last stanza, a negative note is introduced as passing farmers and cattle drovers talk contemptuously about Kavanagh's beloved Shancoduff. They look at the land objectively, and notice only the poor quality of the fields "them hungry hills", which

have been abandoned by even the marshland birds. The direct speech distances Kavanagh from these men's opinions, which he does not share, but also brings a harsh note of reality to the hitherto romantic and loving description of the hills. 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. He feels as someone might feel if they had to face the fact that their wife or girlfriend was ugly. There is also an implication in the farmer's comments that Kavanagh is out of place and not a real farmer. He is "a poet", not a man who knows the land and how to work it. The drovers clearly think that he is slightly mad to attempt to farm this poor land, and there is a sense that he is not one of them, that he does not belong. His profession sets him apart.

Although his heart may be "badly shaken", Kavanagh knows that he, unlike the drovers, can see beyond the poverty and coldness of the place. He may be poor in a material sense, but he has a wealth of imagination, feeling and creativity. He does not measure the worth of his hills the way those men do. "Shancoduff" shows Kavanagh's ability to make a place that is ordinary a worthwhile subject for poetry. (It is worth noting that, although the place and the time were different, Eavan Boland did something similar in her poetry. Look at my notes after the poem "Love" for further exploration of this idea.)

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Although others may see little to value in the "black hills", they are important to Kavanagh. He sees a value in them that goes beyond their monetary worth. Others may look at them and sneer at the poverty of the man who attempts to farm such land, but Kavanagh feels rich. He mentions money when he says that the hills "hoard the bright shillings of March". To the poet, the little pockets of ice which hold on when the spring melt has begun are as valuable as the shiny coins they resemble.

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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" in which he compares the poet's life to that of a shipwrecked sailor on a desert island.

In "Shancoduff", Kavanagh is well aware of the scorn and suspicion with which he is viewed by the local farming community. They are bewildered by his love for his bleak, barren hills. However, despite their mockery, he is proud of his land and inspired by its beauty. That, essentially, is what marks him out as a poet rather than a farmer. There is a sense in which Kavanagh is proud of his difference. He is defiant, and stands up for his land and his love for it.

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! 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.

My father played the melodeon  
Outside at our gate;  
There were stars in the morning east  
And they danced to his music.

Across the wild bogs his melodeon called  
To Lennons and Callans.  
As I pulled on my trousers in a hurry  
I knew some strange thing had happened.

Outside 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.

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.

An old man passing said:  
'Can't he make it talk'—  
The melodeon. 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 melodeon,  
My mother milked the cows,  
And I had a prayer like a white rose pinned  
On the Virgin Mary's blouse.

\*whin' -'gorse' or 'furze'.

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The poem opens with a vivid image from Kavanagh's memory of his childhood. This description is practical and factual but is followed immediately by the adult's nostalgic reflection of how magical and extraordinary this was to the poet. Again, as in "Shancoduff", we see Kavanagh's ability to find wonder in ordinary things. His emotion and strength of feeling is clear in the second line when he repeats the word "wonderful" and ends with an exclamation mark. This idea of wonder and magic is carried on 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 in this, and a feeling of resentment. Adult life cannot compare with the "Garden that was childhood's". When he was a child, everything was filled with beauty. Even cattle tracks or a "green stone lying sideways in a ditch" become transformed into objects of a "beauty the world did not touch".

The second part of the poem is filled with the child's memories. The adult Kavanagh is almost completely absent as he loses himself in the excitement of the childhood Christmas. For the first time, people are introduced. The poet's mother and father create beautiful music in their own ways. His father "played the melodeon" and his mother "Made the music of milking". The stars in the early morning sky danced to his father's playing, adding to the sense of festivity and excitement. The language here is simple, reflecting the thoughts of a six-year old boy.

Religious imagery is prevalent in this second part of the poem. The mother's stable-lamp is like the star over Bethlehem when Jesus was born. The ordinary becomes the extraordinary and connections are made between the Nativity and the poet's own Christmas childhood. There is a sense of hope and of new beginnings, just as Christ's birth brought hope to Christians.

The sounds of nature are described in wonderfully onomatopoeic language in fourth stanza of the second section. The bird "screeched" and the ice in the puddles



"crunched" beneath the feet of someone going to Mass.

Kavanagh's own nostalgic wistfulness is captured in the line "Somebody wistfully twisted the bellows wheel." The soft sibilance makes this image a gentle, quiet, evocative one as the poet thinks back to Ireland in 1910, with fires lighting in every kitchen.

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.

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 final verse returns to the images detailed at the start of this second part of the poem: "My father played the melodeon, / My mother milked the cows". The poet's closeness to his family reminds us of the Holy Family. His love for his parents is reflected in the image of "a prayer like a white rose pinned / On the virgin Mary's blouse". There is a sense of reverence here, and an appreciation of the preciousness of this family bond. The poem ends on a tender, loving note.