

Apollonian and Dionysian Elements in Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney

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Abstract

The article discusses one of the most prominent features and aspects of two fascinating Irish poets in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Both Kavanagh and Heaney possess the dominant qualities of Apollonian and Dionysian traits. Apollonian elements get displayed by the art of versification and stylistics by acquired culture in both Kavanagh and Heaney, while Dionysian features represent their innate poetic endowments. The article stresses that both these phenomena act complimentary in their character and sufficiently infused and woven in their poetry. This perfect blend of both qualities in their poetry makes them unique. Their faithfulness to their motherland despite receiving acclaim from the English literary world coupled with their treatment of nature and Irish nationalism is something very elegant and poetic.

Keywords: Patrick Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney, Apollonian, Dionysian, Dualism, Irish nationalism

Introduction

Of the Modern and the Post-modern period it can be said that a significant amount of literature has been written by Anglophone authors, some of them being the very greatest. Of them there have been Irish authors who wrote in English rather than Gaelic. The remarkable creative period of the Irish authors from the later nineteenth century till now has also given importance to Irish history, legend and folklore nevertheless not ignoring native literary models. 'Irish literature in English' as it should be called has achieved tremendous progress in recent

years. Some of these authors have also been Nobel Laureates. English has now become the main language of Ireland and the language of literary command. In the examples of Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney their point of views evolved primarily from their response to nature and their Irish nationalism. The apparent dualism in their works are both Apollonian and Dionysian.

Apollonian and Dionysian elements in Art and Culture, loosely based on Apollo and Dionysus in Greek mythology, were used by Friedrich Nietzsche in his work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). These terms are contrasting terms in Greek culture; Apollonian are the controlled and reasonable aspects of human nature such as order, serenity, form, classical beauty, moderation and symmetry while Dionysian are elements such as irrationality, uncontrollable, violent and euphoria etc.

Apollonian elements represent the finesse and skill in versification accomplished by culture and the Dionysian elements bespeak of the naturally inherent poetic endowments. In short Apollonian is what we learn or acquire from society through education etc., while Dionysian are our innate natural qualities and abilities. Both Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney chose the vocation of writing which as a way of life was a complete break with the tradition of both families. Each poet faced the dilemma whether to undertake the profession of writing and to accept his lot as a writer. The diverse complementary aspects of Apollonian and Dionysian give Heaney's and Kavanagh's poetry a veritable uniqueness. The natural Dionysian traits in their creativity were imbibed from their birth and rearing up in the farmlands of Ireland and their progressive association with the intellectual world brought in the disciplined Apollonian traits in their creativity.

Heaney's introduction to Kavanagh came in 1962, thanks to Michael Lavery. Reading Kavanagh for the first time was a revelation to Heaney who marveled that the world of ploughing, churning, blackberry picking, turf-cutting etc., could become the stuff of his poetry. The Apollonian and Dionysian aspects came as a startling revelation to Heaney while he earned a scholarship to go to St. Columba's Oollege and it was there that he expressed linguistic difference which according to him were those people who thought him 'guttural' which is a word associated with the lowest levels of society. Both Kavanagh and Heaney spent their childhood on the farmlands in their native countryside. The section "The Ministry of Fear" from the poem *Singing School* by Heaney has autobiographical fragments of belonging to the minority community of Catholics in Protestant- dominated Northern Ireland. At twenty four, Kavanagh was still learning to plough the "stony grey soil of Monaghan" and wondering if there were "some light of imagination in these wet clods".

The poem *An Advancement of Learning* is a typical Heaney poem in that he takes an everyday scene from his childhood in the countryside but conjures out of it something

illuminating. Heaney once remembered that an English magazine when published a couple of his poems in the mid nineteen-sixties, the headlines read 'Poems from the Back of Beyond'. The headline according to Heaney, clearly meant his rural childhood. Heaney's faithfulness to his background and to his Ulster lingua franca was clearly obvious even from this point in his life and due to this the English society placed him within an antiquated, simple, and obsolete context quite unusual from their own. These are some of his Dionysian elements.

Of Heaney it can be said that despite his education and employment in the English speaking world, Heaney never allowed it to infringe upon his rootedness in Ireland. He was faithful to this identity despite his involvement in the English linguistic world as Kavanagh was of his County Monaghan. In his own time, Kavanagh through perseverance, exile and hardship brought home his own poetic harvest. Heaney's assessment of Kavanagh's poems such as *Auditors In, Epic, Prelude* and the canal bank poems can be equally applied to his own; *Mossbawn Sunlight, Clearances* and *Squarings* etc. In both their cases the art of versification and stylistics are Apollonian whereas their inherent imaginative forays and presumptions are all stridently Dionysian.

A very important Apollonian element frequently traced in Heaney's poetry is his technique and refined craft. His capability to glean, to extract and pinpoint minute details from the vast concrete and abstract situations; traits which make him a poet of rare integrity and excellence. His intelligent and fine selection of matter do not overstate or over-emphasize the sensuous details that he handles with great skill and touch rather with his technique he weaves a magic wand by not over-exposing the meaning of his experiences nevertheless records it without distorting the facts.

In both poets there is a bridge between natural rural ancestry and acquired poetic sensibilities. In one of Heaney's poetry collection *Station Island* there are three separate parts. The poems in the collection generally focusses on the role of the poet and their relationship to history and politics. The first part consists of twenty five lyric poems; the central section has a title sequence dramatizing a number of encounters in dream or in visions (one of them being Kavanagh) and a concluding sequence. Despite its separate parts the book has a formal unity and all three parts show there is order in disorder in Heaney. Heaney's view envisages order and chaos, culture and nature, Apollonian and Dionysian parameters which are complementary components but very integral to the formulation and depiction of his poetic sensitivity.

Another interesting aspect of Heaney is that in several of his poems the source of his inspiration is very much feminine but the poetic creation that takes the final shape out of his hand is predominantly masculine. It is noticeable in certain typical masculine expressions like father, digging, barrel and ramrodding, etc. As such both Heaney and Kavanagh have dual concerns, both Apollonian and Dionysian elements are reflected in their works. In their poetry

there is a queer mix of the preserver and the destroyer of Apollo and Dionysus. Traditionalists at one viewpoint they are also pathbreakers in a certain sense.

Both Apollonian and Dionysian elements are crucial to anyone who wants to study Kavanagh and Heaney in proper perspective as they are embodied in their very character and nature

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