

In Memory of my Mother by Patrick Kavanagh

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday--
You meet me and you say:
'Don't forget to see about the cattle--'
Among your earthiest words the angels stray.

And I think of you walking along a headland
Of green oats in June,
So full of repose, so rich with life--
And I see us meeting at the end of a town

On a fair day by accident, after
The bargains are all made and we can walk
Together through the shops and stalls and markets
Free in the oriental streets of thought.

O you are not lying in the wet clay,
For it is harvest evening now and we
Are piling up the ricks against the moonlight
And you smile up at us - eternally.



Analysis:

In Patrick Kavanagh's 'In Memory of My Mother' we are presented with a very vivid, interesting and wonderfully affectionate portrait of the poet's late mother. Although his mother is dead, Kavanagh does not want to focus on the sadness of her loss; rather he wants to celebrate her life and remember her as she was.

This poem is written in the form of an address to the poet's mother, but it is an unusual one in that the person being addressed is no longer alive. However, by calling her 'you' throughout and writing in the present tense rather than the past, Kavanagh ensures that his mother is very much alive in his mind and in his heart. Although she may be 'lying in the wet clay', the poet does not want to imagine her that way and dwells instead on happier thoughts of their time together.

Kavanagh's mother is portrayed as a down-to-earth, sensible, cheerful, spiritual woman. The poet remembers her walking happily to 'second Mass on a summer Sunday' and, when she meets her son on the way, reminding him not to forget about the cattle. All Kavanagh's memories of his mother are positive ones. She is walking along a headland, shopping in the market or 'smiling up' at her son as they work together to bring in the harvest.

In this poem, Kavanagh does not just give us a picture of his own mother, but of all mothers. A line that conjures up the clearest picture of the poet's mother is in the second stanza, when he gives her a voice and remembers her telling him not to 'forget about the cattle'. This is such a practical and sensible thing to say, and so reminiscent of all mothers who seem to be continually reminding their children not to forget to do various chores that the reader can almost hear her speaking the line aloud.

This poem is rich with words and phrases which bring Kavanagh's mother to life for us. In the first and second stanza, the poet describes his mother walking to 'second Mass on a summer Sunday'. The detail – 'second Mass' – makes this description realistic, and the sibilance throughout this line both evokes a sense of peace and reinforces the idea that the poet's mother is going 'happily' on her way. The fact that the poet remembers a summer's day rather than a winter's one again brings his mother to life as that is a time of year connected to growth and new life.

In the third stanza, the poet once again connects his mother to growth and to life as he remembers her walking along a headland near a field of oats on a June day. The line which tells us that he sees her 'so full of repose – so rich with life' is very powerful. The words 'full'

and 'rich' and show just how vividly the poet sees his mother in his mind's eye. This is no vague memory, but one which is so strong that we are enabled to share in it.

In the fourth stanza, Kavanagh describes his conversation with his mother as being like 'oriental streets of thought'. This is an interesting image and makes us think of the Orient: a place considered exotic and exciting as well as a spiritual place where death is not viewed as an ending but rather the start of another life. It seems likely that Kavanagh and his mother discussed interesting and exotic topics as they walked through the market together.

The most moving image in the poem is that in the last line. Kavanagh refuses to think of his mother as a dead body in the wet soil, but instead sees her helping to bring in the harvest and smiling up at him 'eternally'. We are left with a clear picture of a loving mother who watches over her son forever.

Consider the following personal response to link this poem to another you have studied: Although Kavanagh's mother died long before I was born, she will live forever in his poem and will be brought to life as vividly for each new reader as she was for me. I am reminded of the words of William Shakespeare in another poem I studied this year, in which he talks of the power of words to keep a loved one alive:

'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.'

Theme:

The main message of this poem is that we should appreciate our loved ones and treasure the time we spend with them. This bond is so strong, however, that even when they are gone, we may gain some comfort from seeing them in our mind's eye – as Kavanagh does – smiling up at us 'eternally'.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Relationship
- ✓ Memory
- ✓ People
- ✓ Death and grief