



Eavan Boland

Complete Study Guide
Leaving Certificate Poetry

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Brief Biography

Eavan Boland was born in Dublin in 1944 but spent several years of her childhood in London and New York because her father was a diplomat and had to travel as part of his job. Returning to Ireland, she studied at Trinity College, Dublin. She enjoyed her time there, and found living in Dublin city in the 1960s helpful and inspirational to her career as a writer. However, when she married the novelist Kevin Casey in 1969 and started a family, Boland moved to the suburb of Dundrum. She was no longer part of the lively city life, but still managed to find creative inspiration in this new place.



Boland taught at Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin. In 1979, Boland was a member of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. From 1996 to Boland was Professor of English at Stanford University in the United States.

On 15 March 2016, President Obama quoted lines from her poem 'On a Thirtieth Anniversary' (from her 2001 collection *Against Love Poetry*) during his remarks at a St Patrick's Day reception at the White House.

In March 2018, RTÉ aired a documentary about her life as a poet titled *Eavan Boland: Is it Still the Same?*. That same year, Boland was commissioned by the

Government of Ireland and the Royal Irish Academy to write the poem 'Our future will become the past of other women,' which was read at the UN and in Ireland during the centenary celebrations of women's suffrage in Ireland, first granted in 1918.

Boland passed away in Dublin on 27 April 2020. Later that year, she was posthumously honoured with the Costa Book Award for poetry for her final collection, *The Historians*.

In 2024, Trinity College Dublin renamed the Berkeley Library as the Eavan Boland Library.



The War Horse

This dry night, nothing unusual

About the clip, clop, casual

Iron of his shoes as he stamps death

Like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth.

I lift the window, watch the ambling feather

Of hock and fetlock, loosed from its daily tether

In the tinker camp on the Enniskerry Road,

Pass, his breath hissing, his snuffling head

Down. He is gone. No great harm is done.

Only a leaf of our laurel hedge is torn—

Of distant interest like a maimed limb,

Only a rose which now will never climb

The stone of our house, expendable, a mere

Line of defence against him, a volunteer


You might say, only a crocus, its bulbous head

Blown from growth, one of the screamless dead.

But we, we are safe, our unformed fear

Of fierce commitment gone; why should we care





If a rose, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted
Like corpses, remote, crushed, mutilated?

He stumbles on like a rumour of war, huge
Threatening. Neighbours use the subterfuge

Of curtains. He stumbles down our short street
Thankfully passing us. I pause, wait,

Then to breathe relief lean on the sill
And for a second only my blood is still

With atavism. That rose he smashed frays
Ribbioned across our hedge, recalling days

Of burned countryside, illicit braid:
A cause ruined before, a world betrayed.

from *The War Horse* published in 1975

Glossary:

Hock: joint on a horse's hind leg

Fetlock: a projection on the back of a horse's leg, just above the hoof.

Bulbous: fat and round

Subterfuge: evasive technique

Atavism: reversion to ancestral characteristics

Illicit braid: this refers to the green ribbon worn in the buttonhole of the Ribbonmen, members of a 19th century secret society formed to fight the cause of poor Irish Catholics.



Background: Eavan Boland explains her inspiration for this poem:

'I married in my mid-twenties and went to live in a suburban house at the foothills of the Dublin mountains. The first winter in the suburb was harsh. The weather was cold; the road was half-finished. Each morning the fields on the Dublin hills appeared as great slates of frost. At night the street lamps were too few. And the road itself ran out in a gloom of icy mud and builder's huts.

It was early '70s, a time of violence in Northern Ireland. Our front room was a cold rectangle with white walls, hardly any furniture, and a small television chanting deaths and statistics at teatime.

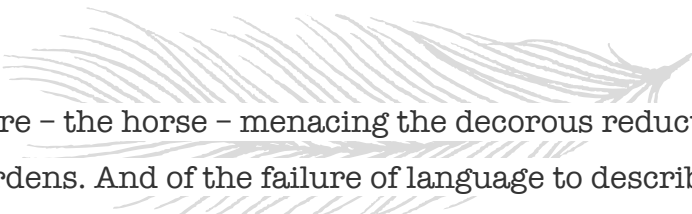
One evening, at the time of the news, I came into the front room with a cup of coffee in my hand. I heard something at the front door. I set down the coffee and went to open it. A large, dappled head – a surreal dismemberment in the dusk – swayed low on the doorstep. The reattached itself to a clumsy horse and clattered away.



There was an explanation. It was almost certainly a traveller's horse with some memory of our road as a travelling-site and our garden as fields where it had grazed only recently. The memory withstood the surprises of its return, but not for long. It came back four or five times. Each time, as it was started into retreat, its huge hooves did damage. Crocus bulbs were uprooted.

Hedge seedlings were dragged up. Grass seeds were churned out of place.

Some months later I began to write a poem. I called it 'The War Horse'. Its argument was gathered around the oppositions of force and formality. Of an



intrusion of nature – the horse – menacing the decorous reductions of nature that were the gardens. And of the failure of language to describe such violence and resist it. I wrote the poem slowly, adding each couplet with care. I was twenty-seven years of age. At first, when it was finished, I looked at it with pleasure and wonder. It encompassed a real event. It entered a place in my life and moved beyond it. I was young enough in the craft to want nothing more.’

From *Object Lessons* by Eavan Boland, 1995



Summary and analysis

The title conjures up images of violence and conflict, albeit of a bygone age, but the first lines of the poem bring us into a suburban setting far removed from war and chaos. The poem opens much like ‘This Moment’ in that the poet states that nothing at all unusual has happened in this quiet place – up to this point. The word ‘This’ focuses us on a specific moment and the word ‘dry’ suggests a lack of anything stormy or dramatic. The onomatopoeic ‘clip clop’ of the horse’s hooves are not normal in the suburbs yet the horse seems indifferent to how out of place he is and to the damage he is causing to lawns and flower beds as his heavy, iron-shod hooves stamp on delicate plants. The enjambment in these lines keeps the poem moving forward and mirrors the movement of the horse as he ambles along the quiet street.

Boland involves herself to a certain extent by opening the window to look closer. She is interested, but not enough to take any action to stop the horse or guide him away from the gardens. Again, the run-on lines convey the horse’s freedom as he has been ‘loosed’ from his tether in the tinker camp and is free to wander at will. Following on that is a description which is slightly different and is marked by different punctuation. The horse lowers his head, sniffs the ground, exhales and is gone. The short sentences ‘He is gone’. No



great harm is done' are almost like a sigh of relief and a release of tension. For a moment the horse had come so close that his breath could be heard but now he has moved on. There was a sense of threat in his 'hissing' breath but Boland can now revert to practicalities and see that no real harm has been caused.



The damage to the plants is minimal: a leaf has been torn from the hedge, a rose and crocus have been destroyed. The language used to describe the effects of the horse's passing is interesting in that it is language more usually associated with descriptions of the battlefield. The missing laurel

leaf is of little importance and only evokes 'distant interest', but it is also like a 'maimed limb'. Does this suggest an attitude towards war? Are those of us who are not directly involved inclined to view such events dispassionately? The dead rose is 'expendable' and it is nothing more than a 'mere line of defence'. The rose is viewed as a 'volunteer' so presumably it would be happy to die in its role as defender, just as those who give up their lives for their country are often viewed as being more than willing to do so. Are such deaths less important, then? The crocus which will now never grow is merely 'one of the screamless dead' as it is violently 'blown' from the ground by the horse's hooves.

The word 'But' at the start of line 17 signals a change. Boland now moves to reflecting on the way in which we take refuge in our own safety and wonder 'why should we care' when war threatens. We have a fear being called upon



to take a side and are relieved when danger passes us by and leaves us unhurt. The horse represents an invader whose actions are watched but not hindered. Those who observe him hope he will simply go away without harming them. I always think, when I read this, of Robert Frost's final lines in 'Out, Out –' in which he says 'And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs'. You can read the poem here if you are interested:

[http://www.aoifesnotes.com/leaving-cert/ordinary-level/Paper-Two/docs/prescribed-poetry/Frost-%20"Out,%20Out%20-%20".pdf](http://www.aoifesnotes.com/leaving-cert/ordinary-level/Paper-Two/docs/prescribed-poetry/Frost-%20)

The horse comes back into the poem at this stage as he is the symbol of war. He is the powerful, invading force that we watch fearfully but hope will not impact on our lives. When he is gone, we go out to pick up the pieces and see what he has done. Some neighbours have evaded his presence by hiding behind their curtains and pretending they do not see him. Boland has, at least, opened the window.

Boland does not judge those who hide behind curtains. She and her neighbours are joined in her use of the words '**our** short street', and '**passing us**'. Like her neighbours, Boland is relieved that the horse has passed on without inflicting serious damage on her property. She has escaped relatively unscathed.





There is still a certain amount of tension – ‘I pause, wait’ - until it is clear that the horse is really gone and is not coming back. Then Boland leans on the windowsill and breathes a sigh of relief.

For a moment, Boland feels connected to her ancestors and compares her moment of fear and tension to their similar feelings when war and violence raged. The rose the horse destroyed is now a symbol of all that was destroyed in Ireland during its troubled past. Did some of those who saw what was happening hide behind curtains and walls, praying that they would escape unnoticed and unhurt? If so, did they lack the ‘fierce commitment’ needed to stand up to an enemy? Did they betray their country by not fighting or does Boland mean that Ireland was betrayed by those who ruled it so harshly? Either way, there is little judgement here, just a sense of regret that such



things happened and an acknowledgement of the suffering of the Irish people in the past.

Child Of Our Time

Yesterday I knew no lullaby
But you have taught me overnight to order
This song, which takes from your final cry
Its tune, from your unreasoned end its reason;
Its rhythm from the discord of your murder,
Its motive from the fact you cannot listen.

We who should have known how to instruct
With rhymes for your waking, rhythms for your sleep
Names for the animals you took to bed,
Tales to distract, legends to protect,
Later an idiom for you to keep
And living, learn, must learn from you, dead.




To make our broken images rebuild
Themselves around your limbs, your broken
Image, find for your sake whose life our idle
Talk has cost, a new language. Child
Of our time, our times have robbed your cradle.
Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken.

Glossary

Discord: lack of harmony between notes sounding together; disagreement between people.

Idiom: idiom: a traditional way of saying something. For example, a person might say they were ‘under the weather’ instead of saying they were sick. A



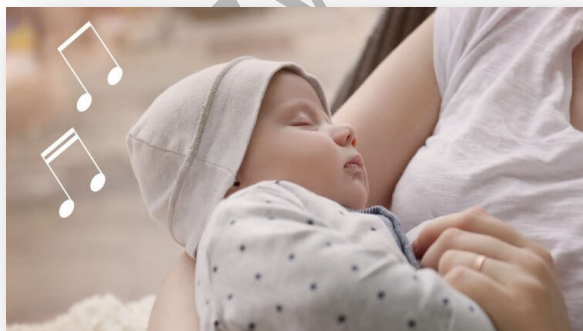
person who was not a native English speaker would have difficulty understanding idioms in the English language.

Background

Boland wrote this poem in response to a photograph of a fireman carrying the body of a dead child from the debris of the Dublin bombing in May 1974. The poem is dedicated to Aengus, a friend's son who died a cot death at the time Boland was writing the poem.


Summary and Analysis

The poem opens with the striking line: 'Yesterday I knew no lullaby'. The poet admits that before the tragic event, she had no song to soothe a child, no lullaby to offer. Now, in response to the death of this child, she feels compelled to write 'This song'. Boland's use of the word 'order' in this context is significant. It suggests that the poem, or song, is being created to impose some kind of structure or meaning on the chaos of the child's death. The bombing was sudden and devastating, leaving behind a world in disarray, and Boland's use of language reflects her attempt to make sense of the senseless. This need for order is reinforced in the line: 'This song, which takes from your final cry / Its tune, from your unreasoned end its reason'. The



child's cry becomes the tune of the song, and his 'unreasoned end', the violent and irrational death he suffered, becomes its reason.

Boland's choice of words such as 'cry', 'tune', and 'song' carries a deep emotional resonance. These are words typically associated with childhood and comfort, but here they are



repurposed here to express the tragic reality of the child's death. The child's 'final cry' is not the cry of a child in need of comfort, but the anguished cry of a dying child. The use of these familiar, almost homely words creates a jarring contrast between how things should be and how they are. In a normal world, children are sung to sleep, but in this dreadful reality, children are killed by violence. This contrast is emphasised further by the line 'Its rhythm from the discord of your murder'. The rhythm of the poem, like the lullaby Boland is trying to create, is shaped by the 'discord' of the child's death. This is a heartbreaking way of reminding us of the difference between the ideal and the real.

In the second stanza, Boland shifts focus to the collective responsibility of the adult world. She writes: 'We who should have known how to instruct / With rhymes for your waking, rhymes for your sleep'. The repetition of 'we' throughout this stanza reinforces the shared guilt and culpability for the



child's death. Adults should have taught the child nursery rhymes and bedtime stories: simple, comforting things that mark the rhythms of a safe and happy childhood. Yet instead of being nurtured and protected, the child was abandoned to a world of violence. Boland contrasts what the child should have learned—'rhymes', 'names for the animals', 'tales to distract'—with the brutal reality of his death. The child's life, full of potential and innocence, has been cut short by the adult world's failure to provide the safety and love he deserved.

One of the key techniques Boland uses in this stanza is repetition. Phrases like 'rhymes for your waking, rhymes for your sleep' mirror the sounds and



rhythms of a lullaby, evoking the kind of song that should have been part of the child's life. Yet this lullaby is not one of comfort; it is an elegy, a song written for a child who 'cannot listen'. The use of enjambment, where lines run into one another without a pause, reflects the relentless nature of the tragedy, as there is no break or resolution to the violence that claimed the child's life. Boland also uses contrasting imagery here to highlight the stark difference between the child's potential future which should have been full of learning, stories, and love, and the grim reality of his premature death.

The third stanza introduces the idea that language itself has failed the child.



Boland writes: 'To make our broken images rebuild / Themselves around your juxtaposed with the child's 'broken' body, highlighting the inadequacy of words to fully capture or prevent the violence that has occurred. Boland's use of the word 'image' is particularly significant, as it refers not only to the physical body of the child, but also to the way language creates mental pictures. The child's death, captured in a photograph in the newspaper, serves as a stark reminder that language and images, no matter how powerful, cannot always prevent the tragedies they depict.

The phrase 'find for your sake whose life our idle / Talk has cost' suggests that the child's death is the result not just of physical violence, but of the careless, thoughtless words of the adult world. Boland's use of the phrase 'idle talk' implies that the breakdown in communication, the failure to engage meaningfully with the world's problems, has contributed to the violence that claimed the child's life. The poet calls for a 'new language', one that can rebuild the broken world and create a better future for children. This idea of finding a new way to communicate is central to the poem's message, as



Boland recognises that the old language, marked by discord and failure, is no longer sufficient to address the realities of the modern world.

The final stanza brings the poem to a powerful and moving conclusion. Boland addresses the child directly once more, writing: ‘Child / Of our time, our times have robbed your cradle’. This line encapsulates the central tragedy of the poem—that the child’s life was stolen by the violent world he was born into. The use of the phrase ‘our times’ suggests that the violence of the present age is a collective responsibility, and that the child’s death is not an isolated incident, but part of a larger pattern of societal failure. Boland’s use of enjambment here allows the sentence to flow into the next line, creating a sense of inevitability as the reader is carried towards the poem’s devastating conclusion.

The poem closes with the lines: ‘Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken’. The image of the child’s ‘final sleep’ contrasts with the traditional idea of sleep as a peaceful, temporary state. Here, sleep is permanent—death. Yet Boland suggests that the child’s death may serve as a wake-up call for the adult world, urging us to confront the violence and discord that surround us. The child’s death has ‘woken’ the world to the need for change, for a ‘new language’ that can prevent future tragedies.

‘Child of Our Time’ is a haunting and powerful meditation on the failure of language and society to protect the most vulnerable. The poem is both a lament for the lost child and a call to action, reminding us that we must learn from the mistakes of the past if we are to build a safer, more compassionate world for the children of the future.



The Famine Road

Idle as trout in light Colonel Jones
these Irish, give them no coins at all; their bones
need toil, their characters no less. Trevelyan's
seal blooded the deal table. The Relief
Committee deliberated: Might it be safe,
Colonel, to give them roads, roads to force
From nowhere, going nowhere of course?

*"one out of every ten and then
another third of those again
women - in a case like yours."*

Sick, directionless they worked; fork, stick
were iron years away; after all could
they not blood their knuckles on rock, suck
April hailstones for water and for food?
Why for that, cunning as housewives, each eyed –
as if at a corner butcher - the other's buttock.

*"anything may have caused it, spores
a childhood accident; one sees
day after day these mysteries."*

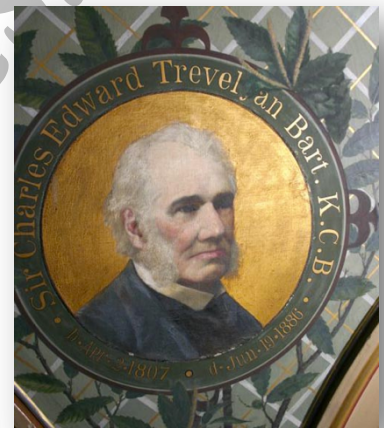
Dusk: they will work tomorrow without him.
They know it and walk clear. He has become



a typhoid pariah, his blood tainted, although
he shares it with some there. No more than snow
attends its own flakes where they settle
and melt, will they pray by his death rattle.

*“You never will, never you know
but take it well woman, grow
your garden, keep house, good-bye.”*

“It has gone better than we expected, Lord
Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured
in one. From parish to parish, field to field;
the wretches work till they are quite worn,
then fester by their work. We march the corn
to the ships in peace. This Tuesday I saw bones
out of my carriage window. Your servant Jones.



*“Barren, never to know the load
of his child in you, what is your body
now if not a famine road?”*

From ‘The War Horse’ collection (1975)

Glossary

Famine road: During the Irish potato famine, the English government decided that starving people could only be given aid if they earned it by working. They were set to work on building the famine roads: paths that led nowhere and were utterly pointless.

Trevelyan: Charles Edward Trevelyan (1807-1896) was a British civil servant and colonial administrator charged with overseeing food supplies to the Irish during the Famine. He has been heavily criticised for the way he handled the situation as he denied emergency relief and viewed the famine as the fault of the Irish people. 'The greatest evil we have to face is not the physical evil of the famine,' he wrote, 'but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the Irish people.' In an 1848 article in the *Edinburgh Review* - at the height of the famine - he applauded the fact that starvation encouraged migration and supported the view that God was punishing the Irish Catholics for their superstitious ways and adherence to 'popery'. He was knighted by Queen Victoria that same year for his work on the famine.¹

Blooded: marked or stained with blood.

Deal: pine

Relief Committee: A group formed to provide assistance to those in need, often during a crisis.

Blood their knuckles: A phrase meaning to injure their hands, particularly by hard labour.

Typhoid: A bacterial infection spread through contaminated food or water.

Pariah: A social outcast, someone rejected by others.

Tainted: Contaminated or polluted, impure.

Sedition: Conduct or speech that incites rebellion against authority, particularly against the government.

Fester: To rot, decay, or become infected, often used to describe a worsening condition.

Barren: Unable to produce offspring; in this context, also refers to something unproductive or fruitless.

¹ From an article by John Meagher – Irish Independent -30/09/2006

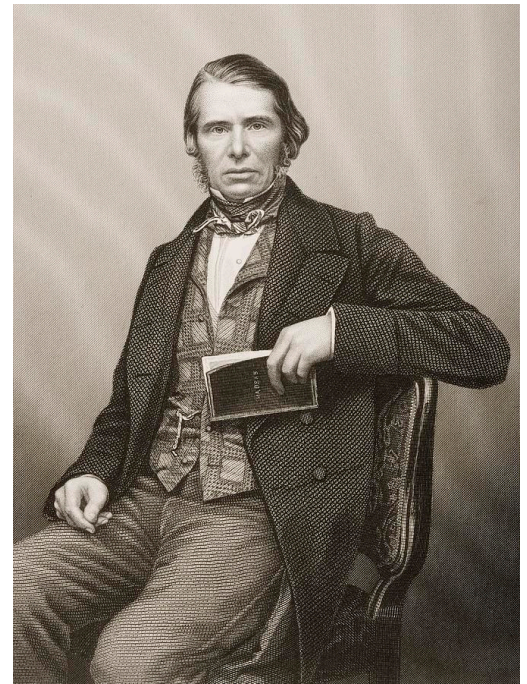
Boland on 19th Century history:

‘It’s the century where writers engaged with all kinds of defeat and began to formulate their responses. It’s instructive to see them struggling at the crossroads of self-awareness and language.

But of course it’s also the century of the Famine. And I see that as a watershed: A powerful once-and-for-all disruption of any kind of heroic history. The most wrenching part of the story of the Famine is how utterly defenseless people were in the face of a disaster they couldn’t control. It’s also surprising to see how little the writing of that time actually turns to what was happening.’²

Summary and analysis

Eavan Boland keeps herself out of this poem: there is no ‘I’, but the strength of her feelings is clear nonetheless. The poem is divided into two sections; in one we hear the voice of Trevelyan and Jones and in the other we hear a doctor speaking to a patient. Boland links the suffering of the Irish during the famine to the suffering of a childless woman. The plight of the famine victims and of the woman are treated with detached disdain and a distinct lack of sympathy by those in authority.



² From an article by JP O’Malley in The Irish Examiner – 11/01/2014

The poem opens with a letter from Trevelyan to Jones in which he dismisses the suffering of the Irish and says they deserve 'no coins' or any sort of relief. Instead, he suggests that these starving and sick people be put to work in order to cure their inherent laziness and improve their characters. His tone is peremptory: in his arrogance Trevelyan presumes to know what is best for the Irish people. The language used in the letter is both familiar and foreign as Boland uses slightly archaic phrasing and similes: 'Idle as trout', 'give them no coins at all'. Trevelyan's ignorance is also clear in these opening lines. After all, the Irish were peasant labourers and were well used to lives of toil and hardly likely to have had the luxury of being idle. If they weren't



working it was not out of choice but because the potato crop had failed and they had nothing to farm.

The red wax on the seal of Trevelyan's letter 'blooded' the light pine table which

foreshadows the deaths which will follow his instructions.

The Relief Committee deliberate on the best way to handle the situation and tentatively ask if it might be an idea to set the Irish to work building roads that go nowhere. This suggestion is a mixture of the cruel and the ridiculous: the suffering and starving Irish will be worked so hard at this pointless task that they will be unable to threaten the safety of those responsible for their situation. There is no thought of the safety of the poor and the dying. The roads will lead nowhere, just as most of these people's lives will lead nowhere.



The poem now moves on to the voice of a doctor speaking to a female patient. Neither is named and the doctor's speech is introduced mid-sentence (The line does not begin with a capital letter). He dispassionately discusses the woman's health issue in terms of statistics and averages. His tone reminds us of the detachment and coldness with which Trevelyan summed up an entire people as 'these Irish'; here the doctor sees the woman in front of him as merely another of these women who present with a similar condition. We don't yet know what the woman's complaint is but it is being treated as something quite common.

The description of the workers on the famine road is heart-breaking. Though they were dying, they had no choice but to work on this pointless road. The



word 'directionless' does not only refer to the road going nowhere but also shows us that the people's lives were going nowhere. They are reduced to the level of stone age people, bleeding their hands on rocks as they

position them to make the road. For them, 'fork, stick / were iron years away'. They have no implements and are like animals as they labour. The rhetorical question which asks if they could not sustain themselves on the harsh April hailstones is clearly ironic: not only is water the bare minimum necessary to sustain life but this is water in its harshest form – hailstones bombarding the workers.

The workers' plight means that they are driven to looking at one another much as cannibals might eye up a prime piece of meat. The juxtaposition of this image with the everyday image a housewife selecting a joint in a 'corner butcher' is horrifying as it makes the idea of feasting on the dead flesh of fellow workers as normal as choosing a piece of meat for dinner.

We move back to the doctor talking to the patient. He tells her in rather offhand way that 'anything might have caused it', be it spores – which makes us think of the spores causing the potato blight – or a mere accident in childhood. The doctor is blasé. He does not seem to realise the devastating effect of his words, just as Trevelyan seemed to show no understanding of the effect his words would have on the lives of tens of thousands of innocents.



It is dusk - a time of transition between light and darkness – and one of the workers is clearly dying and will not see daybreak. In an unnatural reversal of the usual rituals surrounding death,

those close to the dying man edge away. He is a 'pariah' or an outcast and even though some of those around him are his family they ignore him in his last hours. The suffering the people have been forced to endure has dehumanised them and they are no more concerned with the passing of one of their own than a snowflake is by the melting of another snowflake.

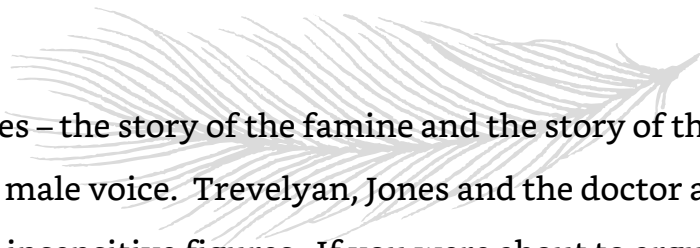
The doctor gives some advice to the woman that he feels is practical and worthwhile. If she busies herself in the garden and in the house – much as the Irish in Famine times were kept busy building pointless roads – then she

will be better off. This makes us think of the starving Irish who were ordered to do the same thing in order to earn food – were they better off as a result of it or was it an imperious command dealt from on high? Either way there is a distance between the people who think they know best for those who are suffering and those who are actually suffering. In both cases the language is distant and rather pompous. From the woman's point of view, keeping her house and garden tidy is as pointless as building a famine road. Her efforts are going nowhere. She wants a child and a future and the doctor's words are meaningless platitudes at best and insulting condescension at worst.

Colonel Jones' report to Trevelyan tells how the Irish are 'quite worn' by their labours and that they are in no position to rebel against those shipping potentially life-saving food out of the country. The certainty of the suppression of the Irish is contained in his words 'I saw bones / out of my carriage window'. That Jones should be travelling in a carriage while the Irish laboured and died on the road highlights the discrepancy between those in authority and those they are supposed to be. The Irish are not people now but merely 'bones'. They have been completely dehumanised by their suffering and their treatment at the hands of the British.



The poem ends with the woman's thoughts. She bleakly views her body like a famine road going nowhere. This is a strange metaphor in that it implies the only purpose of a woman is to bear children.



In both narratives – the story of the famine and the story of the woman – there is a strong male voice. Trevelyan, Jones and the doctor are all seen as dominating and insensitive figures. If you were about to argue that we do not know the sex of the doctor, I would draw your attention to the second last stanza in which his voice is heard:

*“You never will, never you know
but take it well woman, grow
your garden, keep house, good-bye.”*

It is highly unlikely that one woman would address another as ‘woman’. By doing so, the doctor distances himself from his patient just as the Imperialist voices in the other narrative refer to the Irish as ‘these Irish’; and ‘the wretches’.

Boland’s link of the public and the private here is masterly. The intersection of the historical and the emotional is the oppression and the silencing of the victims. The comparison between the way the Irish were treated by the English and the way women have been treated in Irish society is explained as follows by Boland: ‘Womanhood and Irishness are metaphors for one another. There are resonances of humiliation, oppression and silence in both of them and I think you can understand one better by experiencing the other.’³

³ *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century* by Sarah Sceats, Gail Cunningham 1996

The Shadow Doll

(This was sent to the bride-to-be in Victorian times, by her dressmaker. It consisted of a porcelain doll, under a dome of glass, modelling the proposed wedding dress.)

They stitched blooms from the ivory tulle
to hem the oyster gleam of the veil.
They made hoops for the crinoline.

Now, in summary and neatly sewn –
a porcelain bride in an airless glamour –
the shadow doll survives its occasion.

Under glass, under wraps, it stays
even now, after all, discreet about
visits, fevers, quickenings and lusts

and just how, when she looked at
the shell-tone spray of seed pearls,
the bisque features, she could see herself

inside it all, holding less than real
stephanotis, rose petals, never feeling
satin rise and fall with the vows

I kept repeating on the night before –
astray among the cards and wedding gifts –
the coffee pots and the clocks and

the battered tan case full of cotton
lace and tissue-paper, pressing down, then
pressing down again. And then, locks.



Glossary

Stitched blooms: Refers to the sewn flower decorations on the wedding veil, symbolising the careful, decorative aspects of wedding preparations.

Ivory tulle: A delicate, fine netting fabric used in veils, often associated with weddings and bridal wear.

Oyster gleam: A description of the veil's lustrous, pearl-like shine, suggesting luxury and beauty.

Crinoline: A stiffened or structured fabric worn under a dress to give it shape, particularly associated with historical or formal fashion, like wedding gowns.

Quickenig: In historical contexts, this refers to the first movements of a fetus in the womb, but here it may also allude to desires or life that is kept under control.

Bisque features: Refers to the unglazed, matte porcelain face of the doll, a type of ceramic known for its delicate finish.

Stephanotis: A type of flower often used in bridal bouquets, symbolising purity and marital bliss.



Summary and analysis

Boland uses the Victorian custom of sending a porcelain doll dressed in a miniature version of the bride's wedding gown as a starting point to explore the constraints placed on women by the institution of marriage. She contrasts the passive, controlled figure of the Victorian bride with her own experience of marriage, questioning the historical and ongoing impact of these traditions on women's lives.


The poem opens with a vivid description of the doll's wedding dress. The dress is described in meticulous detail: 'They stitched blooms from the ivory tulle / to hem the oyster gleam of the veil. / They made hoops for the crinoline.' Boland's use of these intricate details highlights the care and craftsmanship involved in creating the doll, yet it also suggests a sense of confinement. The repetition of the word 'they' throughout this stanza implies that the bride has little control over this process; she is a passive



participant in the construction of her wedding image. The emphasis on 'hoops' and 'crinoline' draws attention to the restrictive nature of Victorian wedding fashion, as the bride is literally encased in layers of stiffened fabric that limit her movement. These early images of confinement subtly foreshadow the more profound emotional and psychological

constraints the bride may experience in marriage.

In the second stanza, Boland moves from this detailed description of the doll to a reflection on the doll's survival through time: 'Now, in summary and neatly sewn – / a porcelain bride in an airless glamour – / the shadow doll survives its occasion.' The use of the word 'summary' here suggests that the doll is a mere representation, a reduction of the full complexity of the woman it symbolises. The 'airless glamour' in which the doll exists suggests an unnatural preservation; it is protected under glass but deprived of life and breath. Boland's use of half-rhyme, as in 'neatly sewn' and 'airless glamour', gives the poem a subtle, almost fragile musicality that mirrors the delicacy of the doll itself. However, the 'porcelain bride' is cold and inanimate, trapped in a display case, unable to engage with the world beyond her artificial existence.



The theme of entrapment is developed further in the third stanza, where the doll is described as ‘under glass, under wraps’. These repeated images of containment highlight the doll’s separation from the vibrant, chaotic world of human experience. Boland imagines that, despite being witness to ‘visits, fevers, quickenings and lusts,’ the doll remains ‘discreet’—silent and uninvolved in the real emotions and events that have surrounded it. This notion of the doll’s silence is significant, as it reflects the way women, particularly in Victorian times, were often expected to suppress their voices and emotions. The reference to ‘fevers’ and ‘quickenings’—terms associated with pregnancy and sexual desire—suggests that even the most intimate aspects of a woman’s life were subject to this silence. Boland’s choice of archaic language here deepens the sense that these experiences, while natural and universal, were taboo subjects for women of this era.



In the fourth and fifth stanzas, Boland turns her attention to the bride herself, imagining her feelings as she contemplates her future. The line ‘she could see herself / inside it all’ marks a turning point in the poem, as the bride begins to realise that she is being transformed into a ‘shadow’ of herself, just like the doll. The description of her holding ‘less than real / stephanotis, rose petals’ conveys a sense of unreality, as though the woman is reduced to a mere ornament, like the doll itself. The flowers she holds are symbolic of purity and romance, but in this context, they seem empty and lifeless. Boland contrasts this sense of lifelessness with the bride’s inability to ‘feel / satin rise and fall with the vows’. This image of the unfeeling bride highlights the emotional

disconnection she may experience, as her true self is concealed beneath layers of expectation and tradition.

The poem's structure is also significant. It is composed of seven three-line stanzas, with a careful, controlled rhythm that mirrors the tightly wound emotions of the bride. Boland uses enjambment to create a sense of breathlessness and tension, as one thought spills into the next without pause. This mirrors the bride's feelings of being overwhelmed, caught up in the momentum of her wedding preparations, unable to pause and reflect on her own emotions. The tercets create a sense of order and symmetry, reflecting the societal pressures on the bride to conform to expectations, yet this very structure also reinforces the sense of confinement.



In the sixth and seventh stanzas, Boland shifts the focus from the Victorian bride to her own experience of marriage. The poem moves from the third person 'she' to the first person 'I', as Boland recalls her own wedding night: 'I kept repeating on the night before – / astray among the cards and wedding gifts – / the coffee pots and the clocks'. The use of the word 'astray' suggests a sense of confusion or displacement, as the speaker reflects on the vast array of material objects surrounding her. The juxtaposition of 'vows'—a symbol of deep emotional commitment—with mundane wedding gifts like 'coffee pots and clocks' serves to emphasise the way in which the true significance of

marriage can become lost amidst the material trappings of the wedding ceremony.

The poem concludes with a striking image of finality: 'the battered tan case full of cotton / lace and tissue-paper, pressing down, then / pressing down again. And then, locks.' The repeated phrase 'pressing down' conveys a sense of weight and suffocation, as though the speaker is being weighed down by the expectations and responsibilities of marriage. The final word, 'locks', brings the poem to a close with a sense of inevitability. The onomatopoeic sound of the lock clicking shut resonates with the emotional closure of the poem, symbolising the bride's entrapment within the institution of marriage. Boland's decision to end on this word suggests that, despite the speaker's awareness of the constraints placed on women by marriage, there is no easy escape from these societal pressures.



The poem's final image of the locked suitcase serves as a poignant reminder that the struggle for autonomy and self-expression within marriage is an ongoing one.

White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland

I drove West
in the season between seasons.
I left behind suburban gardens.
Lawnmowers. Small talk.

Under low skies, past splashes of coltsfoot.
I assumed
the hard shyness of Atlantic light
and the superstitious aura of hawthorn.

All I wanted then was to fill my arms with
sharp flowers,
to seem, from a distance, to be part of
that ivory, downhill rush. But I knew,


I had always known
the custom was
not to touch hawthorn.

Not to bring it indoors for the sake of

the luck

such constraint would forfeit –
a child might die, perhaps, or an unexplained
fever speckle heifers. So I left it





stirring on those hills
with a fluency
only water has. And, like water, able
to re-define land. And free to seem to be –

for anglers,
and for travellers astray in
the unmarked lights of a May dusk –
the only language spoken in those parts.

Glossary

Coltsfoot: A type of wildflower that grows in the countryside

Constraint would forfeit: this action would force you to give up something, in this case, the luck or protection that would be lost by breaking the superstition.

Summary and analysis

‘White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland’ reflects on the contrast between the structured, controlled environment of suburban life and the open, untamed landscape of the West. The hawthorn tree, steeped in Irish folklore, serves as the central image around which Boland explores themes of freedom, tradition, and connection to nature. Through careful use of imagery and a fluid structure, the poem conveys the poet’s sense of awe and respect for the natural world while also acknowledging the constraints that traditions can impose.

The opening lines set the stage for Boland's departure from the suburban world: 'I drove West / in the season between seasons. / I left behind suburban gardens. / Lawnmowers.

'Small talk.' The journey westward symbolises a movement away from the constraints of modern, suburban life. The fragmented sentences, particularly in the final two lines of this stanza, create a sense of detachment and



fragmentation, reflecting the poet's desire to escape from the mundane.

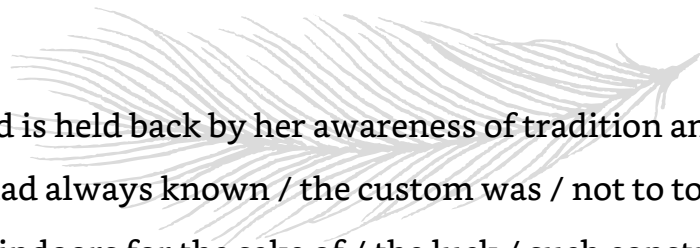
'Lawnmowers. Small talk' are emblematic of the routine, controlled life she leaves behind as she ventures toward the wildness of the West. Boland's choice to isolate these phrases with full stops gives them an abrupt, staccato quality, evoking a sense of restriction and enclosure.

As the poem progresses, the contrast between suburban order and the expansiveness of the western landscape becomes more pronounced. Boland describes her surroundings as she drives further west: 'Under low skies, past splashes of coltsfoot.' Here, the imagery is vivid and natural, evoking the openness of the countryside. The 'low skies' suggest a close connection between the land and sky, as if the vastness of nature is pressing down on the landscape. This contrasts with the manicured, artificial suburban gardens mentioned earlier. The phrase 'splashes of coltsfoot' brings a sense of liveliness and wildness to the scene, reinforcing the idea that the western landscape is full of energy and unpredictability.

Boland then reflects on the changing light as she moves into the West, describing how she ‘assumed / the hard shyness of Atlantic light / and the superstitious aura of hawthorn.’ The oxymoron ‘hard shyness’ captures the dual nature of the Atlantic light—intense yet elusive, a symbol of the rugged beauty of the West. The hawthorn tree, a central figure in Irish folklore, carries with it an air of superstition and mystery. Boland’s use of the word ‘assumed’ suggests that she is not only observing these natural phenomena but also taking them on, allowing the landscape to influence her thoughts and perceptions.



The poet’s desire to merge with the landscape is expressed in the third stanza: ‘All I wanted then was to fill my arms with / sharp flowers, / to seem, from a distance, to be part of / that ivory, downhill rush.’ The white hawthorn blossoms are described as ‘sharp’, a subtle reminder that the beauty of nature is not without its dangers. Boland’s wish to ‘fill her arms’ with the flowers reflects her yearning to fully immerse herself in the landscape. The image of the ‘ivory, downhill rush’ conveys the wild, uncontrollable movement of the flowers as they bloom across the hillsides, contrasting with the carefully controlled suburban gardens she left behind. Her desire to ‘seem, from a distance, to be part of’ this rush suggests a longing to become one with the natural world, yet there is an underlying acknowledgment that she can never fully belong to it.



However, Boland is held back by her awareness of tradition and superstition. 'But I knew, / I had always known / the custom was / not to touch hawthorn. / Not to bring it indoors for the sake of / the luck / such constraint would forfeit.' The tone here shifts from desire to caution, as Boland remembers the ancient customs surrounding the hawthorn tree. The belief that bringing hawthorn indoors would bring bad luck—potentially leading to a child's death or a 'fever speckling heifers'—reflects the deep-rooted superstitions that still hold power in rural Ireland. Boland's decision not to pick the flowers highlights the tension between her desire for freedom and the constraints imposed by tradition.

In the final stanzas, Boland shifts from personal desire to a broader reflection on the place of the hawthorn in the landscape. She leaves the flowers 'stirring on those hills / with a fluency / only water has. / And, like water, able / to re-define land.' The comparison of the hawthorn's movement to water suggests that the tree is not merely a static part of the landscape but a dynamic force capable of shaping the land around it. This image reinforces the idea that the natural world has a power and fluidity that is beyond human control. The hawthorn, like water, is a force of nature that transcends the constraints of time and space.

The final stanza introduces a sense of mystery and otherworldliness: 'And free to seem to be – / for anglers, / and for travellers astray in / the unmarked lights of a May dusk – / the only language spoken in those parts.' The hawthorn becomes a kind of guide, a language understood by those who are lost or wandering through the landscape. The phrase 'unmarked lights of a May dusk' evokes a sense of disorientation, as if the usual markers of civilisation are absent in this remote part of the world. For those unfamiliar

with the land, the hawthorn's presence is the only form of communication, its blossoms speaking a silent language that transcends words. Boland suggests that in this wild, untamed landscape, nature itself becomes the only way to understand and navigate the world.

The structure of the poem, written in free verse, mirrors the openness of the landscape Boland describes. The use of enjambment allows the poem to flow naturally, reflecting the fluidity of the hawthorn's movement and the poet's journey westward. The lack of a rigid rhyme scheme or metre further reinforces the sense of freedom and expansiveness that characterises the western landscape. However, this freedom is tempered by the constraints of tradition, as seen in Boland's decision not to pick the hawthorn flowers. The poem ultimately explores the tension between freedom and constraint, modernity and tradition, as Boland navigates the wild landscape of the West and its deep-rooted superstitions.



The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me

It was the first gift he ever gave her,
buying it for five francs in the Galeries
in pre-war Paris. It was stifling.
A starless drought made the nights stormy.

They stayed in the city for the summer.
They met in cafés. She was always early.
He was late. That evening he was later.
They wrapped the fan. He looked at his watch.

She looked down the Boulevard des Capucines.
She ordered more coffee. She stood up.
The streets were emptying. The heat was killing.
She thought the distance smelled of rain and lightning.

These are wild roses, appliquéed on silk by hand,
darkly picked, stitched boldly, quickly.
The rest is tortoiseshell and has the reticent,
clear patience of its element. It is

a worn-out, underwater bullion and it keeps,
even now, an inference of its violation.
The lace is overcast as if the weather
it opened for and offset had entered it.



The past is an empty café terrace.
An airless dusk before thunder. A man running.
And no way to know what happened then —
none at all — unless, of course, you improvise:

The blackbird on this first sultry morning,
in summer, finding buds, worms, fruit,
feels the heat. Suddenly she puts out her wing —
the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.



Glossary

Francs: The currency used in France before the euro was introduced in 2002. **Galleries:** Refers to a large department store or shopping gallery in Paris, likely *Galleries Lafayette*.

Stifling: Uncomfortably hot and suffocating.

Boulevard des Capucines: A famous street in Paris, known for its shops, theatres, and cafés.

Appliqué: A sewing technique in which pieces of fabric are sewn onto a larger piece of fabric to form a picture or pattern.

Tortoiseshell: A material traditionally made from the shells of turtles, often used in the past for decorative objects.

Reticent: Reserved or holding back, suggesting something understated or quiet.

Bullion: Gold or silver in bulk before coining, but here it metaphorically refers to something valuable or rich in appearance.

Inference: A conclusion or idea suggested indirectly, without being explicitly stated.

Violation: The act of damaging or disrespecting something; in this context, it refers to the idea that the fan's beauty comes at the cost of harm to a living creature (the tortoise).

Overcast: Covered or shaded, often used to describe cloudy weather, but here it refers to the lace being darkened or dulled.

Sultry: Hot and humid, often with a sense of oppressiveness or passion.

Summary and analysis

The poem reflects on a personal object—a fan—given to Boland by her mother, which becomes the central metaphor for the complex nature of relationships.



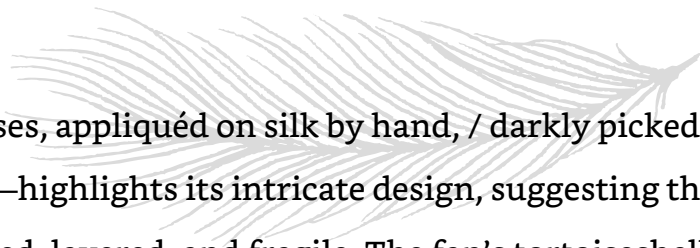
Boland immediately sets the scene with the declarative statement: 'It was the first gift he ever gave her'. This simple, direct beginning introduces the fan as the focal point of the poem and establishes a tone of reflection. The specificity of the following details, 'buying it for five francs in the Galeries / in pre-war Paris,' transports the reader to a particular time and place, giving the poem a sense of personal history. Boland uses these details to ground the poem in a moment of significance, while the mention of 'pre-war' subtly hints at the fragility and transience of the world her parents inhabited. The historical context suggests an impending disruption. This mirrors the tension within the relationship itself.

The poem's structure plays an important role in its meaning. Consisting of seven quatrains, the poem's form creates a sense of progression, much like the unfolding of memory. Boland uses enjambment throughout the poem to propel the reader forward, reflecting the way that time, like memory, flows continuously. In lines like 'They stayed in the city for the summer. / They met in cafés. She was always early. / He was late. That evening he was later,' the enjambment mirrors the movement of time and the actions of the lovers. The abruptness of the short sentences—'He was late. That evening he was later'—creates a staccato rhythm, building a sense of anticipation and unease. This technique not only reflects the couple's imperfect timing but also hints at the underlying tension in their relationship.

Boland's use of weather imagery is another key technique in the poem, adding layers of meaning to the narrative. The oppressive heat in the lines 'It was stifling. / A starless drought made the nights stormy' reflects the emotional atmosphere between the lovers. The weather becomes a metaphor for the intensity of their relationship, where passion and tension coexist. The description of the 'drought' and 'stormy' nights suggests that the couple's interactions are fraught with a kind of emotional volatility, much like a summer storm that brews beneath the surface. Boland's use of natural imagery to reflect human emotions is a subtle yet powerful technique, underscoring the idea that relationships are often as unpredictable and uncontrollable as the weather.



The fan itself is central to the poem's symbolism, representing both the beauty and complexity of love. Boland's description of the fan as a crafted



object—‘wild roses, appliquéd on silk by hand, / darkly picked, stitched boldly, quickly’—highlights its intricate design, suggesting that love, too, is something crafted, layered, and fragile. The fan’s tortoiseshell handle, described as having ‘the reticent, / clear patience of its element,’ adds a contrasting note of permanence and restraint to the more delicate silk.

However, Boland also imbues the fan with darker connotations, as she acknowledges its ‘inference of its violation.’ The tortoiseshell, taken from a living creature, represents the violence that often accompanies beauty and love, reminding the reader that relationships can be both nurturing and destructive. This duality is reinforced by Boland’s careful use of contrasting imagery: the bold roses against the quiet patience of the tortoiseshell.

Another significant technique Boland employs is her manipulation of time within the poem. While the opening lines take the reader to a specific historical moment—‘pre-war Paris’—the poem gradually moves away from linear time. Boland blurs the distinction between past and present, as shown in the line ‘The past is an empty café terrace.’ Here, the past becomes an abstract, almost ghostly presence, one that is both distant and yet felt in the present moment. The shift from a specific memory to a more general reflection on time and memory is reinforced by Boland’s use of the present tense in the final stanzas. The fan, once a tangible object tied to a specific moment, becomes a symbol of something more elusive—the way time alters and distorts our understanding of love.

Boland’s exploration of memory culminates in the lines: ‘And no way now to know what happened then— / none at all—unless, of course, you improvise.’ This admission of the impossibility of fully reconstructing the past highlights the limitations of memory. Boland recognises that much of her

parents' courtship is irretrievably lost to time, and any attempt to piece it together requires imagination. The use of the word 'improvise' suggests that memory is not fixed but fluid, something that can be reshaped and reimagined. This technique of acknowledging the gaps in memory adds a layer of meta-commentary to the poem, where Boland reflects on the act of writing itself as an act of improvisation.

In the final stanza, Boland introduces the image of a blackbird, which serves as a metaphor for the natural, enduring aspects of love. The bird, 'finding buds, worms, fruit,' spreads 'the whole, full, flirtatious span of it,' in a gesture that mirrors the fan. This sensual image of the



blackbird, with its 'flirtatious' wing, suggests that while the specifics of a relationship may fade over time, the gestures and emotions associated with love are timeless. Boland's use of this natural imagery brings the poem full circle, connecting the man-made fan with the organic world of the blackbird. The bird's carefree, instinctual movement contrasts with the human tendency to complicate love with memory and analysis.

The poem's conclusion is both sensual and reflective. It leave the reader with a sense of continuity between the past and present. The gestures of love are timeless, even if the specifics of a relationship fade.

This Moment

A neighbourhood.

At dusk.

Things are getting ready
to happen
out of sight.

Stars and moths.
And rinds slanting around fruit.

But not yet.

One tree is black.
One window is yellow as butter.

A woman leans down to catch a child
who has run into her arms
this moment.

Stars rise.
Moths flutter.
Apples sweeten in the dark.





Background

After her marriage, Boland moved to the suburbs of Dundrum. The suburbs are generally viewed as dull and bland, and not exactly inspirational for poets and artists. However, Boland managed to find her inspiration in this seemingly unexciting setting, and she made her environment the subject of many of her poems.

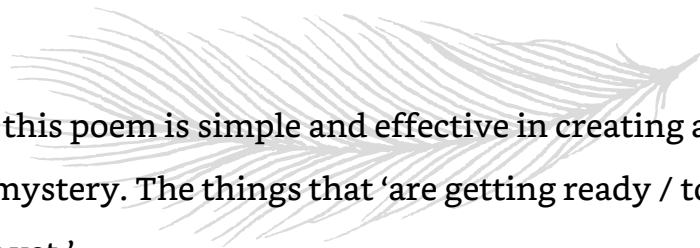
Boland realised that none of her artistic, literary friends thought the suburbs worthy of any particular attention, although everyone was familiar with them. She became determined to explore this world, and to make it the subject of her poetry. It is clear from *This Moment* that Boland succeeded in what she set out to do when she said that she wished to 'bless the ordinary' and 'sanctify the common.'

Boland's mother was an artist and 'This Moment' is a particularly visual poem.

Summary and analysis

The poem opens in a suburban neighbourhood at dusk. It could be anywhere. The short sentences and the mention of things 'getting ready / to happen / out of sight' add the stillness and the sense of anticipation. There is an intensity to the poem, a feeling that something important is about to occur. The rhythm of the poem is broken by full stops, and this serves to heighten the suspense.

Even in this suburban setting, nature is evident. There are 'Stars and moths. / And rinds slanting around fruit.' This last, sensuous description, of 'rinds slanting around fruit' shows us that Boland has an artist's eye for detail.



The language in this poem is simple and effective in creating an atmosphere of stillness and mystery. The things that 'are getting ready / to happen' will happen, 'But not yet.'

In the meantime, Boland describes the silhouette of a black tree and follows this with an image of a lit window which is 'yellow as butter.' The simplicity of the language and the domestic setting do not detract from the powerful visual effect created by this vivid contrast of black and yellow, of light and dark. There is something deliberate about the repetition of the word 'One' at the start of both lines. Our attention is focused, and it seems as if the poet is somehow delaying the moment when we will learn what is 'to happen.' There is an increasing sense of anticipation at this stage in the poem.

In the next three lines, our waiting is over. A child runs into its mother's arms and the moment is so full of love, so beautiful, that "Stars rise. / Moths flutter. / Apples sweeten in the dark." Nature is in harmony with this simple but universal gesture of love when a child is swept up in its mother's loving embrace.

The structure of the three lines in which 'this moment' is described mirrors the motion of the child running towards its mother while she waits, with arms outstretched. The first line is long and reminiscent of the mother's arms flung open wide to embrace the child.. The next line is shorter as they draw closer together and the last line contains only two words as two become one. The mother and the child could not be closer, at 'this moment.'

The movement of the poem contributes to our understanding of the importance of 'This Moment'. The first half of the poem is still and hushed but once the child runs into its mother's arms, there is movement and life:

'Stars rise.

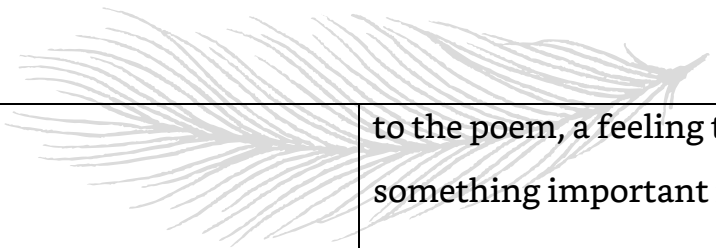
Moths flutter.

Apples sweeten in the dark.'

Although there is movement now, the poem maintains its gentle, warm, reflective tone. The repeated 's' sounds in 'stars', 'rise', 'Moths', 'Apples' and 'sweeten' give the image a softness and a quietness which is in keeping with the close of day. The onomatopoeic 'flutter' of the moths evokes memories of a typical twilight scene as the insects are drawn to the lit windows and bump softly and repeatedly against the glass in their efforts to get to the light. The arrangement of the lines and the full stops at the end of each one slows down the pace of the poem again after the embrace, and this emphasises the gentle, slow pace of a summer's evening in the neighbourhood.

Additional Notes for Ordinary Level

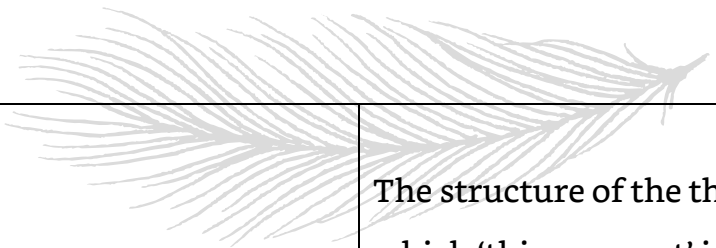
Language	
The language in this poem is simple and effective in creating an atmosphere of stillness, mystery, beauty and joy.	The opening is tense and dramatic: 'Things are getting ready to happen', 'But not yet'. The short, choppy sentences and the mention of things 'getting ready / to happen / out of sight' add the stillness and the sense of anticipation. There is an intensity



to the poem, a feeling that something important is about to occur.

The simile 'yellow as butter' to describe the window is a gentle, warm image which suggests food and comfort. The window could be lit up by the light from inside, or the colour could be created by the reflection of the setting sun on the glass. However, the simplicity of the language and the domestic setting do not detract from the powerful visual effect created by this vivid contrast of black and yellow, of light and dark, which adds to the dramatic nature of the poem.

This sensuous description, of 'rinds slanting around fruit' shows us that Boland has an artist's eye for detail. We can easily imagine a still-life painting in which the curved edges of the fruits shine with the last of the evening light. Boland's mother was an artist and *This Moment* is a particularly visual poem.



	<p>The structure of the three lines in which ‘this moment’ is described mirrors the motion of the child running towards its mother while she waits, with arms outstretched. There is a sharp contrast between the short, choppy sentences earlier in the poem and the run-on lines in the description of the embrace. The three lines can be seen visually, as a transition between distance and closeness, arms open wide and arms wrapped tightly around a child. The first line is long and reminiscent of the mother's arms stretched out. The next line is shorter as mother and child draw closer together and the mother's arms begin to close around her child. The last line contains only two words. The mother and the child could not be closer, at ‘this moment.’</p>
Mood	
Although the poem may appear simple and a little detached (we	The subjects of the poem are described simply ‘a woman’ and ‘a

learn nothing about the individuals in the poem) there is unmistakable warmth and celebration in the portrayal of the child running into its mother's arms.

child'. However, their embrace is a cause of celebration. The tension of the early lines: 'Things are getting ready / to happen / out of sight' is broken by the joy of the mother and child reunion.

Although there is action when the child runs into its mother's arms, the poem maintains its gentle, warm, reflective tone. The sibilance (repeated 's' sounds) in 'stars', 'rise', 'Moths', 'Apples' and 'sweeten' give the image a softness and a quietness which is in keeping with the close of day. The onomatopoeic 'flutter' of the moths evokes memories of a typical twilight scene as the insects are drawn to the lit windows and bump softly and repeatedly against the glass in their efforts to get to the light. The arrangement of the lines and the full stops at the end of each one slows down the pace of the poem again after the embrace, and this emphasises the gentle, slow pace of a summer's evening in the neighbourhood.

	<p>The movement of the poem contributes to our understanding of the importance of 'This Moment'.</p> <p>The first half of the poem is still and hushed but once the child runs into its mother's arms, there is movement, joy and life:</p> <p>'Stars rise. Moths flutter. Apples sweeten in the dark.'</p>
Setting	
The setting is a suburban neighbourhood at dusk.	<p>There is nothing special about this setting: it is simply 'A neighbourhood'. It could be anywhere. However, it is a place of beauty and love. Even in this suburban setting, nature is everywhere. In the sky there are 'Stars and moths' and in the house there are bowls with 'rinds slanting around fruit.'</p>
Relevance	
The poem celebrates the timeless and universal love between a mother and her child. It also highlights the importance of small, everyday moments in life which might not	<p>The whole focus of the poem is the love between a mother and child and a celebration of their everyday but important embrace. The anticipation and build-up of</p>

<p>generally be considered the stuff of great poetic inspiration.</p>	<p>dramatic tension lead to a child running into its loving mother's waiting arms.</p> <p>All nature celebrates along with the mother and child as they embrace and this simple street becomes a place of great importance: 'Stars rise. / Moths flutter. / Apples sweeten in the dark.'</p>
<p>Collection</p>	
<p>This poem would fit well in a collection of poems about love, motherhood, childhood or suburban life.</p>	<p>Love is the whole focus of the poem. Everything leads up to 'this moment' when a child runs into its mother's arms. The love between parent and child causes the stars to rise, moths to begin fluttering about and apples to 'sweeten in the dark'. 'A neighbourhood', although appearing uninteresting and ordinary, can contain moments of intense beauty and joy and is therefore a worthy subject of poetry.</p>

The Pomegranate

Note: You should read the myth of Ceres and Persephone before you study this poem in detail.

The only legend I have ever loved is
the story of a daughter lost in hell.
And found and rescued there.
Love and blackmail are the gist of it.
Ceres and Persephone the names.
And the best thing about the legend
is I can enter it anywhere. And have.
As a child in exile in
a city of fogs and strange consonants,
I read it first and at first I was
an exiled child in the crackling dusk of
the underworld, the stars blighted. Later
I walked out in a summer twilight
searching for my daughter at bed-time.
When she came running I was ready
to make any bargain to keep her.
I carried her back past whitebeams
and wasps and honey-scented buddleias.
But I was Ceres then and I knew
winter was in store for every leaf
on every tree on that road.
Was inescapable for each one we passed.



And for me.

It is winter
and the stars are hidden.

I climb the stairs and stand where
I can see my child asleep beside her teen magazines,
her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit.

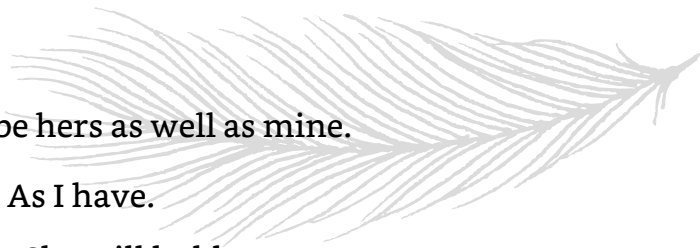
The pomegranate! How did I forget it?
She could have come home and been safe
and ended the story and all
our heart-broken searching but she reached
out a hand and plucked a pomegranate.
She put out her hand and pulled down
the French sound for apple and
the noise of stone and the proof
that even in the place of death,
at the heart of legend, in the midst
of rocks full of unshed tears
ready to be diamonds by the time
the story was told, a child can be
hungry. I could warn her. There is still a chance.

The rain is cold. The road is flint-coloured.
The suburb has cars and cable television.
The veiled stars are above ground.

It is another world. But what else
can a mother give her daughter but such
beautiful rifts in time?

If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.





The legend will be hers as well as mine.

She will enter it. As I have.

She will wake up. She will hold
the papery flushed skin in her hand.

And to her lips. I will say nothing.

Glossary

Ceres and Persephone: In Roman mythology, Ceres is the goddess of agriculture, and Persephone is her daughter who is abducted by Hades and taken to the underworld.

Gist: The main point or essence of something.

Blighted: Spoiled, harmed, or destroyed. In the poem, it refers to stars that are metaphorically damaged or blocked.

Whitebeams: A type of tree native to Europe, known for its white underside of leaves.

Buddleias: A plant that attracts butterflies, commonly known as the butterfly bush.

Pomegranate: A fruit with many seeds, central to the myth of Persephone; eating it ties her to the underworld.

French sound for apple: Refers to the French word for apple, pomme. The pomegranate's name is derived from the Latin words for 'seeded apple'.

Rifts: Cracks, splits, or breaks.

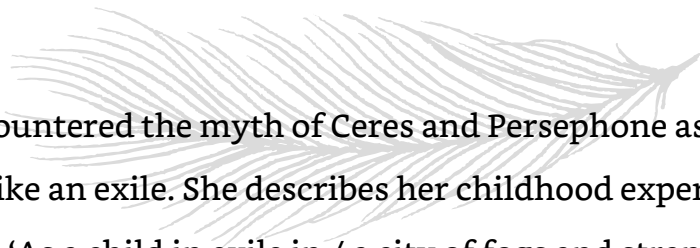


Summary and analysis

Boland uses the myth of Ceres and Persephone to explore motherhood, separation, and the passing of time..

The poem opens with a declaration of Boland's love for the myth of Ceres and Persephone: 'The only legend I have ever loved is / the story of a daughter lost in hell.' Immediately, the reader is introduced to the central mythological framework of the poem. The story of Persephone, who is abducted by Hades and taken to the underworld, while her mother, Ceres, grieves and searches for her, is a story of loss, love, and eventual compromise. In this myth, the pomegranate is a symbol of temptation, fate, and the transition from one stage of life to another. By eating its seeds, Persephone is bound to the underworld for part of each year, symbolising the cyclical nature of life and death, as well as the changing seasons. Boland, however, adds her own interpretation to this myth, presenting it not only as a story of loss and return but also as a reflection on motherhood and the bittersweet experience of watching a child grow up and away.

In the opening lines, Boland briefly summarises the myth: 'Love and blackmail are the gist of it. / Ceres and Persephone the names.' The bluntness of this description captures the essential elements of the story—love as a force that binds people together, and blackmail as a metaphor for the inevitability of separation. There is also something timeless about the way Boland presents the myth, as though it is a story that has repeated itself across generations. Boland writes, 'I can enter it anywhere. And have.' This myth is not just a distant story; it is one the poet has lived through and continues to live through, as both daughter and mother.



Boland first encountered the myth of Ceres and Persephone as a child, when she herself felt like an exile. She describes her childhood experience of living in a foreign city: 'As a child in exile in / a city of fogs and strange consonants, / I read it first.' The unfamiliarity of the 'city of fogs' (London, where Boland lived as a child) mirrors the strangeness of the underworld in the myth.

Boland, as a young girl away from her native Ireland, found solace in the story of Persephone's exile, identifying with the lost daughter, and imagining herself in the 'crackling dusk of / the underworld, the stars blighted.' The use of words like 'exile' and 'crackling dusk' conveys a sense of alienation, where the stars, normally symbols of hope and guidance, are obscured and 'blighted.'

As an adult, Boland's understanding of the myth shifts. Now a mother, she no longer identifies with Persephone but with Ceres, the grieving mother searching for her lost child. The poem moves from Boland's childhood memory to a present where she is the mother of a teenage daughter: 'Later / I walked out in a summer twilight / searching for my daughter at bed-time.' The setting of a summer evening—associated with warmth and light—contrasts with the earlier images of the dark and cold underworld. Yet, there is a sense of foreboding even in this idyllic scene. Boland recalls how, as a mother, she 'was ready / to make any bargain to keep her.' This echoes Ceres' desperation to have her daughter returned from Hades and foreshadows the inevitable separation between mother and child.

The myth of Ceres and Persephone is woven through this scene of suburban life. Boland walks 'past whitebeams / and wasps and honey-scented buddleias,' evoking images of nature in full bloom. But this joy is tempered by the poet's knowledge that 'winter was in store for every leaf / on every tree on

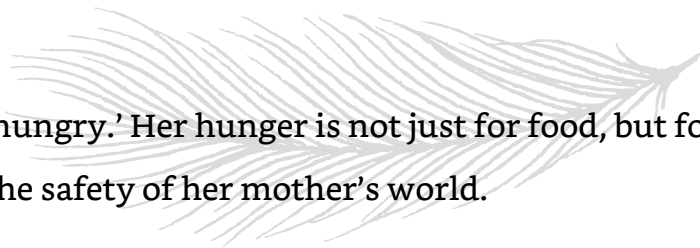
that road.' The cyclical nature of the seasons mirrors the mother-daughter relationship: just as winter inevitably follows summer, the time will come when the daughter must leave her mother. The repetition of 'was in store' and 'was inescapable' in these lines reinforces the sense of inevitability.

Boland's awareness of this cyclical pattern is both personal and mythological—her daughter will grow up, just as Persephone returns to the underworld every autumn.

The poem then shifts again to the present. Boland describes a winter scene: 'It is winter / and the stars are hidden.' This parallels the earlier image of 'blighted' stars in the underworld. Boland climbs the stairs and watches her daughter asleep, surrounded by the typical markers of teenage life: 'her teen magazines, / her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit.' These everyday details ground the myth in a modern context, yet the image of the 'uncut fruit' subtly reintroduces the pomegranate, symbolising the daughter's impending adulthood and her eventual separation from her mother.



The poem's central symbol, the pomegranate, becomes more explicit as Boland recalls how Persephone 'put out her hand and plucked a pomegranate.' This act—so simple yet so loaded with significance—represents the moment of choice, when the daughter begins to take control of her own fate. Boland reflects on the pomegranate as a symbol of temptation and inevitability, linking it to the sound and texture of the word itself: 'the French sound for apple and / the noise of stone.' The fruit's association with both sweetness (the apple) and hardness (the stone) captures the dual nature of growing up: it is both enticing and difficult. Persephone, as Boland reminds



us, 'was simply hungry.' Her hunger is not just for food, but for experience, for life beyond the safety of her mother's world.

In the final section of the poem, Boland wonders whether she should warn her daughter of the challenges and dangers ahead: 'I could warn her. There is still a chance.' The imagery here becomes stark and cold, reflecting the harsh realities of the modern world: 'The rain is cold. The road is flint-coloured.'

The poet acknowledges that her daughter lives in a different world, one filled with 'cars and cable television,' but where the 'veiled stars'—symbols of guidance—are still present. Despite the temptation to protect her daughter from pain and hardship, Boland realises that she cannot shield her forever. The poem concludes with the powerful lines: 'If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.' Boland understands that part of the gift of motherhood is allowing her daughter to make her own choices, even if they lead to separation and loss. To 'defer the grief'—to delay the inevitable—would be to lessen the value of the experiences her daughter must have. The myth, as Boland explains, is not just hers but will become her daughter's: 'The legend will be hers as well as mine.' Just as Boland entered the myth at different points in her life, so too will her daughter. The final image of the daughter holding 'the papery flushed skin' of the pomegranate to her lips is one of acceptance. Boland, as the mother, will 'say nothing,' allowing her daughter to grow and learn in her own time.

Through the symbol of the pomegranate, the poet explores the universal tension between holding on and letting go: the experience of a mother accepting the inevitable transition from childhood to adulthood.



Outside History

There are outsiders, always. These stars –
these iron inklings of an Irish January,
whose light happened

thousands of years before
our pain did: they are, they have always been
outside history.

They keep their distance. Under them remains
a place where you found
you were human and

a landscape in which you know you are mortal.

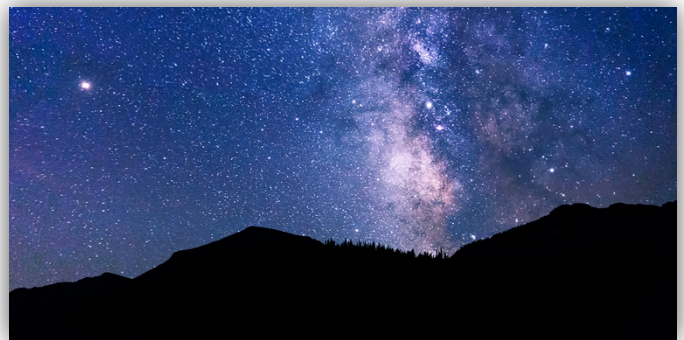
And a time to choose between them.

I have chosen:

out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead.

How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
And we are too late. We are always too late.





Glossary

Inklings: hints

Ordeal: A difficult or painful experience, often one that is prolonged. In the poem, it refers to the suffering and challenges faced by those who are outside the narratives of history.

Clotted: Thickened or congealed, often referring to blood or other substances.

Firmaments: The heavens or sky

The poem opens with the simple yet profound statement: ‘There are outsiders, always.’ This line serves as a thesis for the entire poem, establishing the existence of those who remain outside the official narrative of history. It is a concept that resonates throughout Boland’s work—her attention to the voiceless, the marginalised, and those excluded from traditional historical accounts.

In the first stanza, Boland contrasts the vast, eternal presence of the stars with the fleeting pain of human experience. She describes these stars as ‘iron inklings of an Irish January,’ suggesting both the coldness and distance of the stars, which exist outside human suffering. The phrase ‘iron inklings’ implies a distant, almost indifferent presence, while ‘Irish January’ grounds the poem in a specific time and place, creating a tension between the vast cosmos and the small, particular human world.

Boland’s use of enjambment in the first stanza, particularly in the line ‘whose light happened / thousands of years before / our pain did,’ elongates the thought, emphasising the temporal distance between the stars and human suffering. The stars’ light, which has travelled for millennia to reach us, represents a form of ‘natural history,’ which exists outside the realm of

human history. By juxtaposing the stars with the 'pain' of human history, Boland draws attention to the relative brevity and fragility of human life in contrast to the seemingly eternal, indifferent cosmos.

In the second stanza, Boland continues this contrast, noting that the stars 'keep their distance,' untouched and unaffected by the human experience below. She introduces the idea of two distinct realms: one where 'you found / you were human' and another 'landscape in which you know you are mortal.' Here, Boland acknowledges the tension between recognising one's humanity—perhaps through connection with others—and the unavoidable reality of mortality. The landscape serves as a reminder of human limitations, of the fact that life is brief and often painful. This tension is at the heart of Boland's exploration of history: while the stars remain unchanged, distant, and eternal, humans must grapple with the immediacy of suffering and death.

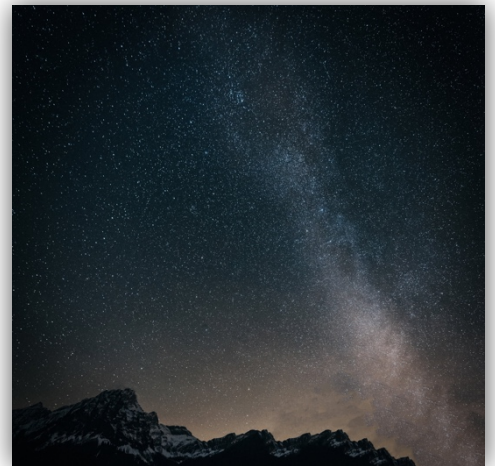


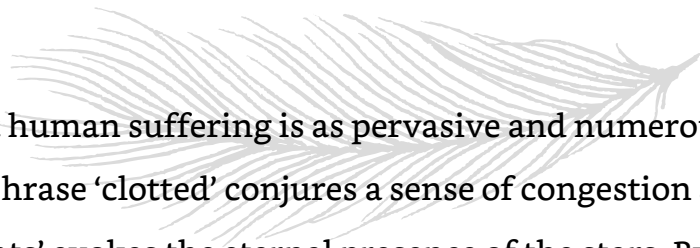
The pivotal moment in the poem comes in the fourth stanza, with the line 'I have chosen.' This declaration signals Boland's decision to move 'out of myth into history.' The choice to reject myth in favour of history reflects her desire to engage with the real, lived experiences of the past rather than to romanticise or mythologise them. Boland's rejection of myth is significant because, as she has argued in other poems, myth often obscures or erases the voices of women and other marginalised groups. In *Outside History*, she refuses to let those voices be forgotten.

The stanza following this declaration introduces the image of 'fields, / those rivers, those roads clotted as / firmaments with the dead.' Boland's imagery here is stark and unsettling. She borrows language typically associated with the stars ('firmaments') and applies it to the human story, suggesting that the dead are as numerous and as distant as the stars themselves. The phrase 'clotted as firmaments' creates a visceral image of the landscape filled with the bodies of those who have suffered and died, and Boland's use of the word 'clotted' connotes both blood and stagnation, evoking the horrors of events such as the Famine, where people died in unimaginable numbers and were often forgotten by history.

Boland's decision to move 'out of myth into history' also reflects her determination to engage with the darkness of the past, to acknowledge the suffering that has been ignored or erased. The stars, with their eternal, indifferent light, contrast with the human experience of darkness, pain, and death. The poet makes clear that she is choosing to confront this darkness rather than remain detached from it, as the stars do. Her choice to become 'part of that ordeal / whose darkness is / only now reaching me' suggests a personal commitment to remember and honour those who have been forgotten by time.

The imagery in the poem becomes particularly powerful as Boland compares the human suffering to the stars, a clever reversal of the cold imagery from earlier in the poem. The dead, like the stars, have become part of a distant past. In the line 'those rivers, those roads clotted as / firmaments with the dead,' Boland





emphasises that human suffering is as pervasive and numerous as the stars in the sky. The phrase 'clotted' conjures a sense of congestion and violence, while 'firmaments' evokes the eternal presence of the stars. By using this duality, Boland connects the human experience of death with the vast, timeless cosmos, once again highlighting the contrast between the natural and human histories.

Throughout the poem, Boland uses natural imagery to ground the human experience in a specific time and place. Her references to 'fields,' 'rivers,' and 'roads' are reminders of the physical landscape of Ireland, a country marked by its own dark history of suffering and loss. Boland's decision to place human suffering in the context of Ireland's natural landscape adds another layer of meaning to the poem, suggesting that the land itself bears witness to the pain of the past. The physical world, like the stars, may seem indifferent and timeless, but it is also a repository of memory and history. The roads and rivers of Ireland are as filled with the dead as the night sky is with stars, reminding the reader of the countless lives that have been lost and forgotten over the centuries.

The final stanza of the poem shifts the focus from the individual to the collective, as Boland introduces the plural 'we.' She describes how 'we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear,' a gesture that suggests both reverence and futility. The dead cannot hear the words spoken to them, and Boland acknowledges this with the repetition of the line 'we are too late. We are always too late.' This refrain adds a note of sadness and resignation to the poem, as Boland recognises that history is filled with missed opportunities and belated attempts to offer comfort to those who have suffered. The image of kneeling beside the dead and whispering in their ear is a poignant



reminder of how often we try to make amends after the fact, only to find that our efforts come too late.

The tone in this final stanza is one of regret and helplessness, as Boland grapples with the limitations of memory and history. The poem ends on a note of quiet despair, as Boland acknowledges that, while we may try to honour the dead and remember their suffering, it is often too late to truly make a difference. The repetition of the phrase ‘we are too late’ reinforces this sense of inevitability, as if Boland is confronting the inescapable fact that history’s silence is something we cannot fully overcome.

In her exploration of history, Boland is particularly concerned with the notion of responsibility. By choosing to move ‘out of myth into history,’ she takes on the task of remembering and honouring those who have been forgotten. The poem’s title, *Outside History*, serves as a reminder that there are countless individuals whose stories have been left untold, whose lives have been erased from the official record. Boland’s poem is an attempt to bring those voices back into the conversation, to acknowledge their suffering and give them the recognition they deserve. At the same time, the poem also recognises the limits of this endeavour—no matter how much we try to remember and honour the dead, we are often ‘too late’ to truly change the course of history. The poem becomes a meditation on the act of remembering itself, and the ways in which memory can both preserve and fail to capture the full truth of the past.

Love

Dark falls on this mid-western town
where we once lived when myths collided.
Dusk has hidden the bridge in the river
which slides and deepens
to become the water
the hero crossed on his way to hell.

Not far from here is our old apartment.
We had a kitchen and an Amish table.
We had a view. And we discovered there
love had the feather and muscle of wings
and had come to live with us,
a brother of fire and air.

We had two infant children one of whom
was touched by death in this town
and spared; and when the hero
was hailed by his comrades in hell
their mouths opened
and their voices failed and
there is no knowing what they would have asked
about a life they had shared and lost.

I am your wife.

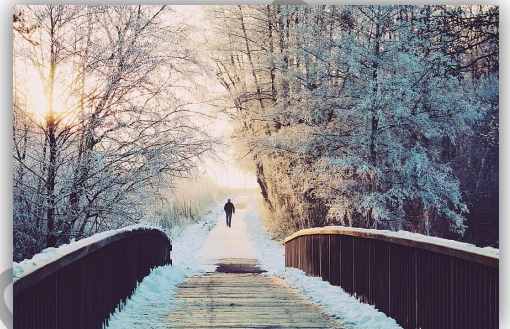
It was years ago.

Our child is healed. We love each other still.

Across our day-to-day and ordinary distances
we speak plainly. We hear each other clearly.

And yet I want to return to you
on the bridge of the Iowa river as you were,
with snow on the shoulders of your coat
and a car passing with its headlights on:

I see you as a hero in a text -
the image blazing and the edges gilded –
and I long to cry out the epic question
my dear companion:



Will we ever live so intensely again?
Will love come to us again and be
so formidable at rest it offered us ascension
even to look at him?

But words are shadows and you cannot hear me.
You walk away and I cannot follow.

Glossary

The 'mid-western' town to which Boland refers in the first verse is Iowa, in the United States. She and her husband lived there in 1979 when they were teaching at Iowa University.

The 'hero' is Aeneas, who was the hero of Virgil's The Aeneid.

Amish table: Simple, plain table made in the style of the Amish community in Pennsylvania.

gilded: covered thinly with gold leaf or gold paint

epic: heroic or impressive.

formidable: very strong, possibly causing fear or alarm.

ascension: rising or uplifting.

Summary and analysis

The poet is revisiting a town in Iowa, where she once lived with her husband and family. As she crosses the bridge, she begins to remember the time they spent there. The reference to 'the water / the hero crossed on his way to hell' is meant to evoke images of the river Styx. In Greek mythology, the river Styx flows through the underworld, or hell. Both Virgil's Aeneas and Homer's Odysseus visit the underworld. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the hero braves the underworld in order to get home more quickly. He is in a hurry to get back to his beloved wife, Penelope. This poem draws heavily on the idea of myth and



legend, of hero and heroine. Did Boland's husband rush home to her when they lived in that town? Does he do so now? The poem explores the nature of love and of marriage. Does it stay the same or does it change all the time? It is significant that the poem opens at dusk. This creates a sense of gloom, of things

being hidden, and possibly of things changing or ending. Dusk, after all, is a time of transition between day and night, light and darkness. Bridges are also symbols of crossing from one place - or one state of being - to another.

The poet thinks of the apartment that she shared with her family when they lived in Iowa. She reflects firstly on the practical aspects of their home: the kitchen, the table and the view. Then she says that love came to live with

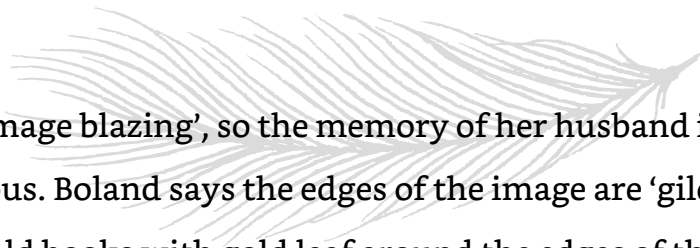
them there. In the poem, love is seen as something basic, essential and elemental, like fire or air. The four elements in ancient Greece were fire, air, earth and water. All of these are mentioned in some way in the poem.

We learn that while they lived in Iowa, one of the couple's children fell seriously ill. Fortunately, the child's life was spared. This was obviously a very intense and emotional time in the couple's marriage, and Boland examines it in some detail. She refers again to Aeneas or Odysseus' journey through hell. As they travelled, they met former companions who had died and were trapped in the underworld. The dead men tried to speak, but they could not be heard. This idea is something to which Boland returns later in the poem. The reference to 'a life they had shared and lost' is clearly not just telling us about the Greek hero and his friends. The poet feels that she and her husband shared a different life, a different kind of love at that time.



The poem returns to the present day. The child is healed; the couple 'love each other still.' On the surface, all is well. They converse and 'hear each other clearly.' However, there is no hint of the emotional intensity which existed at that earlier time.

The poet wants to return to that time in Iowa. Although there may have been stressful moments in their lives, there was an intensity which has gone, and which she now longs for. She sees her husband as he was at that time: 'a hero in a text'. Just as the pictures or descriptions of the hero in a book make him



stand out: 'the image blazing', so the memory of her husband is of someone brave and glorious. Boland says the edges of the image are 'gilded', which brings to mind old books with gold leaf around the edges of the page. The word 'gilded' could also have another meaning here. Something which is gilded is just painted with a thin coating of gold but it is not really valuable. Is Boland saying that time has gilded the edges of her memory? Is she focusing only on the most intense and passionate moments in their youthful relationship and seeing them as more wonderful as they were? Whatever, the answer, Boland yearns for her husband as he was. The image of him standing on the bridge with snow on his shoulders is reminiscent of the hero of a film, picked out by the headlights of a passing car.

The poet wonders if love will ever come to live with them again. Again, love is personified. He is seen as something so formidable, so powerful, that even to be in his presence was awe-inspiring and uplifting. However, like the dead men in the underworld, she wants to cry out to her 'dear companion' but he cannot hear her. The image of her husband on the bridge turns and walks away. Like the men trapped in the underworld, she cannot follow. The hero of the past is gone, and it is impossible to go back. No matter how passionate their love was then, it cannot be recaptured. Time passes and things change. Her words are 'shadows'. They are insubstantial, and she cannot communicate with the memory of a person as they once were. He cannot be the man he was, and their lives must move on.



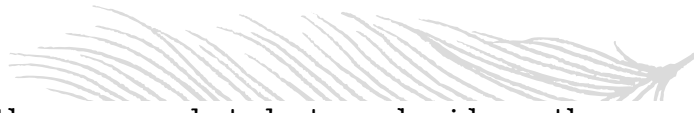
Additional Reading Material – Higher Level

This article from *The Irish Times* gives an excellent analysis of the poem:

Experience, of course, shifts and changes, will not stay in place, will not stay still. The distance between Boland’s volume *The War Horse* and her volume *In a Time of Violence* is 19 years, the distance, in a woman’s life, between 31 and 50. Light years. And, in a poet’s life, more than that. All we have to do is think of the distance between the WB Yeats of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, published when he was 34, and the poet of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, 20 years later. This is not about growing older but about an enrichment and refinement that come from reading the self, re-creating the self, reimagining the self, finding dictions to match discoveries.

Boland’s poem *Love*, from the volume *In a Time of Violence*, both uses and creates myth; it allows, as the poem’s second line suggests, myths to collide. The poet herself is a sort of Orpheus in the poem, charming a loved one with her lines. She invokes Aeneas in the underworld, and Icarus’s dangerous flight over the world above, and also Ceres and Persephone, as she remembers a child who recovered from illness. But, to match this, or set against it, she finds a plain-spoken tone that belongs to now; she heightens this tone and makes it taut, but it remains the voice of a woman speaking. History is now and it is in the words she writes. The opening of the poem is in Iowa: “Dark falls on this mid-western town”. The bridge over the river is seen in dusk, and the dusk “slides and deepens” to a remembered mythology – “the water / the hero crossed on his way to hell”. But she wants this myth to collide with the facts of things – “a kitchen and an Amish table” in “our old apartment”. And then she invokes the eponymous word – love – and then love becomes mythologised, a thing “with the feather and muscle of wings”.

And then there is a stanza about the child spared, and once more a mythology is evoked, as the hero “hailed by his comrades in hell” is brought into service,



given his due in the poem, only to be tossed aside, as the poem wants to swim out to calmer waters.

There have been two six-line stanzas and one seven-line stanza. The metrical system is uneven but led by a spondaic sound that lends itself to statement more than song.

And now Eavan Boland is prepared to make a statement, clear, eschewing myth, or maybe proposing an anti-myth, as the Greek root for the word “myth” suggests the closing of the eyes or the mouth. To be mute. These next five lines will speak with clear-eyed truth. The first line can be read as having not two iambic beats but four clear rings:

I am your wife.

It was years ago.

Our child is healed. We love each other still.

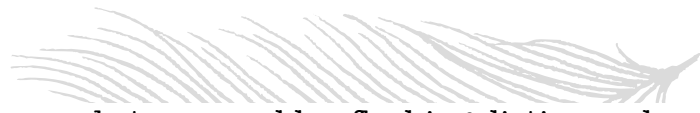
Across our day-to-day and ordinary distances

we speak plainly. We hear each other clearly.

These are six sentences. The first four of them admit no word with a Latin root, as though plain speaking requires an earlier tone. There are no flourishes. The plain tone, because of the references to myth in the previous four stanzas, brings with it a sense of casting off one tone to create another one, a tone more urgent, more exact, a tone caught in a strange grip between clarity and cry, between simple statement and a tense undertone filled with the sheer need to make this statement finally.

Calm eloquence

What to do now? The poem has four stanzas left. As the tone has become more urgent, the number of lines in each stanza will shorten. Three stanzas of four lines, and one last stanza of two lines. The first of these stanzas is perhaps the most beautiful in all of Boland’s work in its calm eloquence, its discovery of the resonant power of the image, the simple power of the thing. The statement emerges as though from an urgent impulse to state, to say, the poetry



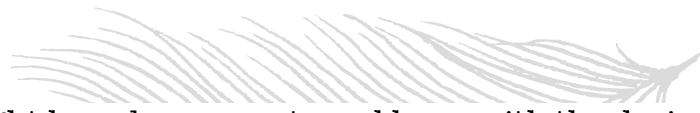
surviving in the space between sudden flashing diction and something chiselled from experience, written to be remembered, a sort of monument:

And yet I want to return to you
on the bridge of the Iowa river as you were,
with snow on the shoulders of your coat
and a car passing with its headlights on

It would be easy to stop the poem here, to let the minor key of the snow on the shoulders of the coat and the car passing with its headlights on create a set of plain single notes for the poem to end on. But just as the poem has earned the right to speak in this tone, it has earned the right to move the music of the poem into a higher register, to use two exalted words that the poem, even with its delving into what Philip Larkin called the “myth-kitty”, would have earlier resisted. These two words, which belong to mythology and to religion, are “epic” and “ascension”:

I see you as a hero in a text –
the images blazing and the edges gilded –
and I long to cry out the epic question
my dear companion:
Will we ever live so intensely again?
Will love come to us again and be
so formidable at rest it offered us ascension
even to look at him?

In these two stanzas, instead of allowing two tones to collide, she has found a match for them. She creates an iambic pentameter line – ‘I see you as a hero in a text; – to set a tone, filled now with a comfort and ease as the voice stretches itself from the simple business of asking a fundamental question – ‘Will love come to us again; – but insisting also on the right to let the voice soar and the question become more transcendental as the sights rise too, rise to the possible experience of “ascension”, the rising up out of the earth towards the sky, or out of the self towards something that two selves might become.



Once more it might have been easy to end here, with the daring question, and the sense that even having to ask such a thing implies a knowledge that the answer will never be clear. But there are two more lines. These come as a way of invoking the image in mythology of Orpheus walking ahead in a place of shadows with Eurydice behind, Eurydice being the one who sings. But she cannot be heard now in this place where words are shadows. The poem is resigned now to the way things are. The lines follow both the terms of a myth and the tone of a voice as though finally there were no distinction between the two:

But the words are shadows and you cannot hear me.
 You walk away and I cannot follow.

From The Irish Times – Saturday September 20th 2014

A version of this article first appeared in the Poetry Review.

Additional Notes for Ordinary Level

Language	
<p>Boland makes effective use of myths and legends in this poem to show the strength of her emotion and the hopelessness of her longing.</p> <p>Love itself is personified as a God-like creature which raised the couple to a higher plane.</p>	<p>Boland compares the river in Iowa to ‘the water / the hero crossed on his way to hell’. However, once in the underworld, the hero could not communicate with his dead companions: ‘their mouths opened and their voices failed and / there is no knowing what they would have asked / about a life they had shared and lost’.</p>

	<p>Love has 'muscle of wings' and chose to 'come to live with us'. Of course, there is the implication that love, being something independent and separate which arrived at a time of its own choosing, may also choose to leave. Boland wonders, 'Will love come to us again and be / so formidable at rest it offered us ascension even to look at him?'</p>
<p>Mood</p>	
<p>There is a sense of sorrow, of loss and of longing in this poem. The poet looks back with nostalgia on a time that has gone and cannot be recaptured. But there is also acceptance of things as they are now, and a recognition of the love and affection the couple shares.</p>	<p>The poet tries to accept the reality of her current situation: 'I am your wife. / It was years ago'. She still loves her husband deeply, but she admits 'And yet I want to return to you ... as you were'. She longs to 'cry out' to the heroic vision of her husband she sees in her mind's eye and ask him if he will 'ever love so intensely again'.</p>
<p>Setting</p>	
<p>The setting is Iowa city, where Boland and her husband lived when they were a young married couple. Boland stands on a bridge (a</p>	<p>The poet returns to 'this mid-western town' and remembers the life she and her husband lived there. Although she could cross the bridge to their old home, she</p>

symbol of transition) at dusk (a time of transition).	cannot travel back in time, despite her yearning: 'I want to return to you / on the bridge of the Iowa river as you were'.
Relevance	
Love is always a relevant topic, but Boland's exploration of the changing nature of love is important in an age in which songs and films tell us that love must always be passionate and intense. A couple who have been married for a long time can love one another deeply but in a more comfortable and less exciting way than they did in the earlier stages of their relationship.	The poet looks at a time when she and her husband loved intensely. Though they are still together and 'love each other still' they are not the people they once were. It is not really possible, she seems to say, to keep the same level of passion and intensity in a relationship as there might have been in the earlier days. There may be occasional moments of longing for the way things were: 'And yet I want to return to you / on the bridge of the Iowa river as you were'. However, the view of marriage should not be seen as a negative one. They are together and they are in love. The communicate and 'hear each other clearly'.
Collection	
This poem would fit well into a collection of poems about love and time.	The intensity of early love which had 'the feather and muscle of wings' and made Boland's husband

seem 'a hero in a text' is compared to the more down-to-earth relationship in which the couple 'love each other still'. However, as she revisits the place where they used to live, Boland wishes she could return to that time when they loved more intensely. She accepts, however, that there is no turning back the clock: 'words are shadows and you cannot hear me. / You walk away and I cannot follow.'

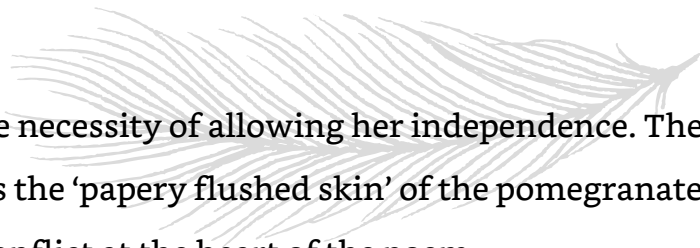


Eavan Boland – Themes and Style

Love and Relationships

Boland frequently examines love in its various forms—romantic, maternal, and filial—drawing attention to the gestures and moments that define these relationships. In ‘Love,’ she explores the evolution of romantic love, reflecting on how a once fiery passion has mellowed into something quieter but equally significant. The line ‘We love each other still’ encapsulates this shift from intense infatuation to the steady companionship of marriage, while the earlier description of love having ‘the feather and muscle of wings’ evokes the powerful, uplifting force that love once was. Boland is unafraid to confront the complexities of romantic love, acknowledging its fading intensity over time, and in ‘The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me,’ she explores love’s unpredictability through the image of her parents’ meeting, symbolised by the fan’s delicate yet enduring presence. Romantic love in her work is neither idealised nor static; it evolves, and Boland captures this evolution with remarkable sensitivity.

Parental love, particularly the protective instincts of a mother, is another key focus. In ‘This Moment,’ a simple yet powerful scene unfolds as a mother leans down to catch her child. The poem highlights the fleeting yet significant moments in a parent’s life, where love manifests in quiet, everyday gestures. In ‘The Pomegranate,’ Boland uses the myth of Ceres and Persephone to symbolise a mother’s inevitable loss as her child grows up and moves away. The recurring symbol of the pomegranate represents both temptation and growth, and Boland’s line ‘If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift’ poignantly captures the tension between a mother’s desire to protect



her child and the necessity of allowing her independence. The careful use of imagery, such as the 'papery flushed skin' of the pomegranate, adds depth to the emotional conflict at the heart of the poem.

History

History, both personal and collective, is a major theme in Boland's poetry. She often presents history as a force that shapes the present, particularly through the experiences of women. In 'The Famine Road,' Boland draws parallels between a barren woman and the desolation of the Irish Famine, using the image of a 'famine road'—a road constructed as a futile relief effort during the Famine—to symbolise a life without continuity or purpose. Here, Boland critiques the dehumanisation of both women and the Irish poor, showing how they have been marginalised by a history dominated by male narratives of power and control. Similarly, in 'Outside History,' Boland reflects on those who have been forgotten by history, likening them to stars—distant, cold, and 'outside' the human story. The repetition of 'too late' in the lines 'And we are too late. We are always too late' emphasises the regret and powerlessness in trying to recover these lost voices.

Personal history, particularly the history shared between generations of women, is also a focus in poems like 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me' and 'The Pomegranate.' These poems reflect on the ways in which objects and stories are passed down, carrying with them the weight of past lives and relationships. The fan in 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me' is not just a physical object but a symbol of both romantic love and maternal inheritance, a link between the poet's mother's past and her own present.

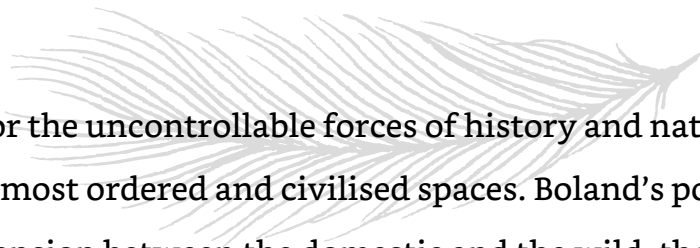


Female Experience and Domestic Life

Boland's poetry is deeply concerned with the female experience, often highlighting the tensions between a woman's personal identity and societal expectations. In 'The Shadow Doll,' Boland critiques the way women have been objectified and constrained by traditional gender roles, using the image of a Victorian bridal doll to symbolise the suffocating expectations placed on women. The 'airless glamour' of the doll's wedding dress represents the stifling nature of these roles, while the description of the bride as 'astray among the cards and wedding gifts' captures the sense of being lost within a life that is not fully her own.

Motherhood is a recurring subject, but Boland's treatment of it is far from idealised. In 'The Pomegranate,' she reflects on the inevitable separation between mother and child, recognising that part of being a mother is learning to let go. The poem's allusion to the myth of Ceres and Persephone allows Boland to explore the complexities of this relationship, where love is intertwined with loss, and protection must eventually give way to independence. In 'This Moment,' Boland presents a more tender, intimate view of motherhood, capturing the beauty of a fleeting moment of connection between mother and child. However, even here, there is an undercurrent of change and the passage of time, with the setting of dusk hinting at the approach of darkness and separation.

Boland also uses domestic imagery to explore larger themes of control and disruption. In 'The War Horse,' the carefully ordered world of suburban Dublin is threatened by the sudden appearance of a wild horse, which tramples through gardens and disrupts the fragile peace of the neighbourhood. This image of the horse, 'loosed from its daily tether,' serves

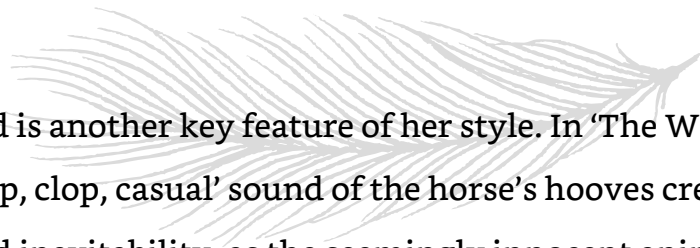


as a metaphor for the uncontrollable forces of history and nature, which can invade even the most ordered and civilised spaces. Boland's poetry often returns to this tension between the domestic and the wild, the controlled and the uncontrollable, reflecting her belief that no matter how much we try to impose order on our lives, there are forces beyond our control that will eventually break through.

Style

Boland's style is characterised by its clarity, precision, and intellectual depth. She often employs simple, everyday images to convey complex emotional and philosophical ideas, using objects like a fan, a pomegranate, or a child's toy to explore themes of love, loss, and identity. Her language, though clear and accessible, is also layered with meaning, inviting the reader to reflect on the deeper significance of the events and objects she describes. In 'Love,' for example, the image of a car passing with its headlights on creates a vivid, cinematic moment that encapsulates the distance and isolation the speaker feels, while also evoking a sense of movement and change.

Boland also makes extensive use of myth and history as metaphors in her work, using these traditional stories to explore contemporary experiences. In 'The Pomegranate,' the myth of Ceres and Persephone becomes a way of understanding the complexities of motherhood, while in 'Love,' the story of Aeneas's journey to the underworld is used to explore the emotional distance between the poet and her husband. These myths serve not only as a means of connecting the personal with the universal but also as a way of showing how the past continues to shape the present.



Her use of sound is another key feature of her style. In 'The War Horse,' for example, the 'clip, clop, casual' sound of the horse's hooves creates a sense of both tension and inevitability, as the seemingly innocent animal becomes a symbol of violence and destruction. Similarly, in 'Child of Our Time,' Boland uses a tight, controlled rhythm to convey the tragic finality of a child's death, while in 'This Moment,' the gentle sounds of 'moths flutter' and 'stars rise' evoke the quiet beauty of a suburban evening.

Boland's poetry is also notable for its formal experimentation. She frequently varies her line lengths and stanza structures to reflect the emotional and thematic shifts within her poems. In 'Love,' for instance, the irregular stanza lengths mirror the speaker's feelings of disconnection and longing, while in 'The War Horse,' the use of terse couplets creates a sense of tension and unease, reinforcing the theme of vulnerability and threat.

Boland invites readers to reflect on the personal and the political, the past and the present, and the ways in which these overlap in our everyday lives.



Writing Your Essay – Sentence Starters

Section	Sentence Starters
Topic sentence – theme	<p>One of the central themes in Boland's poetry is...</p> <p>A key focus of Boland's work is the exploration of...</p> <p>Boland uses the theme of [insert theme] to reflect on...</p>
Adding more points (or topic sentences)	<p>Another way Boland explores [insert theme] is through...</p> <p>Additionally, Boland presents the theme of [insert theme] by...</p> <p>A further exploration of [theme] can be found in...</p>
Making suggested points	<p>Boland's use of vivid imagery in this poem can be interpreted as...</p> <p>The fan in 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me' could symbolise...</p> <p>The depiction of motherhood in 'The Pomegranate' suggests...</p>
Introducing quotations	<p>This can be seen when Boland writes...</p> <p>For example, in 'The War Horse,' she states...</p> <p>In 'The Pomegranate,' the poet illustrates this by saying...</p>



Introducing quotations	For instance, Boland refers to... Boland comments on the complexity of [theme] when she writes... In the line '[quote]' Boland shows how...
Highlighting where in the poem this happens...	In 'The Famine Road', this idea is illustrated through... In 'This Moment,' Boland presents this theme when... Towards the end of 'Love,' the speaker reflects on...
What it means	This suggests that Boland views... This conveys the significance of [theme] because... The phrase '[quote]' highlights...
Analysing words, phrases or features	The word '[quote]' implies... The phrase '[quote]' evokes... This word choice conjures an image of...
Analysing technique	Boland employs the metaphor of [insert metaphor] to... The poet uses the symbol of [insert symbol] to... The simile in this line reinforces... Boland's use of enjambment in this poem creates... Boland's use of enjambment in this poem creates... The metaphor of [insert metaphor]



	<p>generates...</p> <p>The oxymoron in '[quote]' emphasises...</p>
Analysing words, phrases or features in detail	<p>The verb '[quote]' conveys...</p> <p>The adjective '[quote]' suggests...</p> <p>The phrase '[quote]' evokes a sense of...</p>
Exploring the impact/effect of the language	<p>Specifically, this word choice suggests...</p> <p>This image creates a powerful sense of...</p> <p>The description of [insert image] makes the reader imagine...</p>
Giving an important reason for your view	<p>Boland illustrates the complexity of [theme] because...</p> <p>This line demonstrates the significance of [theme] by...</p> <p>The poet suggests that [insert idea] through...</p>
Giving a suggestion of why the writer does this	<p>Perhaps Boland is suggesting...</p> <p>Possibly, the poet is alluding to...</p> <p>Boland may be illustrating the consequences of...</p> <p>Boland uses [insert technique] to remind the reader that...</p> <p>The poet employs [insert symbol/character/event] to convey...</p> <p>This moment in the poem highlights...</p>
Linking to context	<p>Some readers might argue that Boland is reflecting on...</p> <p>In the context of Irish history, Boland's portrayal of [insert theme] could be seen as...</p> <p>This poem can be linked to societal views on...</p>

Linking clearly to context

At the time this poem was written, Boland's audience may have been aware of...

In the context of 20th-century Ireland, this poem reflects...

Boland draws on the history of [insert topic] to...

Linking to how we might read the poem now

Audiences today can still appreciate Boland's exploration of...

Modern readers might interpret this poem as a reflection on...

Today, Boland's poetry offers a powerful reminder of...



Essay Plan – 2021 Leaving Certificate

Question

Discuss how successfully, in your opinion, Eavan Boland employs a range of narrative elements in her poetry to communicate a variety of thematic concerns. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Eavan Boland on your Leaving Certificate English course.

Marking Scheme

Candidates should discuss how successfully, in their opinion, Eavan Boland employs at least two narrative elements in her poetry to communicate a variety of thematic concerns. Pay attention to the quality of the discussion and the development of the response with reference to the poems by Eavan Boland on the Leaving Certificate English course.

Code N for 'Boland successfully/not successfully employs a range of narrative elements'

Code T for 'to communicate a variety of thematic concerns'

Indicative material:

- Boland successfully /not successfully employs a range of narrative elements in her poetry such as: characters, evocative settings, atmosphere/mood, imagery/symbolism, dialogue, mythological/familial/historical events to- communicate a variety of thematic concerns including: love, conflict, feminism, historical events, identity, relationships, loss, including loss of community.


Planning your answer

Note: While I have used all the poems here, you would only be expected to use four or five in your answer, of course!


Theme(s)	Narrative Elements and Examples
Love, Conflict, and Loss in Relationships	<i>Poem: 'Love'</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Character and mythological allusion: Boland uses the myth of Aeneas's journey to the underworld to symbolise emotional distance in a long-term relationship. 'But the words are shadows and you cannot hear me.' This adds a layer of depth, linking personal experience with a universal myth.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Setting and atmosphere: The cold, mid-western town ('snow on the shoulders of your coat') contrasts with the warmth of their earlier love, reinforcing the theme of fading intensity over time.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagery: The 'bridge of the Iowa river' symbolises both a literal and metaphorical connection between past and present, highlighting how love has changed.
Link to 'The Pomegranate'	Link: Both 'Love' and 'The Pomegranate' explore different dimensions of love, but while 'Love' focuses on romantic distance, 'The Pomegranate' shifts to the relationship between mother and daughter.






Motherhood and Independence	<i>Poem: 'The Pomegranate'</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mythological symbolism: The story of Ceres and Persephone illustrates the tension between a mother's protective love and her child's inevitable independence. 'I could warn her. There is still a chance.' This reflects the internal conflict between holding on and letting go.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagery: The pomegranate becomes a symbol of maturity and independence, 'the papery flushed skin' representing both temptation and the beauty of growing up.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Narrative structure: The poem shifts from past to present, with the speaker first identifying with Persephone, then with Ceres, showing how the roles of mother and daughter are interchangeable over time.
Link to 'This Moment' 	Link: While both poems explore motherhood, 'This Moment' captures a fleeting, intimate connection between mother and child, contrasting with the long-term conflict of independence in 'The Pomegranate'.
Fleeting Moments and Motherhood	<i>Poem: 'This Moment'</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Setting and atmosphere: The poem is set in a suburban twilight, creating a quiet, almost magical atmosphere. 'Stars rise, moths flutter' adds a sense





	of expectancy, capturing a moment on the cusp of change.
	• Imagery: The simple, domestic image of ‘one window is yellow as butter’ contrasts with the surrounding darkness, symbolising safety, warmth, and maternal care.
	• Character and narrative focus: The focus is on the brief but meaningful act of a mother catching her child. ‘A woman leans down to catch a child’—this captures the essence of maternal protection and love in just one moment.
Link to ‘The Shadow Doll’ 	Link: While ‘This Moment’ is a celebration of motherhood, ‘The Shadow Doll’ shifts the focus to the constraints placed on women, particularly in the context of marriage.
Feminism and Gender Roles	<i>Poem: ‘The Shadow Doll’</i>
	• Character and symbolism: The shadow doll in her ‘airless glamour’ is a symbol of women’s confinement in traditional marriage roles. This metaphor critiques the objectification of women.
	• Imagery: The description of the doll’s wedding dress, ‘the cotton lace and tissue-paper, pressing down, then pressing down again,’ evokes a sense of suffocation, reflecting the pressures of societal expectations.
	• Narrative perspective: Boland uses the first-person voice to dramatise the inner thoughts of a woman




	preparing for marriage, offering a personal reflection on the tension between outward appearances and inner fears.
 Link to ‘The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me’	Link: Both poems address women’s roles in relationships, but ‘The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me’ takes a more nostalgic approach, reflecting on love and legacy through an heirloom.
Romantic Love and Family Legacy	<i>Poem: ‘The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me’</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Symbolism and imagery: The black lace fan represents both the beauty and fragility of love. ‘The silk roses, appliquéd on silk by hand, darkly picked’ evoke romantic and delicate imagery, while also hinting at the transient nature of love.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Historical setting: The fan’s history—‘It was 1939; the worst of summer’—anchors the personal love story in a broader historical context, reinforcing the idea that personal histories are always shaped by larger events.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Character and narrative structure: The poem shifts between the past, recounting her parents’ courtship, and the present, where the speaker reflects on the legacy of their love. This intergenerational perspective adds depth to the narrative.





<p>Link to 'The War Horse'</p> 	<p>Link: While 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me' focuses on personal legacy and love, 'The War Horse' shifts to the impact of external violence on domestic life, moving from personal to societal concerns.</p>
<p>Conflict and Violence</p>	<p><i>Poem: 'The War Horse'</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolism and character: The stray horse represents a force of violence intruding on the peaceful suburban world. 'The clip, clop, casual iron of his shoes' symbolises the sudden and random nature of conflict.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagery: The destruction left in the horse's wake—'That rose he smashed frays, ribboned across our hedge'—is a powerful metaphor for how violence shatters beauty and disrupts domestic stability.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting and atmosphere: The quiet suburban setting contrasts sharply with the violent image of the horse, emphasising the fragility of peace in the face of uncontrollable forces.
<p>Link to 'The Famine Road'</p> 	<p>Link: Both 'The War Horse' and 'The Famine Road' deal with violence, but while 'The War Horse' presents it as an external threat, 'The Famine Road' directly critiques historical and societal injustices.</p>
<p>Historical Injustice and Female Suffering</p>	<p><i>Poem: 'The Famine Road'</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue and character: Lord Trevelyan's dismissive words, 'Idle as trout in light,' dehumanise



	<p>the Irish people, emphasising the callous indifference of those in power during the Great Famine.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Symbolism: The barren woman's body is compared to a 'famine road,' a striking metaphor for both personal and national desolation, highlighting the theme of female suffering and infertility.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Historical setting: The poem links the personal tragedy of the woman with the broader context of the Irish Famine, blending individual and collective suffering in its narrative.
<p>Link to 'Outside History'</p> 	<p>Link: Both poems focus on historical suffering, but 'Outside History' broadens the theme to explore how marginalised voices are often forgotten by history, expanding the narrative scope.</p>
<p>Marginalisation and Forgotten Lives</p>	<p>Poem: 'Outside History'</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Symbolism and imagery: The stars, 'outside history,' symbolise those who are forgotten or overlooked, distant and indifferent to human pain. 'They keep their distance,' reflecting how history marginalises certain voices.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Narrative structure: The speaker contrasts the timeless stars with the ephemeral nature of human life, creating a reflective and sombre tone. The poem's structure mirrors the theme of distance and disconnection.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Setting: The poem’s cosmic setting serves as a metaphor for the detachment of those who are marginalised, symbolising how easily history forgets the voiceless.
<p>Link to ‘Child of Our Time’</p> 	<p>Link: While ‘Outside History’ focuses on those forgotten by history, ‘Child of Our Time’ shifts to the immediate aftermath of modern violence, highlighting the personal cost of conflict.</p>
<p>Innocence and Violence</p>	<p>Poem: ‘Child of Our Time’</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagery: The image of ‘your cradle’ contrasts with the violence of the child’s death, symbolising the innocence lost in conflict. ‘Our times have robbed your cradle’—a powerful statement on the failure of society to protect the innocent.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Direct address and character: The speaker addresses the dead child directly, making the loss personal and immediate. The direct address, ‘Child of our time,’ highlights the collective guilt felt by society.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Narrative structure: The poem’s lament reflects on the child’s death as a result of societal failure, using personal tragedy to critique broader political violence.
<p>Link to ‘White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland’</p> 	<p>Link: Both poems explore loss, but while ‘Child of Our Time’ focuses on modern violence, ‘White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland’ contrasts the</p>




	simplicity of rural life with the complexities of modernity.
Nature and Tradition vs. Modernity	<i>Poem: 'White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland'</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Landscape and symbolism: The rural landscape, 'splashes of coltsfoot' and 'the hard shyness of Atlantic light,' symbolises a purer, more traditional way of life, contrasting with modern suburban Dublin.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Character and reflection: The speaker reflects on her journey from suburban life to the wildness of the West, symbolising a return to roots and a search for authenticity in a modern world.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Setting and atmosphere: The stark contrast between the 'suburban gardens' and the untamed West highlights the tension between modernity and tradition, central to the poem's narrative structure.

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Sample Plan and Essay - Leaving Certificate

Question: “Boland’s reflective insights are expressed through her precise use of language”. Write your personal response to this statement, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.

Plan

Theme	Examples & Quotes (with reference to Boland's precise language)
Parental love and ordinary moments ('This Moment')	- Boland elevates a simple moment between mother and child. - Use of snapshot imagery: 'One tree is black, / One window is yellow as butter'. - The moment is cinematic and profound: 'A woman leans down to catch a child who has run into her arms this moment.' - Nature reflects this love: 'Stars rise. / Moths flutter. / Apples sweeten in the dark.'
Link to next poem 	Both 'This Moment' and 'Love' explore family relationships, but 'Love' reflects on the changing nature of romantic love over time.
Romantic love and the passage of time ('Love')	- Boland reflects on how love changes over time, using vivid metaphors. - Early passion: 'the feather and muscle of wings, a brother of fire and air'. - Later in marriage, love is quieter but still important: 'We love each other still'. - Sentence structure mirrors changing love: long, flowing sentences for passion, shorter sentences for the



	steady love of marriage: 'I am your wife. / It was years ago.'
Link to next poem 	Transition from the theme of love to the theme of loss, violence, and responsibility in society, explored in 'Child of Our Time'.
Collective responsibility and the impact of violence ('Child of Our Time')	- Boland critiques societal failure to protect children from violence. - Collective responsibility emphasised by use of 'we' and 'our': 'We must learn from you, dead'. - Innocence lost: 'Your final cry' and 'Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken'. - Simple words gain devastating meaning in the context of death.
Link to next poem 	Both 'Child of Our Time' and 'The War Horse' explore the theme of violence, with 'The War Horse' focusing on societal indifference to destruction.
Indifference to violence ('The War Horse')	- Ordinary suburban moment becomes a metaphor for war: 'stamping death like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth'. - Indifference to violence: 'Why should we care / If a root, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted?' - Fallen roses compared to fallen soldiers: 'like corpses'. - The poem challenges complacency and reminds us of our shared humanity.
Link to next poem 	'The War Horse' highlights societal indifference to violence, while 'The Pomegranate' focuses on

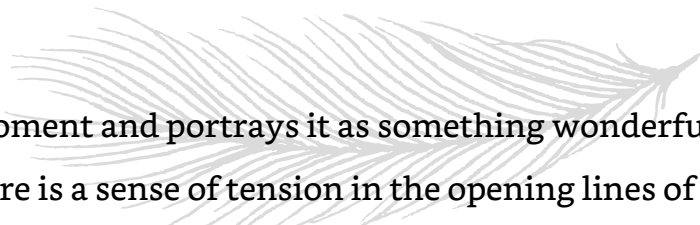
	the personal and emotional struggles of motherhood.
Motherhood and inevitable separation ('The Pomegranate')	- Myth of Ceres and Persephone used to reflect on mother-daughter relationship. - Pomegranate as a symbol of temptation and growth: 'papery flushed skin'. - Tension between protection and independence: 'If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift'. - Mythological references elevate the personal to the universal.

Sample Essay

Eavan Boland's poems are rich in imagery, symbolism, and vivid descriptions, which bring to life personal moments, historical reflections, and universal truths. Throughout her work, Boland examines the human condition with a particular focus on family relationships, the fragility of human life, and the impact of history. By focusing on seemingly ordinary events, she uncovers deep and profound meaning, often linking the personal with the universal.

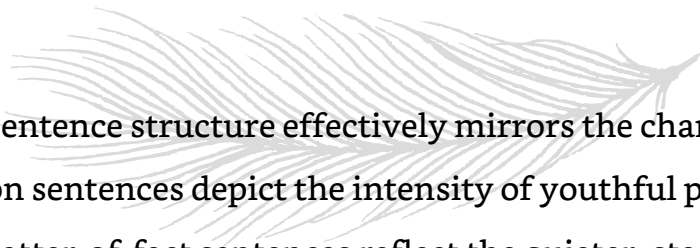
Through her precise use of language, Boland offers reflective insights into themes such as love, loss, violence, and motherhood. Each poem demonstrates her ability to take personal moments and universal experiences and transform them into profound meditations on the human condition. Whether through the vivid imagery of *This Moment*, the shifting sentence structures in *Love*, or the powerful metaphors in *The War Horse*, Boland's poetry consistently engages the reader in thoughtful reflection, making the ordinary appear extraordinary.

In 'This Moment', we are presented with a memorable insight into the love between a parent and a child. Boland takes this personal and seemingly



unimportant moment and portrays it as something wonderful, worth celebrating. There is a sense of tension in the opening lines of the poem. Short, choppy sentences and the reference to 'dusk' and 'things getting ready to happen out of sight' make the familiar suburban setting exciting and exotic. The ordinary becomes extraordinary, and there is a sense of glimpsed images or snapshots: 'One tree is black, / One window is yellow as butter'. This image is particularly effective, I believe, as the cold, darkness of the tree outside contrasts with the warm, homely glow of the lighted window. It evokes the warmth of the mother's love—at the heart of this poem. What begins as a simple moment between a mother and child takes on cinematic quality and gains significance far beyond an everyday event. Finally, the meaning of the title becomes clear as 'A woman leans down to catch a child who has run into her arms this moment.' This moment of connection between mother and child is celebrated by the natural world, which seems to exhale and share in this harmony: 'Stars rise. / Moths flutter. / Apples sweeten in the dark.' Boland's precise use of language elevates this personal moment into a reflection on the beauty and significance of parental love.

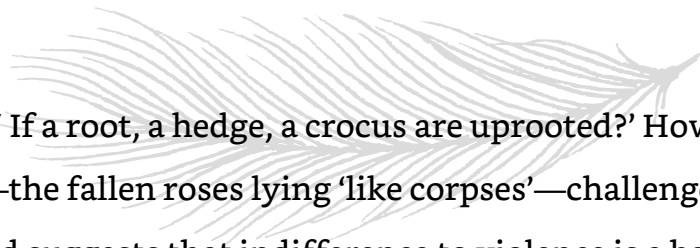
Like 'This Moment', 'Love' explores the nature of family relationships, but in this case, Boland provides memorable insights into the changing nature of love over time. Although love may change, Boland ultimately concludes that it remains just as significant. At the beginning of the relationship, she describes love as the 'feather and muscle of wings, a brother of fire and air.' This metaphor captures the intense, uplifting force of romantic love in its early stages. However, as time passes, this passion fades, and the speaker reflects on how she and her husband 'love each other still.' The love may have changed, becoming less exciting, but Boland insists it is no less valuable: 'We speak plainly.' The poem reflects a sense of nostalgia and a longing for the earlier passion, as she wonders if they will 'ever live so intensely' again.



Boland's use of sentence structure effectively mirrors the changing nature of love: long, run-on sentences depict the intensity of youthful passion, while shorter, more matter-of-fact sentences reflect the quieter, steady love of a long marriage.

In 'Child of Our Time', Boland offers further reflective insights, this time focusing on the tragic consequences of violence. The poem was written in response to the death of a child in a politically-motivated bombing during the Troubles in Ireland, and it powerfully critiques the adult world's failure to protect its children. Boland does not place blame on any single individual but uses the inclusive pronouns 'we' and 'our' to emphasise collective responsibility. The repetition of the words 'we must' and 'our times' underscores the shared guilt of society in allowing such violence to occur. The most striking aspect of the poem is its portrayal of innocence lost and the failure of adults to provide the nurturing environment children need. The simple, everyday words like 'cry' take on devastating new meaning in the context of this death: 'Your final cry.' Rather than being soothed, this child must 'Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken,' emphasising the tragic wake-up call that this death should be for society.

In 'The War Horse', Boland uses a seemingly ordinary moment—the appearance of a horse in a suburban garden—to reflect once more on war and violence. The horse is not inherently dangerous, yet it leaves a trail of destruction, 'stamping death like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth.' This image of casual destruction is a metaphor for the impact of war, which, even when it doesn't directly affect us, leaves a mark on the world. The poem explores the tension between the safety of domestic life and the ever-present threat of violence. Boland and her neighbours, observing from behind their curtains, feel secure as long as the violence doesn't touch them directly: 'Why



should we care / If a root, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted?’ However, Boland’s use of imagery—the fallen roses lying ‘like corpses’—challenges this complacency and suggests that indifference to violence is a betrayal of our shared humanity. The poem’s message is as relevant today as it was during the Troubles, reminding us that turning a blind eye to violence only leads to further devastation.

Boland returns to the theme of motherhood in ‘The Pomegranate’, using the myth of Ceres and Persephone to reflect on the inevitable separation between a mother and her child. The poem is filled with vivid imagery, such as the ‘papery flushed skin’ of the pomegranate, which symbolises both temptation and growth. The pomegranate becomes a central metaphor for the mother’s dilemma: should she try to protect her child from the harsh realities of the world, or should she allow her the independence she needs to grow? Boland concludes that a mother must allow her child to make her own choices, even if it means accepting the grief that comes with watching her grow up. The line ‘If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift’ captures this tension between protection and independence with remarkable precision. The mythological reference elevates the poem, linking the personal experience of a mother and daughter with universal themes of love, loss, and the passage of time.

Boland’s reflective insights are beautifully expressed through her precise use of language in each of these poems. Whether exploring the nature of love, the impact of violence, or the complexities of motherhood, Boland’s poetry is filled with rich imagery, symbolism, and thoughtful reflections. Through her careful attention to language, she takes seemingly ordinary moments and transforms them into profound meditations on the human condition.