

## Eavan Boland – Sample Essay

“Boland’s reflective insights are expressed through her precise use of language.”

Write your personal response to this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Eavan Boland on your Leaving Certificate course.

### Sample Essay

Eavan Boland’s reflective insights are expressed with precision and care throughout her work. Her poetry often takes ordinary moments, personal memories, or historical reflections and transforms them into profound explorations of human experience. Whether she is reflecting on motherhood, war, love or loss, her poems are carefully crafted, rich in imagery and symbolism, and grounded in personal truth. Her use of language—subtle, exact, and emotionally charged—allows her to express her insights in a way that lingers in the reader’s mind. This is particularly evident in poems such as *The Pomegranate*, *Love*, *Child of Our Time*, and *The War Horse*.

In *The Pomegranate*, Boland reflects on the love between a mother and daughter, using the myth of Ceres and Persephone to explore the pain of letting go. The poem offers a deeply moving insight into the universal experience of parental love and loss. At first, Boland recalls her own childhood as a time when she identified with the daughter, ‘an exiled child in the crackling dusk of / the underworld’. However, as the poem progresses, she shifts perspective and becomes Ceres, the mother who must let her child go. The change is beautifully captured in the line: ‘I was Ceres then and I knew / winter was in store for every leaf’. The precision of this image reminds us of the inevitability of separation and the sorrow that comes with it. Boland

captures this tension with her usual clarity and emotional honesty. She understands that protection has its limits and that a parent's love must eventually give way to independence: 'If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift'. That line, for me, captures the reflective wisdom that runs through so much of her work.

Like *The Pomegranate*, the poem *Love* explores the nature of family relationships, but in this case, Boland provides memorable insights into the changing nature of romantic love. Although love may change over time, Boland ultimately concludes that it is not less strong or valuable for that. Initially, she felt love as the 'feather and muscle of wings, a brother of fire and air'. It could raise you up as if on wings and had the vigour to make you feel even more alive than before. Over time, however, married love became less exciting but Boland is quick to point out that she and her husband 'love each other still'. There is no longer talk of 'Heroes' in a text, but the couple 'hear each other clearly'. However, there is a note of longing for the earlier passion when she wonders if they'll 'ever live so intensely' again.

One of the most interesting things about this poem is the way Boland uses sentence structure to convey her message. When she is describing her intense romantic love, Boland uses long run-on sentences, almost as if she is writing straight from the heart with no time to stop and think. For example, she creates a beautiful cinematic image of her husband as he once was: 'with snow on the shoulders of your coat / and a car passing with its headlights on'. This style is in stark contrast to the matter-of-fact, straight-to-the-point sentences in which she describes the relationship as it is now. It all seems much more thought out and far less dramatic, but that does not take from the importance of the marriage; it just emphasises the change that has occurred: 'I am your wife. / It was years ago.' 'We speak plainly.'

In *Child of Our Time*, Boland offers further thought-provoking insights into human nature, but this time she focuses on far less positive aspects of our dealings with one another. She does this by describing her reaction to seeing a photo of the body of a young child killed in a politically-motivated bombing. This personal experience affects Boland deeply and she uses it to reflect on the responsibility we all share for raising children in a peaceful and caring society. The adult world should have provided the child with 'tales to distract' and 'legends to protect', but failed in its duty. It is important to note, however, that Boland does not blame anyone in particular for the death: we are all culpable. She stresses this by her use of the words 'our' and 'we' instead of 'I' or 'you'. This, I think, is the most striking aspect of the poem.

The repetition of all of the normal, everyday things a child should have been entitled to in life is a sobering reminder of the failure of the adult world to provide this basic comfort and guidance. Similarly, she uses the context of the child's death to add poignancy and layers of meaning to words as simple as 'cry'. Normally, when a child cries, an adult reassures and consoles. In this case, however, the cry is a 'final cry' and instead of being settled back to sleep in loving arms, the child has to 'Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken'. That the infant's death may have woken us up to the horror of the violence caused by hatred and 'idle talk' is a cold comfort indeed.

In the poem *The War Horse*, Boland also uses a personal experience to offer a thought-provoking insight into the world in which we live. Once again, she reflects on our reaction to violence in the world around us. The horse in this poem is simply a loose horse searching for its old grazing ground, but Boland uses it as a metaphor for war as the animal 'stamps death' into the ground over which he passes. Boland and her neighbours observe from the safety of their homes. Because the war does not directly affect them, they wonder

‘Why should we care / If a root, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted?’ She compares the fallen roses in the garden to volunteer soldiers who lie ‘like corpses’ on the ground. And why should anyone care? The dead are ‘screamless’ and Boland reflects on our indifference to acts of war and violence. All that matters to those who observe from a distance is the mantra ‘we are safe’.

This poem may have been written about the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1970s but its message is as powerful as ever today in an age when isolationism is being touted as a valid response to worldwide war and violence. Boland offers the insight that a connection to our ancestral memory—‘avatism’—should remind us that simply standing by while atrocities are committed serves to leave us with ‘a world betrayed’.

## **Conclusion**

Boland’s poetry is full of precise and powerful language that allows her to express deeply reflective insights. Her ability to take personal moments, political events, and mythological stories and transform them into something rich with meaning is part of what makes her poetry so rewarding to study. Whether she is writing about a mother and daughter, a long marriage, a political tragedy, or a suburban garden, her poems speak to the heart as well as the mind. For me, it is this combination of emotional honesty and technical skill that makes Boland’s poetry so memorable.