

This essay is offered as an exploration of Boland's poetry in the sense of representative themes as required by the LC English syllabus and highlighted in the annual Marking Schemes published every September.

It is not as concise as an exam essay.

Note the use of poetic references and quotes adapted in setting up the argument in the two introductory paragraphs. It is important, in referring to relevant aspects of the poet's life to use her poetry while so doing.

The essay has been written for students within the framework of a typical LC Higher Question.

At certain moments the key words of the 2011 exam question are incorporated for illustration purpose and because they are so true: ...'reflective insights....in precise language'.

Note the circled words of the question and of the opening paragraph. This provides the focus for the manner in which the argument must be delivered. The key terms as circled are kept central to the argument throughout.

That is a requirement for scoring well in 'Clarity of Purpose'. The level of engagement with the poetry that is evident is essential to a good score in 'Coherence of Delivery'.

Evan Boland's poetry sets out to record and celebrate the role of women'

Discuss this view with reference to a selection of Boland's poems. Include in your discussion references to imagery and myth as you have encountered them in the poems on your course.



Remembering and giving a voice to '*the lost, the voiceless, the silent...*' became Eavan Boland's mission as a poet. Their bones need poetry, not just **'toil'**, to adapt The 'Famine Road'. For Boland no **'idle'** aesthetic talk, to adapt 'Child of our Time'. No more **'keep house'**, while men wrote poetry and history. She saw her purpose as to redress the marginalized. When she began to write, she realized '*a woman's life was not honoured*'. Thus celebration is not always to the fore in her poetry.

In some of the poems I could explore, Boland wanted to delve into the facts of history rather than the dreams of myth; she wrote of authentic experiences. Yes she would use myths to amplify her lived experiences as mother and wife in 'The Pomegranate' and 'Love'. But there would be no '*majestic and radiant maidens*', the phrase writer Daniel Corkery used to describe the typical and popular female objects of traditional poetry. Instead there would be barren women, broken children, cowardly bourgeois onlookers, busy home-makers taking their children indoors, an anxious mother of a teenager, a bride with a battered suitcases and a girl-friend left waiting outside a café. To borrow from 'The War Horse', Boland shouts for the 'screamless', mocks the 'subterfuge' of cowardly discretion, strews a protesting **'ribbon'** on behalf of silent victims across our defences.

In the poem '**Outside History**' Evan Boland confirmed that one of her main purposes as a poet was to redeem ordinary women from obscurity.

These stars -

these iron inklings of an Irish January.

whose light appeared

thousands of years before

our pain did:

Boland felt that poets traditionally ignored ordinary women's experience. She set out to alter the representation of women in our culture as iconic figures: '**those stars**', poetic **IMAGES** of women that transcend the lived experience of women. In her view, women were often pictured as archetypes, immortal figures gracing traditional poetry. But she decided that women needed to be earthed in '**A landscape in which you know you are mortal.**' She rejected the idealisation of women in the '**firmament**', among the remote stars. Over-celebration of a lie is replaced by a quiet determination to record and to acknowledge.

This could be considered a signature poem of Boland. She is marking an exclusion and rectifying it. She is honoring rather than celebrating. How can

you celebrate 'pain'? The image of 'iron', part of a clever musical line with assonance and rhyme on the sound 'ir', is too unspectacular for celebration. The music is a strong presence, but it is a lament: those recurring 'r' and 'n' sounds embedded in lots of 't' and 'd' create a mournful sound. Boland's language effects are so precise that her insight can hardly be mistaken for celebration.

Boland wanted to shift poetry from abstraction to record. She opposes 'clotted' to 'myth', the graphic against the vague, in the following extract:

**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.**

She became interested in the actual and individual lives of women: tackling maternal, domestic, emotional, relationship and sexuality issues. Boland felt that male poetry dealt in generalities like time, death, transience, body versus soul, ideals etc. In this spectrum of poetry, she sees female history as largely unrecorded: 'we are always too late'— 'Outside History'. Boland wanted to record 'our pain', to write about the 'ordeal' of real existence. Boland, albeit 'too late' in terms of the forgotten women of history, decided to enter 'their ordeal' in her poetry, to write about the 'darkness...only now reaching' her from the fields. Her voice carries a strong TONE of regret. She feels a sense of guilt at the how artists have ignored the ordinary suffering of women; in her final image in 'Outside History' she imagines her poem on their behalf serves as a type of traditional Catholic contrition in their ears.

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

But Boland is no romantic. Despite her tribute, we are 'too late'. It has to be from now on that women are honoured.

Boland once wrote:
'So much that matters, so much that is powerful and frail in human affairs seems to me, increasingly, to happen outside history... at great risk of being edited out of the final account'. The poem 'Outside History' is one of her many poems of redress for that history of exclusion. But it is a poem of acknowledgement, setting the record straight, rather than of celebration.

It is likely that **'The Shadow Doll'** is inspired by Boland's rejection of the way women had become objects of culture, rather than people who lived the cultural experience:

'she could see herself

inside it all, holding less than real stephanotis'.

This **IMAGE** shows Boland's dislike of the traditional tendency to treat women as ornaments. *'As a poet I have ... one area I return to ... perhaps it's a sense of the lives that haven't been lived... the unexpressed lives of other women...'*

Thus she wrote of **'visits, fevers, quickening and lusts'**—despising the way in which both artists and society kept the real side of a woman's life **'under wraps'** and **'discreet'**. There is little to celebrate in this realistic image of the hardships of womanhood; Boland is far from romantic, but she does argue for engaging with the ordinary experience of women.

Boland felt strongly that the images used by a poet should be authentic:

'Images are not ornamentals: they are truth.'

In writing of **'a porcelain bride in an airless glamour'** Boland was condemning repression of women's sensual and mortal sides.

The beautification of women dehumanises them, is the message contained within that image. The dome that modelled the bridal dress symbolised the inert, unfelt life of women. Their lives were formalised, and consequently dehumanised. Boland's personal image of herself going away as a bride cleverly mirrors the idea of entrapment of traditional brides:

'pressing down, then

pressing down again. And then, locks.

The **'battered tan case'** in **'The Shadow Doll'** is deliberately inelegant—the truth is prosaic. In an ironic twist Boland wanted poetry to celebrate the prosaic rather than the poetic!

In **'The Famine Road'** Boland dramatises the brutality of policy makers during the Famine and the impact of their policy on the starving Irish with the intent of shocking the reader. But the true purpose of this is to stir readers' anger at the seemingly heartless handling of a woman patient by a fertility doctor. The historical details of the famine are an analogy for perceiving the cruelty of the doctor's dismissive attitude towards the woman to whom he broke the news of her being infertile in a heartless manner.

'but take it well, you never know

but take it well woman. Grow

your garden, keep house, goodbye.'

Note the **PLACING** of **'grow'** at the end of a line, which gives emphasis to the word. Just as the famine roads are purposeless, **'going nowhere'**, the woman has lost her main purpose as a wife in being diagnosed **'barren'**, a word not unlike **'pariah'** for the abandoned road builder. Boland is conscious that

women in Ireland at that time were defined by motherhood. Without the affirmation of being a mother, a woman was as purposeless a barren road. Boland is highlighting that society is somewhat patriarchal **and** insensitive to women. The word '**load**' implies that women's role in procreation is to complete the male, that there is a lack of self-realization for women in society:

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

The **RHYMING** of '**load**' with '**road**' finishes the poem off in a powerfully suggestive manner; Boland's view on women's status in society is very negative, conveyed in a powerful manner by language, imagery, analogy and rhyming. The record is being set straight, but there is no celebration of any kind.

'Child of Our Time' is a woman poet's response to political violence. Here Eavan Boland introduces an adult female perspective to political slaughter. Though not yet a mother, she nurtures an idea for a new Ireland, as she records her poetic version of an atrocity. She **wants** to compose a lullaby in memory of the child and to express the lessons that have to be learned. The sight of the dead child and the thought of his final death-cry inspire her to write this disguised lullaby. It takes its tune from the bombed child's final cry: **'Child of our times, our times have robbed your cradle'**. You can imagine the word '*rocked*' here, in the gentle sense and in the fatal sense too.

Boland's **LANGUAGE** is effective because it is precise. The word '**robbed**' is an attack on the political culture of the day, **PERSONIFIED** as '**our times**'; a culture where '**idle talk**' has led to the fatal bombing that led to the child's death. Boland places the domestic at the heart of public debate; she dares to call for a '**new language**'. The poem suggests a subtle **CONTRAST** between bedside legends told by a mother '**to protect**' her child, by teaching lessons about dangers, and republican legends that lead people to violence.

In **CLEVER PARADOXES** Boland wishes to grow positives from the negatives: from '**discord**' and '**unreasoned end**', she pleads for new '**rhythm**' and '**reason**'. This is a poem that reacts to recorded facts; it is controversial rather than celebratory in **TONE**. Eavan Boland thinks of the cradle, not the bomb or bomber. She feels and thinks as a mother, a giver of life. But though her **TONE** is angry and shocked her **RHYMING** suggests hope, if only we would '**rebuild**' and '**find**'. The precision of her rhyming draws attention to her message. It's one of nurturing the future rather than being merely scathing. The rhyming of '**broken**' and '**woken**' suggests the urgent need to turn the child's death into a positive sacrifice, to create a new consciousness.

There is a similar dilution of the celebratory spirit in the poem **'Love'**—an unsentimental reflection on her marriage: **'You walk away and I cannot follow'**. Her husband, once heroic like Aeneas in the underworld, is no longer as close as he was to her. Yet again Boland draws in myth as an analogy to express her idea,

'the water the hero crossed on his way to hell'.

Boland asks **'Will we ever live so intensely again?'**... The ebb and flow of a woman's marriage relationship is put under the microscope, with little to celebrate.

The details of **'This Moment'** on the other hand offer only celebration. The uplift comes as a child runs into a mother's arms. It is the buttery and black instant as twilight blackens the sky while the yellow light glows indoors. It is visually precise, a poetic recording. The imagery speaks of joy: a mother's celebration.

But **'The Pomegranate'** examines a cycle, rather than a moment, pain with the hope of deferred joy. The inspiring stars of **'Outside History'** recur as **'stars blighted'**. **'The Pomegranate'** is a more profound reflection, at most a sober celebration of motherhood. It may be seen as a deeply personal reflection on the maturing of a daughter. A myth re-writes itself in a modern setting. The watching parent thinks about her child's future, while tempted to preserve childhood. Boland records how this felt: **'ready to make any bargain to keep'** the child as she was in **'This Moment'** at twilight.

Future light, echoing **'blighted'**, is **'veiled'** and later **'hidden'** during adolescence, the equivalent of Persephone's sojourn in Hades. Boland writes with feeling that a mother's quest to understand and relate to her teenage daughter amounts to **'heart-broken searching'**, with her **'lost in hell'**.

But the poem also transforms the ordinary into the universal by the use of the Ceres/Persephone **MYTH**. Myth allows Boland the imaginative power to see the inevitable cycle of growth in a transformed way, to view personal loss and change as part of the great patterns of existence. Finding and losing, love and loss, change and growth, loving and letting go are all integral to the dynamic of the mother and daughter relationship. A myth can offer comfort.

Boland's **IMAGERY** reveals the great prize: **'diamonds'** which will form from the **'unshed tears'** of freed adolescence. The cleverness is that the underworld, a mythical place, doubles as the place where diamonds form. Her

daughter's maturing personality can compress tears into the precious stone. The myth is a liberating force for Boland:

"I can enter it (myth) anywhere."

Boland can be Persephone or Ceres, depending on her stage of life. And through her knowledge of myth she can trust to nature to see her relationship with her daughter survive adolescence:

'she will hold the papery flushed skin in her hand...I will say nothing'.

If this poem is a celebration, it also in her use of the language of mythology to record the passing of her daughter's childhood embraces the pain of relationships that must endure separation. Boland is adept and comfortable and its implications for a mother. The words of '**Outside History**' still mesmerize the reader as their effect is mirrored in what is happening in the '**The Pomegranate**':

**'out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is
only now reaching me'**

Poems amplify each other.

In conclusion, Boland felt that where women tended to be treated as mythological figures by other poets, she recorded truth from women's everyday experience and the cyclical patterns of their lives.