

Eavan Boland | Sample Answer 2011

“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.

Upon Boland’s unfortunate death earlier this year, President Higgins said she was one of “the most insightful inner sources of Irish life”. This quote by Mr. Higgins highlights how Boland’s reflective insights are expressed through her precise use of language. It is through her undeniable talent that she manages to provide personal experience along with universal significance in her poetry. I personally find her a very thought-provoking poet and have thoroughly enjoyed studying her poetry. The poems I have studied on my course are; “The Shadow Doll”, “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me”, “This Moment”, “The Pomegranate” and “The War Horse”. Through my discussion of the poems above, I shall be revealing why I agree with the statement.

Boland expresses her reflective insights on relationships and marriage in the poems “The Shadow Doll” and “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me”. Namely in “The Black Lace Fan...”, Boland deals with the realities of a new relationship. From the first stanza we are told that the poem is set in Paris – one of the most notoriously romantic cities in the world. We also learn that the “*black lace fan*” from the title was “*the first gift he ever gave her*”. The fact the woman in the poem kept this gift insinuates this man and moment are both important to her. Boland’s precise use of language when mentioning “*pre-war*” as well as her use of pathetic fallacy when describing the weather; “*stifling*”, “*stormy*”, foreshadows the problems the couple will face later in the poem.

Boland introduces fear into the second and third stanza by using short, clipped sentences that suggest a chaotic mind. In a coffee *shop* “*the heat was killing*” the woman as she grew worrisome about her late partner. However, the image of the “*black lace fan*” brings her comfort. The fan acts as a metaphor for the couple’s relationship. The top of the fan is decorated with “*wild roses*” and bold stitching represents the wild and lustful side of the relationship. Conversely, the handle of the fan is the foundation of the relationship, being described as “*patient*”. The fan reminds the woman of a special moment and brings her vitality. This poem is full of emotion and effectively shows the reality of a normal relationship, making it extremely relatable and appealing.

Contrarily, “The Shadow Doll” conveys a more negative insight to marriage and relationships. The poem opens with the description of a porcelain doll. The first stanza is filled with colour; “*Ivory tulle*”, “*oyster gleam*”, hinting at the glamour of the wedding day, but also the fragility of the bride. The poem’s tone changes dramatically in the second and third stanza. Boland suggests that the bride’s fate will be “*neatly sewn*”. The line “*a porcelain doll in an airless glamour*” is particularly striking to me. Here Boland suggests that the fragile bride will struggle to survive this difficult marriage. “*Under glass, Under wraps*”, is another prominent image in this poem. Boland’s precise language here, such as the repetition of the word “*glass*” indicates the bride is purely there for display. These images contrast greatly with the more positive image of the fan in the previous poem, which symbolizes the different parts of a co-dependent relationship. In the second half of the poem Boland reflects on the feelings she had before she got married, “*the vows I kept repeating on the night before*”. The final stanza conveys an image of the bride “*pressing down, pressing down*” in order to close the “*battered tan case*” giving weight to the sense of imprisonment. I feel here Boland is hinting at the inevitable loss of identity that occurs through marriage, particularly for women. I believe Boland’s reflective insight into marriage is particularly significant in this poem as she wrote about her own experience with marriage – “*...as far as the poets were concerned, I went off the radar screen. I went to the suburbs. I married. I had two children.*”

“This Moment” highlights Boland’s life in suburban Dublin, also her reflective insights are expressed through her precise use of language. Although short, “This Moment” is a beautiful piece of work by Boland. I am not surprised that the poet is often described as “painterly”, as she sets the scene of the poem in only four words – “*A neighborhood, At dusk*”. Boland’s meticulous use of language is shown wonderfully in the simile “*One window is yellow as butter*”. She also employs a sense of mystery and anticipation in the lines “*Things are getting ready, to happen, out of sight.*”. Boland purposefully uses short lines to mirror the brevity of the moment. The moment that the poem is built around is fleeting yet eternal, personal yet universal. Boland shares with us her reflective insights on motherhood and suburban life, “*a woman leans down to catch a child*”. The simplicity of this poem is beautiful, and its skillful themes and images make it particularly relatable.

Boland effortlessly creates masterpieces from seemingly banal objects or events. I believe her poems “The War Horse” and “The Pomegranate” portray her admirable ability to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary. Boland does this with precise use of language to express her reflective insights.

In “The Pomegranate” Boland skillfully sketches out the myth of Persephone – “The story of a daughter lost in hell”. I think the use of myths and legends in her poetry, makes Boland a more thought-provoking poet. She notes how myths can have a resonance for the present and can apply in different ways at different times – “*The best thing about the legend is I can enter it anywhere*”. The pomegranate is the central image of the poem. The modern daughters “*plate of uncut fruit*” reminds the poet that as she grows older, Boland will lose a part of her. Here Boland relates as a mother to Ceres, as in the myth Persephone is lost in the underworld for half of the year. However, she first “*found*” the legend as a daughter in “*a city of fog and strange consonants*”. The feeling of isolation as a child in London is paralleled with Persephone’s separation and confinement in the underworld. It is Boland’s personal experiences and reflective insights that allow her to take an ordinary pomegranate and link it to such a remarkable Greek legend. “*She will wake up*” carries overtones of sexual awakening, as well as Boland’s precise language when

describing the pomegranate's "*papery flushes skin*". The poet's sensual language makes clear the connection between the idea of becoming a sexual adult woman. However, the poet's job as a mother is to "*say nothing*" and let her child go.

Boland's clever technique of turning the ordinary into the extraordinary can also be seen in "The War Horse". Boland uses a seemingly ordinary horse from a "*tinker camp*", as a symbol of war. This is a metaphor poem with obvious political overtones. The poem was written during a time of great political unrest and violence in the North. Throughout the poem Boland uses graphic violent imagery to great effect. The horse "*stamps death, like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth*". He "*stumbles on like a rumor of war*", uprooting flowers "*like corpses*" or "*one of the screamless dead*". Boland's precise language such as the use of similes as well as well-chosen adjectives to describe the scene bring the image to life, additionally emphasizing the extremity of the event. The indifference of those hearing about violence is exposed by Boland's image of the relieved neighbors using "*the subterfuge of curtains*" and looking out with "distant unrest". The poet shares her reflective insight into the attitudes about the troubles, again Boland amazes me here by doing so only using the actions of a simple clever technique which forced me to look for the deeper meaning of the poem.

I have been both challenged and moved by Boland's poetry. She offered me new insights and an innovative, precise way of dealing with language. Her poems are relatable and memorable. Through her reflective insights, she prompted me to think about my world and my place in it. For this reason, and my reasons above I fully agree with the above statement.