

2005: The appeal of Eavan Boland's poetry

Eavan Boland once stated “poetry begins where language does: in the shadows of what we experience”. Throughout her poetry, Boland explores themes and relationships using a variety of techniques in a deeply appealing way. In this essay, I will support this statement with reference to “Child of Our Time”, “The Famine Road”, “The Pomegranate” and “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me”.

In “Child of Our Time”, Boland makes use of rhythm, imagery and emphatic language in an appealing manner to fully communicate the subject matter of the poem. Written for a young boy killed in the Troubles, Boland opens the poem with a series of oxymorons, the poem taking its “discord from the rhythm of [the child's] murder”. This oxymoron serves to highlight the disorder of a world that kills a child, and the line itself causes us to slow down when reading it. Written in unrhymed iambic pentameter, it is a rhythmic line, echoing the “lullaby” referred to Boland in the first line and adds a lyrical quality to the poem. This technique sets the mood of the poem, offering us an insight into how the death of this child- even though he was unknown to Boland- has caused her, and rightfully our, world to slow down and take notice. Though focusing on a large political and social issue, the Troubles, Boland focuses on the story of an individual child to enable us to empathise with the impact of the conflict and feel the emotions it has evoked in her, increasing the poem's appeal to our emotions.

Boland then employs highly evocative imagery, further increasing our engagement with the poem. Boland states the adults failed this child, and should have focused on “names for the animals you took to bed”. This is an image of innocence, innocence stripped away by violence. Boland goes on to use collective language in this stanza “We who should have known”, emphasising the societal responsibility for this death. In this line, the reader can feel the guilt, anger and grief at a young life that was stolen. Boland uses this single, soft, simple image to increase the impact of the horror of the war that took innocence away. Though this is an uncomfortable image, it appeals to the reader by increasing the emotional impact of the poem and enabling us to connect with a complex issue, by communicating it through a single story of stolen innocence.

Finally, in “Child of Our Time”, Boland uses emphatic language to increase the engagement of the poem. Towards the end of the poem, she writes “and living, learn, must learn from you” in this sentence structure, a chiasmus, we expect it to conclude with another “I”, perhaps “living”. Yet, Boland concludes the line with “dead”. Through this, she emphasises the injustice and illustrates our collective responsibility to each other as human beings, to prevent such a tragedy from occurring again. Upon reading this line, I felt grief and a need for all of us to work together a society, because of Boland subverting my expectations. This made me engage further with the poem’s message, and caused me to actively think about Boland’s intentions when employing this technique.

The appeal of Boland’s poetry is further demonstrated through her use of a variety of techniques on a much more personal level in “The Pomegranate”. Through use of enjambement and pause, Boland writes an engaging and fascinating poem to explore her experience of motherhood.

Drawing on the myth of Ceres and Persephone, Boland describes herself switching from the daughter in the myth to the mother “But I was Ceres then”. In this role, she now understands the fear and desperation to protect one’s child that comes with motherhood. Boland demonstrates this through nine lines of enjambement, beginning with, “She pulled down the French word for apple,” describing Hades (hell), with “rocks full of unshed tears” and finally ending with “a child can be hungry”. Eating the pomegranate is what dooms both Persephone and, with regard to the transition to adulthood, the daughter. In these lines, we can connect with Boland’s growing sense of desperation as the mother loses the ability to shield her daughter. Each line builds on the last, and stirred in me a need to intervene, to save the daughter, but the eventual eating of the pomegranate is inevitable. Boland gives word to the experiences of motherhood, and enables the reader to place themselves in the shoes of a parent in this situation. This is an experience which I, as a young reader, cannot share in but through Boland’s poetry I was able to empathise with it. This ability to explore different lives and experiences vividly in her poetry heavily appealed to me throughout her work, in a similar manner as ‘Child of Our Time’.

This use of enjambement is followed by an evocative use of pause, building on this appeal. Boland meditates “There is still a chance. I could warn her”. Each line ends in short, small sentences, in clear contrast to the previous wave of enjambement. This illustrated to me the feeling of Boland slowly coming to her final realisation, but not before trying to explore any other possible solution. In the atmosphere of stillness created by the pause, Boland concludes “If I defer the grief I will diminish the

gift". There is a sense of finality, and gives an honest account of motherhood. This contrast with the enjambement further allowed me to empathise with Boland's acceptance, and also illustrated poetic talent in employing a wide range of techniques to engage the reader. Hence, this use of pause coupled with preceding enjambement increased the appeal of "The Pomegranate" by enabling me to connect with the story and emotions, and showcasing a range of poetic techniques.

In "The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me", Boland employs evocative imagery in an appealing way to further explore parent-child relationships. The poem conveys several images of Boland's parents in pre-war Paris "It was stifling," "She was always early. He was always late". It is largely written in the past tense, until Boland reaches the central image of the titular fan. "These are", she tells us, silk "appliquéd by hand". The fan is a symbol of her parents' relationship, surviving the initial challenges of being out-of-sync with one another. Boland goes on to describe the past as an "empty café terrace". These images stood out to me upon reading the poem, and deeply appealed to me. Through them, Boland conveys a sense of nostalgia, but also a tinge of sadness in never truly knowing what occurred, "unless- of course- you improvise". The imagery enables us to see Boland's parents through her eyes, and the longing- perhaps- to know more. This gives an interesting insight into how we explore the past, the feelings that may come with "the past consisting of shadows"- as stated by Boland in an interview, and ultimately how we bridge intergenerational gaps in our relationships. This was a topic I had not seen explored in poetry before, and one which caused me to think further on how we connect with our past. This is a complex topic, which may put readers off, but Boland's use of clear and evocative imagery causes it to appeal to us and inspires us to apply the poem to our own lives and relationships. Being able to connect personally with this poem was an engaging and attractive element of the poem, and further inspired a love for Boland's poetry.

Finally, Boland makes appealing and evocative use of metaphor in "The Famine Road" to communicate a dark period of suffering in Irish history. Boland juxtaposes the story of the workers in the Great Famine building famine roads, "roads going nowhere", with the experience of a "barren woman". The roads built in pain, referred to by Boland in a number of other poems such as "The Science of Cartography" act as a metaphor for the woman in the doctor's office. The doctor is cold, mirroring Trevelyan's indifference as he "blooded the deal table". His statement "but take it well, woman" illustrates the dismissiveness towards women at the time, offering an insight into how those with power

harm those without. This metaphor caused me to reflect on the power we hold in society, and how it can be abused to harm the most vulnerable. The final line reiterates the metaphor with “Barren/never to know the load/of his child in you. What is your body now if not a famine road?” This stirred up grief in me, for the woman, and anger at a society and doctor who would treat women who are suffering in this way. By using a historical metaphor, Boland draws a comparison between past and present suffering at the hands of our fellow humans, and invites us to reflect on how we interact with one another in times of suffering. As seen in her other poetry, Boland brings these issues into a new light, allows us to connect with past and present struggles, and enables us to empathise with complex situations.

In conclusion, Eavan Boland’s poetry is deeply appealing and utilises a range of techniques to communicate themes and relationships in a way that engages the reader fully in her work. This is clearly seen in the poems “Child of Our Time”, “The Pomegranate”, “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me” and “The Famine Road”. Boland employs imagery, enjambement, pause, and metaphor throughout these poems to approach complex issues. Through her work, she distils these topics to a relatable, human level. We can empathise with the people and stories involved, and connect with issues that we may not have otherwise come across. While reading her work, I was able to explore those “shadows” of which Boland speaks, and this ability to explore and empathise through masterful use of poetic techniques makes her poetry undoubtedly appealing to a wide range of readers across time.