

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

Write your response to this statement, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.

In my opinion, Boland’s reflective insights are indeed exposed through her precise use of language. Across Boland’s poetry, we get an insight into her personal struggles as both a mother and a poet, along with the struggles of Irish people throughout history. I believe her writing to be domestic and humble, therefore making it more accessible and relatable to the reader. Boland provides a voice to the powerless individuals in society, this is apparent in ‘The Famine Road’ and ‘The War Horse.’ She also provides insights into issues directly related to women and motherhood in ‘The Pomegranate’ and ‘The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me.’ In this essay, I will explore how these reflective insights are exposed through Boland’s use of language in each of the poems mentioned above.

In ‘The Famine Road’, the reflective insights are that of Irish history and the subjugation and mistreatment of women. I consider this poem to be quite cleverly written, in both structure and language. The four alternating stanzas play off one another, while still closely relating to the conversation between the doctor and the woman. Boland uses an irregular rhyming system along with enjambment and run on lines, “*Idle as trout in light Colonel Jones, these Irish, give them no coins at all; their bones need toil.*” Boland relates a woman’s experience of infertility, with Charles Trevelyan’s initiative to build roads leading nowhere during the Irish famine. It is suggested that, like the roads, the woman is barren. The anonymous woman is treated by a cold, calculated, and ultimately ruthless doctor, similar to the treatment of Irish people during famine times. It connects the reader with the past, while expressing the oppression of Irish men and women by the English. Boland uses similes such as “*idle as trout*” , along with cacophony and euphemistic effects “*they*

not blood their knuckles on rock, suck April hailstones for water." We hear Colonel Jones's final report describing the sickening conditions of Ireland, before the poem ends with a return to the woman's narrative. The final three lines are the rhyming, completely insensitive, words of the compassionless doctor; "*Barren never to know the load of his child in you, what is your body now if not a famine road?*"

'The War Horse', reflects on the powerlessness and vulnerability of humans in the face of war, violence and destruction. Similar to 'The Famine Road', this poem investigates Ireland's brutal past. Boland begins with alliteration to set the pace of the poem, "*About the clip, clop, casual.*" This auditory imagery helps the reader to imagine the rumblings of the powerful horse as it marches down the road, "*loosened from it's daily tether in the tinker camp on the Enniskerry Road.*" I believe that Boland uses the horse as a symbol of war or an invading force, one that is capable of significant destruction. A slightly ominous simile compares the uprooted flowers to "*corpses, remote, crushed, mutilated.*" This poem was written during the Troubles, at a time when Boland was living not very far from the violence. However, for the time being they were safe but the horse "*stumbles on like a rumour of war,*" an ever threatening force looming over the country. The rhetorical questions posed by Boland convey her fearful and disapproving attitude towards the violence, along with the regular rhyme and evocative metaphors. The almost controversial final line, "*Of burned countryside, illicit braid a cause ruined before; a world betrayed.*"

In 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me,' Boland gives us an insight into her parents initial meeting and their love life during pre-war Paris. She employs short, dramatic sentences to communicate the building tension between her parents in the early stages of their relationship. Using compressive language, she describes the "*stifling, starless drought that made the nights stormy.*" Weather imagery allows us to imagine the intense heat and witness the closeness of the air. Boland continuously transitions between the past and the present tense, as the fourth stanza takes on a sales assistant like tone in order to describe the black lace fan. Here, she uses precise detail and contrast; "*darkly picked, stitched boldly, quickly...the rest is tortoise shell.*" At the beginning of the poem, I wondered if the fan is a symbol of love, romance even, but as the poem goes on it begins to show a darker meaning, "*the lace is overcast as if the weather it opened for and offset had entered it.*" Perhaps, Boland is contemplating the complicated relationship between her parents. Her father was always late to meet her mother, which nowadays is considered disrespectful and is not widely tolerated. The poem's final stanza concludes with

visual imagery through assonance, with the symbolic Blackbird's wings on the first morning of summer, which I believe represents the passing down of the fan from old to young, "*She puts out her wing – the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.*"

Another example of Boland's reflective insights is in 'The Pomegranate'. In this poem, Boland focuses on the relationship between mothers and daughters. As with 'The Famine Road', this poem implies the subjugation of women, a common trait in her poetry. She also makes reference to the mythological Greek story of Ceres and Persephone (mother and daughter.) The poem's language is simple, yet complex in its meaning. Persephone was kidnapped by the God of the Underworld and held hostage unbeknownst to her mother Ceres. While in captivity in the Underworld, Persephone ate a pomegranate, sealing her fate as an exile. The act of eating or drinking while in the Underworld supposedly binds a person to the place, preventing them from ever escaping. I feel that Boland can relate to this, as she often felt exiled when she first moved to London as a child, "*as a child of exile in a city of fogs and strange consonants, I read it first.*" As an adult, Boland begins to comprehend the anxiety and worry that comes with being a mother, similar to that of Ceres. I believe that the pomegranate symbolises the maturity of the poet's daughter as she reaches adulthood. The importance of this is conveyed through the repetition of the word 'pomegranate' in the second stanza of the poem, "*The pomegranate! How did I forget it?...reached out a hand and plucked a pomegranate.*" Other language techniques visible in this poem include alliteration, assonance, metaphoric language and euphony. Short sentences add to the rising tension, as the poet's panic leads to her closing decision. She must let her daughter go, "*She will hold the papery flushed skin in her hand. And to her lips. I will say nothing.*"

To conclude, I believe that Boland uses various language skills to convey reflective insights in her poetry. I have noticed that several of her poems explore ancient mythology, which I suspect influenced the insights that she gives in her poems. Boland almost challenges the false myths of women through her depictions of motherhood in both 'The Famine Road' and 'The Pomegranate,' while embracing the myths of the Ancient Greeks. Her use of language is consistently simple yet eloquently complex. Alliteration, assonance, figurative language, metaphorical language and symbolism play a sizeable role in Boland's poetry and I conclude that, by using such techniques, her poetry becomes all the more powerful and appealing.