EAVAN BOLAND: Revision notes.

Boland’s poetry offers a unique perspective on the world in which we live. Historically, women in Irish literature had been silenced or idealised, Boland’s poetry seeks to change this. In her prose writings she states that the complexity of real women’s lives has been diminished by the association of femininity and Irishness in poetic emblems like Caitlin Ni Houlihan and Dark Rosaleen. In her poems there is a modern and feminine voice that forces the reader to question our relationship with the past. They are set in a modern urban landscape that most of us are familiar with. Boland herself has said that her most formative years were those she spent as a young wife and mother in her own suburban environment. Boland opposes violence and speaks out for the weak and the marginalised. She has engaged with many of the socio-political ideas of her time and culture. While much of her work addresses matters of public concern, she has also written deeply personal and honest poems that reveal intimate details about her life and her relationships. She constantly seems to explore issues relating to the identity of the poet, the nature of poetic themes and the role of the woman poet in society.

GENERAL POINTS-1. Boland’s poems tend to create a sense of immediacy by drawing us into the narrative. Some techniques used by her are-the use of the personal pronoun I, the revelation of personal and intimate details about her own life and the use of concise language that is to the point.

2. Boland chooses to situate her poems in a suburban setting. Her poetry makes it clear that the modern housing estate is a place where the magic of poetry happens.

3. Boland calls into question the traditional divisions that exist between the order of suburbia and the wildness of the countryside.

4. Boland’s poetry looks at history, both personal and public, in a unique fashion. The blending of past and present can result in an interesting experience for the reader. Sometimes her narratives exist in the past and in the present, as a result breaking down the barriers between past and present, giving her poetry a sense of timelessness.

5. Boland deals with powerful emotions and human relationships in an honest and open manner. This is very evident in her treatment of the experience of being in love.

POEMS-KEY POINTS

THE WAR HORSE- A runaway horse from the “tinker camp on the Enniskerry road” is making his way down the suburban street, damaging lawns and flowers as he goes. The horse’s progress is described in terms of violence and war. The powerlessness and vulnerability of human beings in the face of war are suggested. The attitude of resignation and relief referred to earlier in the poem becomes one of indifference and even callousness. Links to a racial memory of violence are made. The poem seems to imply that impossibility of real detachment from violence in an Irish context, inherent as it is in the collective
memory. The poem implicitly recognises that the contemporary violence in Northern Ireland cannot be safely ignored or seen as having nothing to do with ordinary people. The form of the poem works as an ironic counterpoint to the underlying theme. The use of rhyming couplets, rhyme and half-rhyme echo the desire for order, but these are at complete variance with the irrational destructiveness of the war horse. The use of onomatopoeia allows us to hear the sound of the horse and the rhetorical question prompts us to reflect on our attitude to war and violence.

CHILD OF OUR TIME- From the beginning the two qualities of tenderness and outrage are evident in the tone of the poem. The image of language is used as an emblem of protection. The poem suggests that what must be rebuilt is our “broken images”. The child is an icon of suffering but also an emblem of hope. The implications that it is “our times” that have done this give a feeling of intense poignancy, linked with an acceptance of collective responsibility. The poem can be read as an elegy, its functions being to lament, to praise and to console. The long lines reflect the sad, solemn mood. Names are not mentioned highlighting the universality of this tragedy.

THE FAMINE ROAD- In the first stanza we hear the voice of the Relief Committee. The members express a stereotypical view of the Irish as seen by the governing classes. In the second stanza another voice can be heard. In a series of vivid and horrifying images, the reality of the Famine experience is described. The gradual dehumanisation of a whole race is suggested. In Stanza four we return to the speaker of stanza two. The problem, which has still not been articulated, is accepted by this speaker as given, a “mystery” that does not require explanation. The fifth stanza outlines how the basic human feelings of empathy and compassion have been destroyed in these people. In stanza six the individual, like the Famine victims, is almost invisible. It is the voice of the powerful raised against the powerless. In the penultimate the stanza the writer of the “report” to Lord Trevelyan is smugly triumphant. The poem links an entire racial experience of defeat and powerlessness with that of a woman’s experience of childlessness. The focus is not solely on the Famine victims but also on the figure of the childless woman.

THE BLACK LACE FAN MY MOTHER GAVE ME-The fan was the first gift given to the poet’s mother by her father. Applied to the relationship the fan represents, there may be a suggestion of underlying tensions juxtaposed with its undoubted durability and worth. The fan is an object that has reflected much of the personal history of the poet’s parents. The poet is aware that it is impossible to recreate particular moments of the past. The poem both celebrates her parents’ relationship and perceives its vulnerability.

THE SHADOW DOLL-In this poem we see Boland’s technique of allowing the imagination to move beyond the concrete object to contemplate the implications of the object, so that it becomes an emblem for a whole area of experience. As the poem progresses the doll gains a symbolic resonance. The sense of the doll as an object is reinforced. For a moment it is the bride’s perspective that we share. The expressive word “locks” gathers together all the suggestions of restrictiveness that have been indicated in the poem. Examining this concrete
object has allowed Boland to reflect on the nature of marriage from Victorian times to the present.

WHITE HAWTHORN IN THE WEST OF IRELAND-The poem is structured in a dramatic way around the image of a journey. We can sense the speaker’s delight in the natural landscape and her desire to be part of it and share in its freedom. The new sense of freedom and belonging may be merely illusory. The poet recognises the customs and folklore surrounding hawthorn. The expressive power of hawthorn to suggest whole ways of life is indicated in the term “fluency”. The final insight into the hawthorn sees it as a kind of language which has a universal meaning in the west of Ireland. The language of superstition, aligned with the “language” of the landscape, has superseded the actual language of the place. As part of the natural world, hawthorn itself is outside the influence of history; however, in an oblique way it has exerted its influence on the course of history. The speaker is an outsider, endeavouring to understand a way of life (for which the natural landscape of hawthorn is a metaphor), but inevitably failing to do so.

OUTSIDE HISTORY-The theme of the poem is the exclusion from history of those who have been voiceless and forgotten. Natural imagery is invoked, not so much for its own sake as for its symbolism, with the stars as emblems of these “outsiders”. In stanza three in an address to herself the speaker affirms her realisation of her humanity and mortality. She signals her intention to move into the ordeal of history. The poet will take her place, and here the gender of the poet is significant in this context, as part of the darkness of history. There is a suggestion of continuity with the past. The poet has accepted a responsibility, metaphorically speaking, to the dead by recognising that there is a need to redress the wrong that has been done to all the countless dead whose lives have somehow been forgotten and unexpressed.

THIS MOMENT-This short lyric captures the essence of a particular moment in time in vivid, sensuous images. The intensity of the perception is heightened by an awareness that the moment will not last. The child running into the woman’s arms has the static, timeless purity of ritual. Change and loss of innocence are inevitable for the child. The poet’s intention is to record the perception of a fleeting moment, but the poem evokes ideas and feelings which go beyond the purely ephemeral. The ordinary suburban setting has an important place in her work.

LOVE- Love is a personal poem addressed to the poet’s husband. It is also a meditation on the nature of love itself and how it is affected by time and change. The experience of being in love is described in mythic terms. The poet is sadly aware of the powerlessness of poetry to recreate the depth of feeling they once had. The tone of regret and loss is modified somewhat by a reversal to the present tense and an affirmation to the durability of their love. And yet the poem makes clear that something has been lost. It juxtaposes ordinary reality (twentieth century America) with the eternity of myth. Words are only a shadowy reflection of the reality and can offer no consolation in the face of the erosions of time and of feeling. The final impression that the poem leaves is celebratory in its lyrical evocation of mutual love.
The poem’s language is a skilful combination of the metaphorical and conversational, which is entirely appropriate to the theme.

THE POMEGRANATE-the poem is narrated in the form of a single, long, unrhymed stanza. The tensions inherent in the poem are between the tender feelings expressed and the acute fear of parental loss which underlines them. The second half of the poem is structured in a dramatic way. The scene is set. The tone of sadness stems from the consciousness of innocence and the accompanying sense of foreboding. The poem suggests that it may be a mother’s role to relinquish a daughter to the world of adult experience. The simplicity with which the poem ends belies the complex nature of the mother-daughter experience. Despite its perception of the sadness of the loss and the changes that time will bring, the poem affirms the continuity of women’s experience and celebrates it.

QUESTIONS

2002: Write personal response to the poetry of Eavan Boland. Support the point you make by reference to the poetry of Eavan Boland that you have studied.

Possible points include—her life and its links with her work, the themes and issues she explores in her poems, the appeal of the poems and/or the impact of the poetry on the reader, her style-vision, language, and imagery.

2005: “The appeal of Eavan Boland’s poetry.” Using the above title, write an essay outlining what you consider to be the appeal of Boland’s poetry. Support your points by reference to the poems of Eavan Boland on your course.

“The impact of Eavan Boland’s poetry.” Write a speech to be delivered to your classmates on the impact Boland’s poetry had on you. Your answer should focus on both themes and the use of imagery/language. Support your points.....

Write a letter to Eavan Boland in which you discuss the experience of reading her poetry.

Write an essay introducing the poetry of Eavan Boland.

See also mock paper questions.