

# English

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Higher Level

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*Eavan Boland*





# BOLAND

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**Study Pack**





Eavan Boland's poetry offers us a unique perspective on the world in which we live. Historically, women in Irish literature have been either silenced or idealised. Her poems seek to change this. The result is a thoroughly modern and feminine voice that forces us to question our relationship with the past and to reassess our preconceived notions about poetry itself. Very often, she transports poetry from its more traditional settings to a modern urban landscape that most of us are familiar with. Her poems oppose violence in all its guises and speak out for the weak and the marginalised. 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 daily life and relationships.

## The Famine Road

'Idle as trout in light Colonel Jones  
these Irish, give them no coins at all; their bones  
need toil, their characters no less.' Trevelyan's  
seal blooded the deal table. The Relief  
Committee deliberated: 'Might it be safe,

5

Colonel, to give them roads, roads to force  
from nowhere, going nowhere of course?'

one out of every ten and then  
another third of those again  
women – in a case like yours.

10

\*

Sick, directionless they worked fork, stick  
were iron years away; after all could  
they not blood their knuckles on rock, suck  
April hailstones for water and for food?  
Why for that, cunning as housewives, each eyed –

15

as if at a corner butcher – the other’s buttock.

anything may have caused it, spores,  
a childhood accident; one sees  
day after day these mysteries.

★

Dusk: they will work tomorrow without him.

20

They know it and walk clear. He has become  
a typhoid pariah, his blood tainted, although  
he shares it with some there. No more than snow  
attends its own flakes where they settle  
and melt, will they pray by his death rattle.

25

You never will, never you know  
but take it well woman, grow  
your garden, keep house, good-bye.

★

‘It has gone better than we expected, Lord  
Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured  
in one; from parish to parish, field to field;  
the wretches work till they are quite worn,  
then fester by their work; we march the corn  
to the ships in peace. This Tuesday I saw bones

30

out of my carriage window. Your servant Jones.'

35

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

## Glossary

**'The Famine Road'** – during the Irish Famine, the government dictated that aid could not be given without demanding something in return. As a result, a series of public work programmes was initiated. In return for aid, the starving population was required to work on pointless construction projects.

**3 Trevelyan** – Sir Charles Edward Trevelyan (1807–86) served as secretary for Ireland during the Famine years. Prof. Joe Lee estimates that 10 per cent of the population died during Trevelyan's stewardship.

**8 one out of every ten** – the narrative changes here. We are now in a consultant's rooms. Notice how the detached tone of the consultant mirrors the coldness of Trevelyan and his subordinate.

**17 anything may have caused it, spores** – we return to the second narrative. Notice again the detachment of the doctor. The mention of spores recalls the fungal spores that caused the Famine.

**22 typhoid** – a disease of the blood transmitted by lice.

**22 pariah** – a social outcast.

**30 sedition** – the act of plotting against the state, subversive behaviour.

## 1. Content

'The Famine Road' is a haunting poem. It is complex and can at first be difficult to read. You will have noticed two narratives in this poem. The poem opens with the voice of Trevelyan assuring his colonel that the Irish are lazy and in need of hard work. Sandwiched in between this narrative is the story of a woman visiting a gynaecologist. She is being told that she will not be able to conceive a child. As the poem progresses, Boland draws both narratives together to produce a memorable poem. In Boland's view, the tragedy of Irish history and the reality of being a woman are reflected in one another. This is what this poem attempts to convey through these two narratives. When asked about being Irish, Boland has stated:

Apart from the fact that it connects me with a past, I find it a perspective on my womanhood as well. Womanhood and Irishness are metaphors for one another. There are resonances of humiliation, oppression and silence in both of them and I think you can understand one better by experiencing the other. Thus, it is valid to read this poem as

an attempt to join the experience of being a woman to the humiliation experienced during the Famine.

Let us first turn our attention to the narrative dealing with the Famine. The Great Famine is a horrific fault line in Irish history. After two successive years of blight on potato crops caused by mildew spores, many people chose to eat whatever seed they had rather than run the risk of planting a fresh crop of potatoes. Ironically and tragically, in 1847, there was little or no blight, but there was no crop either. The people had simply not planted enough to sustain themselves. 'Black 47', as it came to be known, saw the advent of fevers such as typhus, which rapidly spread through the weakened population. Workhouses were crammed with fever patients. Auxiliary workhouses were opened and fever sheds erected. Dr Daly reported from Newport in May 1847: Fever, dysentery and diarrhoea are greatly on the increase, beginning with vomiting, pains, headache very intense; coming to a crisis in about seven days, relapsing again once or twice, from which death occurred through mere debility or diarrhoea, caused and kept up by bad food, principally Indian meal, supplied to them in small quantities, and which they invariably swallow after only a few minutes boiling and sometimes cold and raw. The greatest mortality is among the labourers, men and women, on public roads, in cold, wet, boggy hills. No other



single event in the history of Ireland has so touched and shaped our identity. In *Outside History*, Eavan Boland explains how she first became aware of the Famine. She tells us that on a visit to Achill Island, she came into contact with an old woman who was: the first person to talk to me about the famine. The first person, in fact, to speak to me with any force about the terrible parish of survival and death which the event had been in those regions. She kept repeating to me that they were great people, the people of the famine. Great people, I had never heard that before. Having read the above, you should be able to understand the narrative in the poem that deals with the Famine. As we have said, the poem opens with Lord Trevelyan advising his subordinate on how to deal with the 'idle' and starving Irish population. The manner in which his seal bloodies the deal table is significant. Blood is a motif that runs through this poem. The attitude of these men is completely lacking in compassion and this is mirrored in their decision:

[...] to give them roads, roads to force  
from nowhere, going nowhere of course [...]

Notice how the Irish themselves are denied any voice. Those in power decide the manner in which this population will die. The people have no say in this. The poem now changes direction abruptly. The narrative in italics takes place in a

doctor's rooms. We have moved through time to the present day. The cold, arrogant lack of compassion shown by the doctor mirrors the attitude of Jones, Trevelyan and the Relief Committee. Notice how the woman in question is also denied a voice. In the third stanza, we return to the 'Sick [and] directionless' Famine victims. The physical deprivation and suffering experienced by this starving population are accurately captured in the following lines:

The poem changes  
direction abruptly.  
[...] after all could  
they not blood their knuckles on rock, suck  
April hailstones for water and for food?

The hunger and distress caused by being forced to work with inadequate tools in difficult conditions reduces them to the level of animals. They eye each other hungrily as their humanity is eroded. The poem switches direction and once again we are in the doctor's surgery. The woman is informed that anything may have caused her defect. It may have even been 'spores'. This links her plight to that of the Famine victims.

The blight that affected the potatoes was carried by fungal spores. Despite the life-altering gravity of what the doctor is

telling the woman, his tone remains detached. To him, it is an ordinary, everyday mystery, not to be questioned. She remains silent. In the fifth stanza, we return once again to the past. It is now dusk and the effects of the Famine are made more vivid. One of the work party has become a 'typhoid pariah'. As a result of the disease, his companions, even though some are relatives, shun him.

Dusk: they will work tomorrow without him.

They know it and walk clear [...]

The image of the snow settling and melting is a powerful and poignant one. It captures in a simple and moving fashion the fragility of human life. Before we have time to consider fully the tragedy of this death, the narrative returns to the present. The tone of the doctor has changed slightly. Coldness and detachment now give way to an arrogant, patronising tone. The woman is told that she 'never will' give birth. Instead of mothering a child, she is told to 'grow [her] garden, keep house'. The abrupt 'good-bye' signals the point at which the doctor washes his hands of the woman. She remains silent.

In the seventh stanza, Colonel Jones makes his final, sickening report to his master, Trevelyan. Following the cruelty of the work programmes, he reports:

[...] sedition, idleness, cured  
in one; from parish to parish, field to field;  
the wretches work till they are quite worn,  
then fester by their work [...]

There is an appalling lack of human compassion in these lines. This is followed by a shocking admission: The doctor's tone is detached.

[...] we march the corn  
to the ships in peace [...]

The Famine years saw a continuation of the export of cereal crops from Ireland.

However shocking this may be, it is historically accurate. The starving Irish quite literally looked on while the food they needed to survive was exported. The poem ends with a return to the woman's narrative. She is still denied a direct voice. Then, in the final stanza, rhymed aba to round off the poem, we are told that she will never know the 'load I of [a] child in [her ]'. Her body is now barren. Like the Famine road itself, she lacks direction.

## 2. Stylistic Features

'The Famine Road' constitutes a poignant interlacing of voices. At first, Boland manages to make use of the private and public voices of the Relief Committee. We first meet the private voice of Trevelyan. It is a voice laced with contempt. The Irish are, in his view, 'Idle as trout in light' and should be given: [...] no coins at all; their bones need toil, their characters no less.' [...]

Notice how the Irish are objectified. They are, in Lord Trevelyan's eyes, 'these Irish'. The wheedling of the public works committee is matched by Trevelyan's coldness. The hypocrisy of the committee is such that it tries to sell the programmes as being 'safe'. The public decision of the committee to give them roads 'going nowhere of course' is sickening. The language of the committee continues to objectify the Irish. It is worth pointing out that, in this poem, the Irish are not permitted to speak; they, unlike the English, have no voice. The structure of 'The Famine Road' mirrors this fact. The two stanzas that outline the tortured and dehumanising experiences of the Irish people are framed by the two English stanzas. As a result, the Irish become little more than objects. The narrative voice of the poem changes once again. The four tercets in italics concentrate on the condition of the woman unable to conceive. The italics show

us that the woman's story is different. She is marginalised by her experience. In the There is an interweaving of voices in 'The Famine Road'. first three tercets, the tone of the voice descends from professional impartiality to arrogance.

The final tercet attempts to acknowledge the individuality of the woman. While

not allowing the woman to speak directly, the objective third person attempts to give voice to the woman's emotions:

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

The result is a highly crafted poem that manages to convey its message through several voices.

### 3. Essay Writing

When it comes to essay writing, 'The Famine Road' is an interesting poem. If you are considering using this poem in your essays, you may want to include the poem in any paragraph that deals with the following.

a. Boland's tendency to move through time. In this manner, the poem links with

'The Black Lace Fan my Mother Gave me', 'The Pomegranate', 'Love' and 'Outside History'.

b. Boland's treatment of history.

c. The technical aspects of the poem: the interlacing of voices, the changes in tone and the powerful imagery.

## The Black Laced Fan my Mother Gave me

It was the first gift he ever gave her,  
buying it for five francs in the Galeries  
in pre-war Paris. It was stifling.  
A starless drought made the nights stormy.

★

They stayed in the city for the summer.

5

They met in cafés. She was always early.  
He was late. That evening he was later.  
They wrapped the fan. He looked at his watch.

★

She looked down the Boulevard des Capucines.  
She ordered more coffee. She stood up.

10

The streets were emptying. The heat was killing.  
She thought the distance smelled of rain and lightning.

★

These are wild roses, appliqued on silk by hand,  
darkly picked, stitched boldly, quickly.  
The rest is tortoiseshell and has the reticent,

15



clear patience of its element. It is

★

a worn-out, underwater bullion and it keeps,

even now, an inference of its violation.

The lace is overcast as if the weather

it opened for and offset had entered it.

20

★

The past is an empty café terrace.

An airless dusk before thunder. A man running.

And no way now to know what happened then –

none at all – unless, of course, you improvise:

★

The blackbird on this first sultry morning,

25

in summer, finding buds, worms, fruit,

feels the heat. Suddenly she puts out her wing –

the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.

## Glossary

2 **Galleries** – most likely a reference to the Galeries Lafayette, an upmarket store in Paris.

3 **pre-war Paris and stormy** (line 4) – these references must be read as a deliberate allusion to the lightning war, or blitzkrieg, of the German army. Notice how the poem makes great use of the caesura, or internal break within a line. These breaks in the line give the poem a jerky or grainy quality, similar to an old black and white film. For more on this, see the critical commentary.

9 **Boulevard des Capucines** – an area of Paris made famous in a well-known painting by Claude Monet.

12 **the distance smelled of rain and lightning** – an allusion to the impending war.

15 **reticent** – unforthcoming, restrained,

uncommunicative. The fan, being made of 'tortoiseshell', contains something of the tortoise it was made from.

22 **A man running** – notice the strange use of the present continuous. This allows us to access the narrative more easily.

24 of course, you improvise – because Boland has not lived this event herself, she is forced to improvise.

25 **The blackbird on this first sultry morning** – suddenly, the poem returns to the present. This is characteristic of Boland's poetry. The past, pre-war Paris and the story of her mother and father's courtship blend with the here and now.

## 1. Content

This is a complex, beautiful poem that deals with those classic themes of poetry – love, life and the passing of time. The poem opens in a very direct fashion. This black lace fan, we learn, was 'the first gift' Boland's father gave her mother. The fan becomes a symbol of her mother and father's courtship. As the poet has no way of knowing what

happened during this stage in their relationship, she is forced to 'improvise'. The barriers between past and present become loosened, and the result is an emotionally charged poem. Through her study of the black lace fan, Boland manages to reconstruct the courtship of her mother and father. By moving through the layers of the past, she throws fresh light on her understanding of their relationship. This examination of the rituals that surround any love story leads to profound insights into the nature of existence, love and the passing of time. Boland brings us back to her parents' meetings in 'pre-war Paris'. We are told that the weather was 'stifling', 'the nights stormy' and that 'They met in cafés'. This is the stuff of a romance novel or a Hollywood love story. There is certainly something cinematic about these opening lines. Boland herself has stated that she wanted to create 'a jerky, grainy feel to the poem', much like the experience of watching an old black and white movie. This adds to the romance of the opening stanzas. However, in a very subtle manner, the poet manages to introduce a sense of urgency to the lovers' courtship. She informs us that:

The heat was killing.

She thought the distance smelled of rain and lightning.

This must be read as an allusion to the impending war and the blitzkrieg, or lightning warfare, of Nazi Germany. This reference to a historical event that had such an enormous impact on people's lives is a powerful reminder that nothing in this world lasts forever. Despite the careful, considered nature of Boland's treatment of the past, it is an improvisation and thus incomplete. So, before she completes this portrait of her parents' courtship, she returns to the present. 'The Black Lace Fan my Mother Gave me' is framed within a series of precise temporal references. We are made aware from the outset that this poem is dealing with a historical event. However, despite the obvious historical context of the opening stanzas, Boland chooses to introduce the continuous present tense. The effect of this is to blur the distinctions between history and the present. We are literally made to relive events. Her father is still 'buying' the fan, even though it is 'pre-war Paris'. This signals the beginning of the blending of the past and present and forms an essential characteristic of the poem. The sands of time shift again in stanza four as Boland gives closer consideration to the detail on the fan. We now return to the present. The 'wild roses' are a reminder of the romantic connotations associated with the gift. Yet for all the romance of its 'café terrace', the past cannot be relived. We are told that the fan, like the 'tortoiseshell' from which it was made, has a 'reticent, I clear patience'. Here, the tone of the poem

changes significantly and darkens. Even now, an 'inference' of the destruction or 'violation' that was necessary to create this fan can be detected. In the poet's eyes, the fan is transformed from an object symbolising love to one that reminds us that change is inevitable. This is a beautiful poem. It takes us into the past to witness the romance and the emotion of a relationship in its early stages. In the process, we are made to confront some harsh realities concerning the passing of time. As the poem ends, Boland returns to the present and describes the blackbird in an act of courtship:

[...] Suddenly she puts out her wing –  
the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.

## 2. Stylistic Features

It is rare to find a poet who is willing to explain the rationale behind the technical choices made in a poem. Given that Boland has provided us with a detailed account of how she crafted this poem in her book *Object Lessons*, it might be best to allow her to explain the techniques she has used:

*This poem is about a black lace fan. The fan actually exists. As I write this, I know it is downstairs in a*

glass-fronted cupboard, all folded in, a bit crumpled and definitely faded. But in its first existence, as I imagine it here, it was fully spread out. The lace was crisp and scratchy. The tortoiseshell at the base of it had a yellow sheen. The tasselled cord looked silky and ungrimy. This fan was the first gift my father gave my mother. They were in a heat wave in Paris in the thirties and, as she once told me, he went to the

Galleries Lafayette, a big cluster of shops, and bought the fan just before he went on to keep his appointment with her. Eventually my mother gave me the fan and told me its story. But the poem began in an image and not a story. The image was of an object, which was entirely silent. I could hold it and feel its

mixture of smoothness and friction. But it would never be able to tell me whether my father rushed down the Boulevard des Capucines to be there on time. Did he rush? It would never be able to tell me what they said, or when the storm broke. What did they say? What did the storm look like?

Just asking these questions made me want to re- create the event: the storm, the man and the woman, the drama and poignancy of the first steps in a courtship. But first I had to make the fan vivid again:

not the crumpled object I owned but the beautiful, surprising gift it had once been. To do that, I had to make some choices: practical technical choices. These can be hard to describe in hindsight, but here are two examples of those

choices. Firstly, I decided to make the opening stanza of the poem slip and slide a bit: to make the pronouns shimmer and disappear. To make the reader feel the ground of grammar shift and tip in a disconcerting way.

So I used the word 'it' twice. The first 'it', of course, is the fan. It was the first gift he ever gave her. The second 'it' is evidently about the weather. It was stifling. But it looks back a little bit, like something disappearing in a car mirror, to the other it. And so the fan, the weather, the heat, the mystery are deliberately confused and merged by those pronouns.

In the second stanza I change the caesuras around. Perhaps the word is hardly used any more. And yet there hasn't been a replacement for it, so I will use it here. No one should be afraid of it. All a caesura means is where you break the line as you are writing it: after two beats, or three, or even one. Or not at all. Where you pause, or don't pause, in other words. The name may be rather artificial and off-putting. But the actual practice of breaking the line can yield very useful results for a poet and be instantly picked up as a slight, but important, shift in speed by the readers, even if they don't use that name for it. It's a little like the controls on a video; slowing down or speeding up the tape. Here I write four lines where I move the action along a little: to show they stayed in the city, were meeting in the cafes, were sometimes late for one another, and this time he was delayed by

buying the fan. I use no caesura in the first or last line. Then in the following three lines I put the caesura or internal line-break after the second stress. That way I get a jerky, grainy feel to the stanza: a little like the frames of an old film. And that's what I wanted.

They stayed in the city for the summer.  
They met in cafés. She was always early.  
He was late. That evening he was later.  
They wrapped the fan. He looked at his watch.

The fan, the story, the history of the object all had and have great meaning for me. But sometimes a poem's existence is decided in a split second. And that happened here. I had the fan; I knew the story. And still I hadn't the poem although I had thought about it. Then one late spring morning I was looking out my back window into the garden. A female blackbird was just in front of our apple tree, moving around, looking for worms. It was sunny and clear and the light was moving directly to that part of the grass. Suddenly, as I watched, she put out one brown wing: a wonderfully constructed fan-like movement, now open, now shut. There and then the existence of the poem was guaranteed. I had wanted to write about the fan, the past, the lost moment. I lacked the meaning. Now here, in this evocation in nature of the man-made object of courtship, I found the meaning I needed and the final image for the poem. The blackbird on this first sultry



*morning, in summer, finding buds, worms, fruit, feels the heat.  
Suddenly she puts out her wing – the whole, full, flirtatious span  
of it.*

### 3. Essay Writing

'The Black Lace Fan my Mother Gave me' is an important poem and, as such, is certainly worth mentioning in any response to Boland's poetry. When writing about Boland's poetry, you should bear the following points in mind.

a. The poem deals with the passing of time. In *Object Lessons*, Boland has said that 'ordinary objects seemed to warn [her] that that the body might share the world but could not own it'. In other words, the fan is a reminder of the passing of time. This links the poem to 'The Shadow Doll' and 'White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland'.

b. The poem moves through time and, in the process, past and present become blurred. This is, of course, true of other Boland poems on the course. Consider how this same process can be seen in 'The Shadow Doll', 'White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland', 'The Famine Road' and 'The War Horse'.

c. The poem is honest about the relationships in Boland's life.  
This can be used to form a link to 'Love' and 'The Pomegranate'.

## This Moment

A neighbourhood.

At dusk.

Things are getting ready

to happen

out of sight.

5

Stars and moths.

And rinds slanting around fruit.

But not yet.

One tree is black.

One window is yellow as butter.

10

A woman leans down to catch a child

who has run into her arms

this moment.

Stars rise.

Moths flutter.

15

Apples sweeten in the dark.

## glossary

The title of the poem is very informative. This poem is literally about a moment in time.

1 A neighbourhood – once again, Boland turns her gaze towards suburbia.

7 rinds slanting around fruit – Boland takes the moment and slows it down so that usually imperceptible events become visible.

10 yellow as butter – there is something very homely about this simile.

11 A woman leans down to catch a child – this image is a beautiful representation of how wonderful the ordinary can be.

16 Apples sweeten in the dark – the poem ends with a depiction of an event that normally remains hidden.

## 1. Content

There is something almost cinematic about this poem. Here, as elsewhere, Boland examines a condensed moment in time. The result is a simple, honest, yet deeply moving poem. There is something so familiar about the scene that Boland presents to us. We are taken to a suburban neighbourhood. The time of year suggested by the early twilight, ripening fruit and fluttering moths is most likely autumn. Autumn brings with it a feeling of comfort and of natural abundance. Furthermore, and this again adds to the warmth of the poem,

one can sense a feminine presence at work. The description of suburbia feels somehow safe and The scene presented in the poem is a familiar one.

The description of suburbia feels somehow safe and warm. This feeling of security finds its fullest expression in the unification of the mother and child. In *Object Lessons*, Boland asks the following question: Is there something about the repeated action – about lifting a child, clearing a dish, watching the season return to a tree and depart from a vista – which reveals a deeper meaning to existence and heals some of the worst abrasions of time? Perhaps this is the best way to view 'This Moment' – as an attempt to heal 'those abrasions of time'. In any case, the poem does offer insights into the beauty that can exist in the ordinary. In his famous poem 'Canal Bank Walk', Patrick Kavanagh celebrated the everyday, the habitual, the 'banal'. This is what Boland attempts to do here. The ordinary is given new meaning and relevance and is celebrated with The ordinary is given new meaning and relevance and is celebrated with a lover's intensity. Here, Boland reinstates suburbia as a setting worthy of poetic expression.

This poem stands apart from the other poems by Boland on the course. Boland's poetry can be forceful and vigorous in its approach. Very often, the power of its message is

matched by powerful language. Boland was determined to make her poems address the ordinary, everyday concerns that had never traditionally been the stuff of poetry. This is precisely what she does here. The ordinary things in everyday life are celebrated. Reading this poem, we can easily recognise the picture she paints. It's dusk in autumn and 'Things are getting ready | to happen'. The uninhibited simplicity of the poem's language reflects the ordinariness of its theme . There is not one word in this poem that forces the reader to consult a dictionary. This is a very accessible poem.

### 3. Essay Writing

There are possible links between 'This Moment' and the other poems that you have studied. If you include 'This Moment' in a paragraph, consider some of these points.

- a. The poem is readily accessible to most readers.
- b. The language of the poem mirrors the simplicity of its message.
- c. Once again, this is a poem by Boland that is situated in suburbia. Despite