

Suggestions for Reading and Studying Eavan Boland

By Renee H. Shea

I. Biography and Other Useful Links

“Eavan Boland” (biographical information, links to the following sites, texts of “The Laundresses” and “The Pomegranate,” and audio and discussion of “The Emigrant Irish”)
<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C07000D>

“Where Poetry Begins: An Interview with Eavan Boland”
<http://www.poets.org/poems/prose.cfm?45442B7C000C0405017B>

“Daughters”

Curated by Eavan Boland (a site with discussion of poems about daughters and links to other poems, including ones by Rita Dove, W.B. Yeats, and Richard Wilbur)
<http://www.poets.org/exh/Exhibit.cfm?45442B7C000C0F>

II. Interrupted Reading: An Approach to Close Analysis

One way to promote close reading of poetry is to divide the poem into discrete sections for students to read and respond to – freely – before they read the entire work with an eye toward formal analysis. At best, this approach allows them to “listen” to the text and meet in on its own terms, to generate hypotheses, and to enjoy the language. There are several ways to design such an exercise, but the following are general guidelines.

1. Determine the reason for the divisions or dividing lines that you select (such as development of a metaphor, shifts in tone, specific devices, or examples of figurative language).
2. If possible (by copying, using an overhead transparency, or PowerPoint), present the students with each “division” on a separate sheet – and allow them time to write about that section. (If you give them a hard copy of the poem, ask them not to look forward. If they read and write quickly, suggest they reread the poem as though it were music.)
3. Ask one individual to read each excerpt aloud, but change voices from excerpt to excerpt.
4. Once you’ve been through the entire poem and each student has had a chance to write, then discuss each section – and explore different perceptions or associations the students have.
5. If you are working with formal poetic devices, keep a list of the ones students notice (and in many cases, you might have to provide the critical term for a device a student describes).

6. (optional) It's likely that the results of such an open exercise will yield very different interpretations, so you might ask students to sort out "lines" of interpretations that have come up during the discussion.
7. Clearly, this exercise can simply be a way to approach the text and generate text-based discussion, though it also can lead to an essay-writing assignment.

Following is a suggested sequence of divisions for an interrupted reading of Eavan Boland's poem "It's a Woman's World," which appeared on the 1998 AP Literature exam. These divisions or "chunks" were chosen to reflect the twists and turns that add up to the speaker's complex conception of a "woman's world."

1.
(title)
"It's a Woman's World"

2.

Our way of life
has hardly changed
since a wheel first
whetted a knife.

3.

Well, maybe flame
burns more greedily
and wheels are steadier
but we're the same

who milestone
our lives
with oversights –
living by the lights

of the loaf left
by the cash register,
the washing powder
paid for and wrapped,

the wash left wet.

4.

Like most historic peoples
we are defined
by what we forget,

by what we never will be:
star-gazers,
fire-eaters.
It's our alibi

for all time
that as far as history goes
we were never
on the scene of the crime.

5.

So when the king's head
gored its basket –
grim harvest –
we were gristing bread

or getting the recipe
for a good soup
to appetize
our gossip.

6.

And it's still the same:
By night our windows
moth our children
to the flame

of hearth not history.
And still no page
scores the low music
of our outrage.

7.

But appearances
still reassure:
That woman there,
craned to the starry mystery

is merely getting a breath
of evening air,
while this one here –
her mouth

a burning plume –
she's no fire-eater,
just my frosty neighbour
coming home.

From *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems, 1967-1987*, by Eavan Boland. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Etext of "It's a Woman's World":

<http://www.netsoc.tcd.ie/~elena/poetry/poemWomansWorld.html>

1998 AP Literature Question 1: The following poem was written by a contemporary Irish woman, Eavan Boland. Read the poem carefully and then write an essay in which you analyze how the poem reveals the speaker's complex conception of a "woman's world."

III. Mothers and Daughters: "The Pomegranate" and Beyond

The Pomegranate

Etext: <http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmID=1167>

The only legend I have ever loved is
The story of a daughter lost in Hell.
And found and rescued there.
Love and blackmail are the gist of it.
Ceres and Persephone the names.
And the best thing about the legend is
I can enter it anywhere. And have.
As a child in exile in
A city of fogs and strange consonants,
I read it first and at first I was
An exiled child in the crackling dusk of
The underworld, the stars blighted. Later
I walked out in a summer twilight
Searching for my daughter at bedtime.
When she came running I was ready
To make any bargain to keep her.
I carried her back past whitebeams.
And wasps and honey-scented buddleias.
But I was Ceres then and I knew
Winter was in store for every leaf
On every tree on that road.
Was inescapable for each one we passed.
And for me.
It is winter
And the stars are hidden.
I climb the stairs and stand where I can see
My child asleep beside her teen magazines,
Her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit.
The pomegranate! How did I forget it?
She could have come home and been safe

And ended the story and all
Our heartbroken searching, but she reached
Out a hand and plucked a pomegranate.
She put out her hand and pulled down
The French sound for apple and
The noise of stone and the proof
That even in the place of death,
At the heart of legend, in the midst
Of rocks full of unshed tears
Ready to be diamonds by the time
The story was told, a child can be
Hungry. I could warn her. There is still a chance.
The rain is cold. The road is flint-colored.
The suburb has cars and cable television.
The veiled starts are above ground.
It is another world. But what else
Can a mother give her daughter but such
Beautiful rifts in time?
If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.
The legend will be hers as well as mine.
She will enter it. As I have.
She will wake up. She will hold
The papery, flushed skin in her hand.
And to her lips. I will say nothing.

From *In a Time of Violence*, by Eavan Boland. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Focus Questions

1. Why is the myth of Ceres and Persephone appropriate for this poem?
2. What is the speaker's movement in both time and place in the poem (e.g., "As a child in exile," "I was Ceres then," "I climb the stairs")?
3. What images of nature, especially the seasons, do you find? Why are they important to the classical myth? To this poem?
4. What physical elements does the speaker include to signal her existence in a contemporary world?
5. How do you interpret the following lines:

"I can enter it [the legend] anywhere. And have."

"a child can be/hungry"

"If I defer the grief I diminish the gift"

6. How would you characterize the speaker's tone? Try to describe it with an AP multiple choice-like construction, such as an adjective-noun (e.g., angry disappointment") or adverb-adjective (e.g., sadly reflective).

Mock AP Question:

How does the allusion to the classical myth and the language of “The Pomegranate” reveal the speaker’s attitude toward her daughter?

More Open Essay Question:

Why doesn’t the mother in this poem “warn” her daughter? Use textual evidence to support your interpretation.

Extensions and Connections:

Eavan Boland’s “Daughters” project (referenced in Section I) is a good source for poems to compare and contrast. She specifically talks about Rita Dove’s poem “Bistro Styx,” which turns on an intriguing combination of classical reference and the construct of a meal. That poem appears in Dove’s collection *Mother Love*, which is an exploration of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. In her Forward to this collection, Dove calls this ancient story “a tale of a violated world. It is a modern dilemma as well – there comes a point when a mother can no longer protect her child, when the daughter must go her own way into womanhood.” “Bistro Styx” is only one of numerous excellent possibilities (many written as sonnets) in *Mother Love* to generate discussions of the mother-daughter relationship (from both perspectives) as well as poetic form.

IV. Painting and Poetry

Suggested Activity

The poem entitled “Degas’s Laundresses” might be explored as an interpretation of one of the famous paintings by Degas. The following sequence could take students through a consideration not only of the two representations – one visual, one verbal – but also a close analysis of Boland’s poem.

- A. Consider the painting “The Laundresses” by Degas. Write a description of the painting in verse or prose [or] write a description of what is occurring, the task at hand, in the voice of one of the laundresses (or a dialogue between the two).

<http://www.mystudios.com/art/impress/degas/degas-laundresses.html>
<http://www.euro-art-gallery.net/degas/pages/ed12.htm>

- B. Read Eavan Boland’s poem “Degas’s Laundresses” and explore the similarities and differences between what you (and your classmates) saw and what she depicted.

Degas’s Laundresses

Etext: <http://www.wfu.edu/wfupress/bolandpoetry.htm>

You rise, you dawn
roll-sleeved Aprodites,
out of a camisole brine,
a linen pit of stitches,
silking the fitted sheets
away from you like waves.

You seam dreams in the folds
Of wash from which freshes
the whiff and reach of fields
where it bleached and stiffened
your chat's sabbatical:
brides, wedding outfits,

a pleasure of leisured women
are sweated into the folds,
the neat heaps of linen.
Now the drag of the clasp.
Your wrists basket your waist.
You round to the square weight.

Wait. There. Behind you.
A man. There behind you.
Whatever you do don't turn.
Why is he watching you?
Whatever you do don't turn.
Whatever you do don't turn.

So he takes his ease,
Staking his easel so,
Slowly sharpening charcoal,
Closing his eyes just so,
slowly smiling as if
so slowly he is

unbandaging his mind.
Surely a good laundress
would understand its twists,
its white turns,
its blind designs:

it's your winding sheet.

From *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems, 1967-1987*, by Eavan Boland. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

C. Consider the following focus questions in your analysis of the poem:

1. What does the description of the laundresses as “roll-sleeved Aphrodites” suggest?
2. Why is the laundresses’ chat “sabbatical”?
3. How do the verbs in the third stanza begin to shift the mood?
4. Who is the man behind them introduced in the fourth stanza?
5. Why does the speaker caution the laundresses not to “turn”?
6. What is the man’s “blind design”?
7. Is the speaker addressing the laundresses?

Suggested Essay Question:

Eavan Boland creates her poem “Degas’s Laundresses” in response to the painting “The Laundresses” by the late-nineteenth-century French Impressionist painter Edgar Degas. Compare and contrast her attitude toward the laundresses and toward the painter.

Extension:

Consider Boland’s poem “On Renoir’s The Grape-Pickers” in a similar exercise.

V. The Map of Ireland: “That the Science of Cartography Is Limited”

This poem might be used to encourage students to explore how increasing contextual information influences their reading. The poem certainly can be approached on its own as autonomous text that provides sufficient information within its own borders for the reader to appreciate, analyze, and understand. On the other critical hand, information about the 1847 famine in Ireland, the Relief Committees, even the science of cartography is likely to deepen or even alter an interpretive reading.

The Focus Questions that follow can guide students’ reading with or without the contextual information.

That the Science of Cartography Is Limited

Etext: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2078/1_44/67532123/p1/article.jhtml

-- and not simply by the fact that this shading of
forest cannot show the fragrance of balsam,
the gloom of cypresses
is what I wish to prove.

When you and I were first in love we drove
to the borders of Connacht
and entered a wood there.

Look down you said: this was once a famine road.

I looked down at ivy and the scutch grass
rough-cast stone had
disappeared into as you told me
in the second winter of their ordeal, in

1847, when the crop had failed twice,
Relief Committees gave
the starving Irish such roads to build.

When they died, there the road ended

and ends still and when I take down
the map of this island, it is never so
I can say here is
the masterful, the apt rendering of

the spherical as flat, nor
an ingenious design which persuades a curve
into a plane,
but to tell myself again that

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress
and finds no horizon

will not be there.

From *In a Time of Violence*, by Eavan Boland. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Focus Questions

1. What is the “science of cartography”? In what ways is it a “science”?
2. What is it that the speaker literally “wishes to prove” (according to the strict syntax of the sentence in which the phrase appears)?
3. What is the importance of the situation the speaker sets up in the poem, i.e., “when you and I were first in love”? (For fun, perhaps: is the speaker male or female? Does it matter?)
4. What is the literal meaning of “the apt rendering of/the spherical as flat” and “an ingenious design which persuades a curve/into a plane”?
5. What are the several different past events alluded to in the poem? How do they intersect?

6. What is the contrast between what the speaker might say when he or she looks at the map and what he or she chooses to “tell myself again”?
7. Revisit the speaker’s claim of what he or she “wishes to prove”? In light of the entire poem (not only the sentence in which it appears), how do you (re)interpret “proof” being the subject of this poem?

VI. The Body

Eavan Boland has written a series of poems focused on women’s bodies that generate good discussions of stereotypes and differing conceptions of beauty. “Anorexic” is one of the most powerful and, sadly, one with resonance for many adolescents. The accessibility and raw emotion of it may, in fact, encourage students to stay on the surface of the poem, but the questions that follow can guide them to probe more deeply and appreciate the intricacies of Boland’s language.

Anorexic

Etext: <http://www.cs.berkeley.edu/~richie/poetry/html/aupoem9.html>

Flesh is heretic.
My body is a witch.
I am burning it.

Yes I am torching
her curves and paps and wiles.
They scorch in my self denials.

How she meshed my head
in the half-truths
of her fevers till I renounced
milk and honey
and the taste of lunch.

I vomited
her hungers.
Now the bitch is burning.

I am starved and curveless.
I am skin and bone.
She has learned her lesson.

Thin as a rib
I turn in sleep.
My dreams probe

a claustrophobia
a sensuous enclosure.
How warm it was and wide

once by a warm drum,
once by the song of his breath
and in his sleeping side.

Only a little more,
only a few more days
sinless, foodless.

I will slip
back into him again
as if I have never been away.

Caged so
I will grow
angular and holy

past pain
keeping his heart
such company

as will make me forget
in a small space
the fall

into forked dark,
into python needs
heaving to hips and breasts
and lips and heat
and sweat and fat and greed.

From *In Her Own Image*, by Eavan Boland. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Focus Questions

1. What are the words and images in the poem that suggest a lack of control?
2. What are the words and images that connote anger or violence?
3. What are the words that have a positive connotation? Pay particular attention to those that would be positive outside the context of this poem, but that the poet subverts.
4. How do you interpret the pronouns? Who or what is the “she” in the start of the poem and the “he” later on?

5. How does the speaker juxtapose images of the body with those of the mind? What other dualities do you find in the poem?
6. What references do you find that are usually associated with religion? Why does she use such words and images in a poem about an illness?
7. The poem ends with an image of “sweat and fat and greed.” Why is this line so powerful?
8. What textual evidence do you see to support an interpretation that this poem alludes to the Biblical story of Genesis, specifically the fall of Adam and Eve?
9. How would you characterize the level of self-awareness of the speaker in the poem?
10. What difference does it make that Boland chose to title the poem “Anorexic” instead of “Anorexia”?

Essay Question: Who is the “Anorexic,” according to the poem by Eavan Boland? Pay attention to the language as you formulate your response.

Extension

In Boland’s poem “Making Up,” the speaker describes herself in the morning as she faces herself in the mirror, then applies make-up as she prepares to meet the day. This poem might be used with “Anorexia” to explore cultural constructs of beauty and how they affect individuals.

VII. PAIRING WITH OTHER WORKS: THE COLONIAL CONNECTION

In both the following poem and the excerpt, the speaker expresses her response to the experience of growing up under colonial domination. In the poem by Eavan Boland, the speaker, a native of Ireland, recalls living in England; in the excerpt, Jamaica Kincaid describes her experience growing up in Antigua in the Caribbean. Although this combination of poetry and prose has never appeared on the AP Exam – and these two taken together demand far more than 40 minutes to understand and analyze – juxtaposing them offers students an opportunity to engage with the language and explore how similar devices can be used in the hands of a poet and an essayist.

Suggested Essay:

Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the way Eavan Boland and Jamaica Kincaid treat similar experiences of colonialism. You might consider such devices as the map as symbol, knowledge of history, the school as setting, the teacher as imperial agent. Is the speaker’s tone in the two works more similar or different?

In Which the Ancient History I Learn is Not My Own

By Eavan Boland

The linen map
hung from the wall.
The linen was shiny

and cracked in places.
The cracks were darkened by grime.
It was fastened to the classroom wall with
a wooden batten on
a triangle of knotted cotton.

The colours
were faded out
so the red of Empire –
the stain of absolute possession –
the mark once made from Kashmir
to the oast-barns of the Kent
coast south of us was
underwater coral.

Ireland was far away
and farther away
every year.
I was nearly an English child.
I could list the English kings.
I could name the famous battles.
I was learning to recognize
God's grace in history.

And the waters
of the Irish sea,
their shallow weave
and cross-grained blue green
had drained away
to the pale gaze
of a doll's china eyes –
a stare without recognition or memory.

*We have no oracles,
no rocks or olive trees,
no sacred path to the temple
and no priestesses.*
The teacher's voice had a London accent.
This was London. 1952.
It was Ancient History Class.
She put the tip

of the wooden
pointer on the map.
She tapped over ridges and dried-
out rivers and cities buried in

the sea and sea-scapes which
had once been land.

And stopped.

Remember this, children.

*The Roman Empire was
the greatest Empire
ever known –*

*Until our time of course –
while the Delphic Oracle
was reckoned to be
the exact center
of the earth.*

Suddenly

I wanted to stand in front of it.

I wanted to trace over
and over the weave of my own country.

To read out names.

I was close to forgetting.

Wicklow. Kilruddery. Dublin.

To ask

where exactly

was my old house?

Its brass One and Seven.

Its flight of granite steps.

Its lilac tree whose scent

stayed under your fingernails

for days.

For days –

She was saying – even months,

the ancients traveled

to the Oracle.

They brought sheep and killed them.

They brought questions about tillage and war.

They rarely left with more

than an ambiguous answer.

From *In a Time of Violence*, by Eavan Boland. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

The following is an excerpt from the essay “On Seeing England for the First Time” by Caribbean author Jamaica Kincaid. It appeared on the AP Language Exam (Q. 2) in 1991. (Actual AP question follows the passage.)

When I saw England for the first time, I was a child in school sitting at a desk. The England I was looking at was laid out on a map gently, beautifully, delicately, a very special jewel; it lay on a bed of sky blue – the background of the map – its yellow form mysterious, because though it looked like a leg of mutton, it could not really look like anything so familiar as a leg of mutton because it was England – with shadings of pink and green, unlike any shadings of pink and green I had seen before, squiggly veins of red running in every direction. England was a special jewel all right, and only special people got to wear it. The people who got to wear England were English people. They wore it well and they wore it everywhere: in jungles, in deserts, on plains, on top of the highest mountains, on all the oceans, on all the seas, in places where they were not welcome, in places they should not have been. When my teacher had pinned this map up on the blackboard, she said, “This is England” – and she said it with authority, seriousness, and adoration, and we all sat up. It was as if she had said, “This is Jerusalem, the place you will go to when you die but only if you have been good.” We understood then – we were meant to understand then – that England was to be our source of myth and the source from which we got our sense of reality, our sense of what was meaningful, our sense of what was meaningless – and much about our own lives and much about the very idea of us headed that last list.

At the time I was a child sitting at my desk seeing England for the first time, I was already very familiar with the greatness of it. Each morning before I left for school, I ate a breakfast of half a grapefruit, an egg, bread and butter and a slice of cheese, and a cup of cocoa; or half a grapefruit, a bowl of oat porridge, bread and butter and a slice of cheese, and a cup of cocoa. The can of cocoa was often left on the table in front of me. It had written on it the name of the company, the year the company established, and the words “Made in England.” Those words, “Made in England,” were written on the box the oats came in too. They would also have been written on the box the shoes I was wearing came in; a bolt of gray linen cloth lying on the shelf of a store from which my mother had bought three yards to make the uniform that I was wearing had written along its edge those three words. The shoes I wore were made in England; so were my socks and cotton undergarments and the satin ribbons I wore tied at the end of two plaits of my hair. My father, who might have sat next to me at breakfast, was a carpenter and cabinet maker. The shoes he wore to work would have been made in England, as were his khaki shirt and trousers, his underpants and undershirt, his socks and brown felt hat. Felt was not the proper materials from which a hat that was expected to provide shade from the hot sun should be made, but my father must have seen and admired a picture of an Englishman wearing such a hat in England, and this picture that he saw must have been so compelling that it caused him to wear the wrong hat for a hot climate most of his long life. And this hat – a brown felt hat – became so central to his character that it was the first thing he put on in the morning as he stepped out of bed and the last thing he took off before he stepped back into bed at night. As we sat at breakfast a car might go by. The car, a Hillman or a Zephyr, was made in England. The very idea of the meal itself, breakfast, and its substantial quality and quantity was an idea from England; we somehow knew that in England they began the day with this meal called breakfast, and its substantial quality and quantity was an idea from England; we somehow knew that in England they began the day with this meal called breakfast and a proper breakfast was a big breakfast. No one I knew liked eating so much food so early in the day; it made us feel sleepy, tired. But this breakfast business was as Made in England like almost everything else that surrounded us, the exceptions being the sea, the sky, and the air we breathed.

At the time I saw this map – seeing England for the first time – I did not say to myself, “Ah, so that’s what it looks like,” because there was no longing in me to put a shape to those three words that ran through every part of my life, no matter how small; for me to have had such a longing would have meant that I lived in a certain atmosphere, an atmosphere in which those

three words were felt as a burden. But I did not live in such an atmosphere. My father's brown felt hat would develop a hole in its crown, the lining would separate from the hat itself, and six weeks before he thought that he could not be seen wearing it – he was a very vain man – he would order another hat from England. And my mother taught me to eat my food in the English way: the knife in the right hand, the fork in the left, my elbows held still close to my side, the food carefully balanced on my fork and then brought up to my mouth. When I had finally mastered it, I overheard her saying to a friend, “Did you see how nicely she can eat?” But I knew then that I enjoyed my food more when I ate it with my bare hands, and I continued to do so when she wasn't looking. And when my teacher showed us the map, she asked us to study it carefully, because no test we would ever take could be complete without this statement: “Draw a map of England.”

I did not know then that the statement “Draw a map of England” was something far worse than a declaration of war, for in fact a flat-out declaration of war would have put me on alert, and again in fact, there was no need for war – I had long ago been conquered. I did not know then that this statement was part of a process that would result in my erasure, not my physical erasure, but my erasure all the same. I did not know then that this statement was meant to make me feel in awe and small whenever I heard the word “England”: awe at its existence, small because I was not from it. I did not know very much of anything then – certainly not what a blessing it was that I was unable to draw a map of England correctly.

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1991 AP Literature Question 2:

The passage below is from the opening of an essay, “On Seeing England for the First Time,” by Jamaica Kincaid. Kincaid grew up on the Caribbean island of Antigua before it became independent from England in 1981. Read the entire passage carefully. Then write an essay analyzing the rhetorical strategies Kincaid employs to convey her attitude toward England.