

Abstract

Boland creates a narrative poem, "Listen. This is the Noise of Myth," that repudiates all legends that show men to be stronger and the savior of women, and suggests both that there are endless ways to depict any myth.

Defying the Feminist  
Dilemma: Eavan Boland's  
"Listen. This is the Noise Myth"

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Defying the Feminist Dilemma:  
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In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland was not a country renowned for their progressive treatment of women's equality and rights. Critics like Margret Fine-Davis argue that much of the widely accepted sexism in Ireland can be attributed to two main factors: the power of the Catholic Church and the distance, both physical and social, from Europe and the United States. The Catholic church, Fine-Davis remarks had a particularly strong influence in Ireland (more so than almost any other Catholic country) and used that power to maintain stasis and tradition in the country. Fine-Davis explains the change that occurred in Ireland in 1970, in large part, as a result of "Ireland's entrance into the European Community...[and] such factors as [greater] exposure to American and British television, [and] greater opportunities for foreign travel" (288). This social awakening of sorts in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century caused a ripple in the literary, and specifically poetic, tradition in Ireland, as well.

The early poetic tradition in Ireland is inarguably masculine. For centuries, men in Ireland and the world over have dominated the field of poetry. In Ireland, poets wrote about heroic, often mythic, issues that encapsulated the entirety of the Irish experience. However, the Modern Era brought with it female poets who were bridging the gap between male, heroic poetry and a feminine, individualist style. Mostly shunned by the Irish people for their divergent writing styles, feminist poets were forced to join their "new [feminine] experience and an established aesthetic" (Maguire, 59). The result of

this effort is that women must sacrifice much of their own personal experience to adhere more strictly to the accepted Irish poetic model.

In her essays, her poetry, and her speeches and interviews, Eavan Boland fought harshly against this paradigm. She argued that poetic writing has been defined to only include “poetic feelings about poetic experiences” (Maguire, 60), and that this narrowing has served to whittle down successful poetry and exclude poetry verse about the ordinary, domestic arenas of daily life. This theory is quite believable, and also the topic of most of Boland’s poetry. Whether damning women who surrender themselves to the domicile (as far away from political and social issues as possible in Boland’s opinion), or encouraging all womankind to disregard the hundreds of years of sexism that proceeded and adopt the separatist feminism beliefs, Boland conquers these womanly questions with ease and beauty.

In her poem “Listen. This is the Noise of Myth,” Boland narrates a story of the journey of a man and a woman. While it is never explained to the reader what the pair are running from or where they are running to, it seems remarkably unimportant to the meaning of Boland’s poem. In fact, the journey is far more important than the destination. Using plot, tone, imagery and metaphor, Boland creates a narrative poem, “Listen. This is the Noise of Myth,” that repudiates all legends that show men to be stronger and the savior of women, and suggests both that there are endless ways to depict any myth. Women have been slighted, and falsely accused of needing a man to survive. Boland further suggests that myths have a distinctly dark and cold power over their audiences, in that a myth can define an entire culture, casting a shadow over women’s

strength without reason. Boland's poem can be read as renouncing one or many or all myths as dangerous to a society, but "Listen. This is the Noise of Myth" could also be described as the rejection of the myth of femininity as a whole. This, most likely, is Boland's myth. This essay intends to explore and explain the Boland's ultimate intention in "Listen. This is the Noise of Myth" while purporting that Boland's own feminist agenda against the Irish literary tradition led to her writing this poem.

Boland achieves her meaning through a variety of technical tools: foremost, was her use of plot and point of view. These two literary devices were woven together throughout the poem laying forth an incomplete story that is neither integral to the poem nor bothersome to the narrator or the audience. The plot is simple: A man and a woman are running in the dead of winter; "they are fugitives...[they cannot] eat where they had cooked nor sleep where they had eaten." Boland creates an atmosphere of urgency and yet the reader does not know what causes such a secretive rush, but it can be easily surmised that this pursuit has brought the pair closer. Their journey ends. "Light is coming through the ash...[and] something is about to happen." Boland suggests that in this myth, much like all other myths, when the journey ends the woman "leans forward" into the man, submitting to his masculinity and relinquishing her power by having sex with the man, her savior.

The above interaction occurs in the first half of the poem without much interruption from the narrator. However, as soon as the second stanza, the narrator has already alerted the reader to her intention by saying, "[the man and woman are] fictions of my purpose." Boland explains early on that the characters of her narrative poem

function on a much larger scale than merely propagating the storyline. The man and the woman, to Boland, are clearly representative of all gendered society. The woman's submission to having sex with the man is symbolic of the myth of femininity because this woman represents all females. So if, in the end, she is not remembered for keeping pace with the man in their journey through the cold winter, rather remembered for doing her feminine role and making love to the man, then womankind stands no chance of asserting their own power.

It is in the second half of the poem, however, that point of view plays a larger and more integral role in "Listen. This is the Noise of Myth" as it is this sizeable break in narration that steers the reader toward the meaning of the poem. The second half of the poem is almost all conjecture from the narrator. Here, she offers her own interpretation of the preceding myth in presenting the idea that the man and the woman never made love, and that, in fact, the two never embarked on their "winter journey" at all. It was all a lie, a legend, myth. The narrator's interjections allow Boland's ultimate meaning to become effortlessly clear to the reader, but also create an atmosphere in the poem that is conversational and open. By doing this, Boland invites the readers, themselves, to examine the ways that myths are gendered against womankind. Boland's conversational tone also allows her more authority because she is speaking directly to her audience; she is commanding them to "listen," to make of it "what [they] will."

Boland's narrator is certainly a dictator in "Listen. This is the Noise of Myth." The narrator, who is undoubtedly female, creates authority, but is also able to evoke a sympathetic ear from the reader. She divulges in the second stanza of the poem that she

knows that she has complete power over the fate of the characters in her myth, but that she “ought to tell their story...before [she] break[s] their hearts or save[s] their lives.” It is this didactic and yet friendly tone that captivates the reader and allows Boland more freedom in the second half of her poem where she “sets the truth to rights.”

Boland spends the majority of her poem turning her own myth upside down. By keeping her audience guessing as to what exactly occurred between the man and woman, Boland is able to communicate that gender stereotypes have an “infinite” amount of “shifts and fluencies,” and that myth, specifically the myth of femininity, has a cold and shadowy presence over women’s liberation from the domicile. Boland also uses her conversational, didactic tone to suggest in the last stanzas of her poem that this myth could just as easily give “reflections” of the man “becom[ing the woman’s] lover” rather than the reversed notion that Boland gave in the original storytelling. Boland’s idea of fluencies is suggestive of her belief that women could change their ranking in Irish society by just saying that it is so. This is the power of a myth.

Boland’s tone and message in “Listen. This is the Noise of Myth” is a style she has often adopted. This narrative and didactic style of writing, critics like Leslie Ullman agree, allows Boland to “confront painful or numbing [social or historical] conditions [of] which [she has an]...overwhelming awareness” (Ullman, 157). Ullman suggests that Boland constantly attempts “to illuminate what has been left in the shadows,” and “re-see a version of history, a legend, or a work of art, and...restructure memory itself” (Ullman, 163). “Listen. This is the Noise of Myth” does just that. Boland is a woman who constantly struggled with the translucence of women’s roles, especially in Ireland. Her

poem is an example of how her internal struggle for a more influential role in Irish society manifested itself externally.

Besides her effective handling of point of view and tone, Boland's use of imagery masterfully paints her meaning into her poem. Boland employs images that are dark and cold in order to exemplify her idea that myth "makes the same sound as shadow." The scene that the characters are traversing in the myth is described as "cold, cold...[with] lambs under the snow." Boland establishes a scene that is both physically cold and, as she explains later, also emotionally cold for the female character, as her only purpose is to ultimately be sexually conquered by the man. Boland also depicts the forest that the pair is running through as dark and treacherous: "They shunned the densities/of trees with one trunk and of caves/with one dark and the dangerous embrace/of islands with a single landing place." Her description of their journey generates an image of danger, as they could not rest on island or in caves for the fear of what awaited them. Also, her description of the "densities of trees with one trunk" evokes a mental picture in the reader that is dark and drab, as if all of the forest is covered by one singular tree. There is clearly no light surrounding the man and woman during their journey. Boland uses this darkness to her advantage as it metaphorically places the fugitive pair in the dark of society. Because they are surrendering to their socially mandated genders, Boland asserts that they are left in the cold and the dark, outside of enlightenment.

Boland also references a number of plants and birds in "Listen. This is the Noise of Myth" in order to perpetuate the image of a cold and wintry setting where only few plants and vines crawl their way through the ice and the snow. She references "aconite"

and “foxgloves,” which are both flowering plants that can be quite toxic. Each plant is also seasonal as aconite grows in the winter and foxgloves are a primarily spring-grown flower. By using these poisonous, cyclic plants Boland’s meaning is further established. The man and woman are trapped under the shroud of winter as they are traveling, but as soon as the woman does her sexual duty, spring returns and “light is coming through the ash [of dark winter]. Boland’s plants serve to surface and depict the irony of femininity. Boland’s tone and diction suggests that this “light” is “legend, self-depiction, sin.” None of it is believable according to her. Boland maintains that despite what fables have told us about the power of femininity those that surrender themselves to societal mores are destined to be trapped in a “shadow” of society.

Boland’s use of imagery serves her poem well, but it may function on a much higher plain. Based upon a vast sampling of Boland’s more feminist works, the poet’s use of shadowed and cold imagery operates in order to “reflect, both linguistically and thematically, the prescriptive aspects of domestication, a life in exile” (Barr, 33). Though it could be said that Boland’s use of dark imagery is “restrained...[and] understated” (33), that it requires that the reader make a certain leap of faith to understand Boland’s ultimate meaning, the poet’s painterly depiction of a winter journey in “Listen. This is the Noise of Myth” approaches feminism and domestication in Irish society and poetry with the contemplative sincerity that is necessary to be taken seriously by people of both of the sexes.

Boland’s mixture of metaphor and a re-imagination in the last three stanzas of her poem solidify her true meaning of the danger and possibilities of myth. She explains “we

put the old poultices on the old sores, the same mirrors to the old magic.” In Boland’s mind, gendering has wounded women; however, instead of breaking away from the source of their abuse, they continue to nurse their sores with the same old bandages. Similarly, Boland’s mirror metaphor simply means that, to the poet, women are mindlessly repeating history, witnessing the same tricks over and over again, but never attempting to change anything. Boland wants to rewrite this myth, and she does in the last two stanzas of her poem. Here, she places the man and woman back in the forest next to the weir, but this time the woman is in control. She “gives the kiss of myth her human heat” and makes the man and the myth her own. Boland states emphatically that this is no “old romance,” that there are no “glories or ornaments.” In the end, Boland’s poem is simply a call for truth, a call for the destruction of the wall that has been erected between the domicile and the real, man’s world.

“Make no bones about it;” to Boland, Ireland was still very much controlled by the male Bardic tradition. It was her aim in “Listen. This is the Noise of Myth” and many of her other works, to imbue in women “who inherit a constraining national tradition [such as it is in Ireland] to subvert that tradition” (Allen-Randolph, 19). This poem encourages woman, against all odds, to fight against a system that is ostracizing them based on nothing more than their gender. Boland makes advocating this cause a resonant experience for the reader, and in doing so creates a narrative poem that is not lacking in any of the realms of linguistic beauty that the old poetic tradition would demand. Eavan Boland, in “Listen. This is the Noise of Myth,” most successfully bridges the gap between the male-dominated Irish literary tradition and the female-dominated domicile.

### Annotated Works Cited

Allen-Randolph, Jody. "Review: A Passion for the Ordinary." *Women's Review of Books* 9.7 (1992): 19-20. Web. 14 Mar 2010.

"A Passion for the Ordinary" is a review of Boland's Outside History and an explanation of the context surrounding the book. I used this source to help illuminate how Boland's poem connected to her struggle with woman's liberation in Ireland.

Barr, Tina. "Review: [untitled]." *Harvard Book Review* 19.20 (1991): 33. Web. 12 Mar 2010.

This review was far more focused on how Boland painted the scenes and themes into her poem. It discussed her use of imagery and how that affected both her poetry and the reader. I used Barr's review to connect Boland's vast amount of imagery in "Listen" to how she was able to potentially reach both men and women with her poetry, and in turn, change women's roles in Ireland.

Fine-Davis, Margret. "Attitudes toward the Role of Women as Part of a Larger Belief System." *Political Psychology* 10.2 (1989): 287-308. Web. 12 Mar 2010.

Margret Fine-Davis discusses the roles of women in Ireland and how those definitions have seen a radical change since the 1970s. I used Fine-Davis' article to bolster my own claim that the limited societal roles for women in Ireland caused Boland to write how and what she did write. Specifically, I used Fine-Davis' article to add evidence to my introduction in which I discussed the stasis and change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish literary tradition.

Maguire, Sarah. "Attitudes toward the Role of Women as Part of a Larger Belief System." *Feminist Review* 62. (1999): 58-66. Web. 12 Mar 2010.

Maguire discusses how, besides have to be accepted into a male-dominated poetic tradition, women poets must choose where they fall in the spectrum of feminist issues. Like Fine-Davis' article, I used Maguire's essay to reinforce the claims that I made in my introduction. I used her idea that women poets in Ireland were forced to incorporate their own beliefs into the established aesthetic, and showed that this was part of the struggle that can be seen in Boland's poetry.

Ullman, Leslie. "Review: The Heart's Difficult Speech." *Kenyon Review* 17.2 (1995): 157-69. Web. 12 Mar 2010.

Leslie Ullman discusses in her article "The Heart's Difficult Speech" the different ways two authors approached exile and other unfair social conditions in their literature. I used Ullman's article to aid in my discussion of Boland's use of direct and conversational speech in her poem. With the help of Ullman's essay I was able to make the point that by using that tonal style, Boland was able to communicate both her immediate meaning and her internal struggle with the unfair social and political conditions that her poetry more broadly covers.