It's a Woman's World Study Guide

It's a Woman's World by Eavan Boland

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Eavan Boland's "It's a Woman's World" was first published in her poetry collection *Night Feed* (1982). The poem can also be found in *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967—1987* (1996).

Like many poems in *Night Feed*, "It's a Woman's World" focuses on issues of female identity and how the contributions of women have been overlooked in Irish art, myth, and history. Boland also highlights the domestic work and lives of Irish women in the poem, which is another popular theme throughout the collection. In creating the poems in *Night Feed*, Boland drew inspiration from the paintings of Jan Van Eyck and Jean-Baptiste Chardin, which mostly depict still-life and domestic scenes. By focusing attention on the domestic aspect of life, Boland gives the domestic sphere a place of importance in history. By expressing that women have contributed to the wider culture through their domestic work, she also emphasizes the inaccuracy of leaving women off the historical record.

Boland employs rhyme, alliteration, and assonance to enhance the impact of her themes in "It's a Woman's World." She also uses short lines and varying stanza lengths, which break from tradition, reinforcing her theme of reworking old modes of expression to include contributions of women to Irish history and culture.

Author Biography

Eavan Aisling Boland was born September 24, 1944, in Dublin, Ireland. The daughter of Frederick H. Boland, a diplomat, and Frances Kelly, a painter, Boland grew up in Dublin, London, and New York City. In 1966, she graduated with honors from Trinity College in Dublin, where she later was a lecturer in the English department. From the late 1960s through the late 1980s, Boland worked as a cultural journalist, writing reviews for the arts section of the *Irish Times* and other publications. Since the 1980s, Boland has taught at several colleges in the United States and Ireland, including Bowdoin College, Washington University, University College Dublin, and Stanford University. Since 1995, she has been the Bella Mabury and Eloise Mabury Knapp Professor in the Humanities and director of the creative writing program at Stanford.

In 1967, Boland published a collection of poems titled *New Territory*. Boland has since published ten poetry collections, including *The War Horse* (1975), *Night Feed* (1982), *Outside History: Selected Poems, 1980—1990* (1990), *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967—1987* (1996), and *Against Love Poetry: Poems* (2001). "It's a Woman's World" appears in *Night Feed*.

Boland has also published volumes of prose, including *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995) and *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (1989). She coauthored a biography of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, *W. B. Yeats and His World* (1998), and has edited several anthologies, including, with the American poet Mark Strand, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (2000).

Boland has received many distinguished awards, such as the 1994 Lannan Award for poetry, *Poetry* magazine's 2002 Frederick Nims Memorial Prize, and the *Yale Review*'s Smartt Family Prize for *Against Love Poetry*.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—4

In the first stanza of "It's a Woman's World," Boland introduces the idea that women's lives have remained largely unchanged throughout history. Boland's use of a clichéd phrase as the title sets the poem's somewhat bitterly ironic tone. The first word of the poem, "Our," refers to women, as the poem's title indicates that the poem's subject is the female sphere. Her reference to "a wheel" alludes to another clichéd phrase, "since the invention of the wheel," which generally means "since humans started using tools," or "since ages and ages ago." The use of "knife" as the last word also creates a sense of drama and hints at danger or violence to come.

Lines 5—8

In the second stanza, Boland elaborates on the theme she established in the first stanza. She stresses that women's lives have remained unchanged, although technological advances such as more powerful combustion and improved wheels have occurred. In so doing, Boland invokes two of the most significant discoveries in the development of civilization, as both fire and the wheel have been crucial to human progress and industry. "Flame" introduces the symbol of fire, which Boland invokes several times in the poem. Her second use of "wheel" (which appeared in the first stanza) subtly reinforces the sense of the passage of time, as suggested by yet another common phrase, "the wheels of time turning."

Lines 9—17

Boland extends the long sentence begun in the second stanza through the third and fourth stanzas. By providing details from the traditionally female world of domestic labor, she continues to elaborate on the theme of how women's lives have hardly changed. The "loaf" alludes to the daily chore of buying groceries for a family, while the "washing powder" and "wash" refer to the domestic chore of doing laundry.

Using the metaphor of "milestone," which is a marker on a road, Boland expresses that the speaker and other women measure their lives by the "oversights," or tasks they have forgotten to do. Boland suggests that, throughout history, women's work has consisted of a series of preoccupying but unmemorable daily responsibilities centered on food and cleaning. By twice using the word "left" in these stanzas, she emphasizes how forgettable these tasks are. Boland also highlights the economic aspect of the work by mentioning the cash register and the paid-for powder. By including these details, she suggests women have not been paid for their domestic work.

These two stanzas depart from the form established in the first two stanzas. Stanza 3 contains five, not four lines. Instead of end rhyming the first and last lines of each

stanza as she did in stanzas 1 and 2, Boland uses a different pattern of end rhyme. In stanza 3, she rhymes the third and fourth lines. In stanza 4, she supplants end rhyme with internal rhyme (rhyme within the line itself), using "cash" and "wash" in the middle of lines 14 and 17. She also steps up her use of alliteration (repetition of initial consonant sounds) in stanza 3 by repeating the "l" sounds in "lives," "living," "lights," "loaf," and "left," as well as assonance (repetition of similar vowel sounds) in, for example, the "e" sounds of "left" and "wet." Boland's use of internal rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, rather than the end-rhyme pattern she used earlier in the poem, indicates the poem is breaking away from and will not follow any kind of regular, traditional form.

Lines 18—28

In these next three stanzas, Boland drives home her point that women have been defined by domestic tasks that have been neglected by historical record. She first concludes the long sentence started in stanza 2, "like most historic peoples / we are defined / by what we forget // and what we never will be: / star-gazers, / fire-eaters." These lines emphasize the idea that women have been occupied and identified by unmemorable household chores such as cooking and cleaning that keep them from more notable, glamorous activities. "Star-gazers" can be interpreted as a metaphor (a word or phrase used in place of another word or phrase, suggesting a likeness between the two) for intellectuals or artists, while "fire-eaters" can be seen as passionate innovators, performers, or revolutionaries. By using the phrase "like most historic peoples," Boland refers to Irish women but also to Irish people as a whole and to other societies with a history of oppression.

Lines 24—28 express the idea that consignment to domestic duty has kept women out of history as we know it. Her repeated use of the word "never" in this section highlights the idea that this situation has always been the case for women. The exact rhyme of "time" and "crime" serves to emphasize Boland's statement by making it literally sound more emphatic.

Lines 29—34

In these lines, Boland refers to an unspecified ancient crime, in which a king is beheaded. This anecdote illustrates how women have been left out of history, since women have been too busy with cooking and other daily chores to fight wars, kill monarchs, and change the course of history. This violent crime also probably alludes specifically to Irish history and to the fight for Irish nationhood, in which women were not generally allowed to participate as warriors. By invoking this grisly event, Boland acknowledges that women have avoided some of the nastier aspects of history. The tone is ironic and self-mocking, as the phrase "getting the recipe / for a good soup" seems sardonic. The speaker would rather have had the chance to contribute to something other than the family meal.

Lines 35—42

As in stanza 2, Boland states that the role of women has changed very little over time and that the pattern will continue into the next generation. The children to which Boland refers are presumably female, since they are relegated to the domestic sphere symbolized by the hearth rather than the more public sphere of history. The metaphor of the moth for female children is ominous, since moths usually die when they are drawn to flames. Boland uses the symbol of fire in different ways here, with the flame representing both the warmth of home and the passion of history or revolution.

In the next stanza, Boland stresses how the enduring situation of women as working only in the domestic and not the historical arena has incited a righteous anger, which has also been ignored. The speaker expresses a desire for recognition in music or some other art form of this unjust exclusion of women from the public sphere. The exact rhyme of "page" and "outrage" highlights the statement of frustration. The term "low music" conveys that women have been quiet about their dissatisfaction with the situation, but that their outrage is humming just below the surface.

Lines 43—48

In these lines, Boland hints at the idea that women have in fact made contributions to culture and society that have been overlooked. She implies that the artistic or intellectual work of women has been discounted or misinterpreted as ordinary, everyday acts. Boland asserts that women have in fact been the star-gazers referred to in stanza 6 but that, because of the misconception that women do not do creative work, such actions have gone unacknowledged.

Lines 49—53

Boland concludes the poem by citing another example of a woman who may be a force of history. She conveys that the speaker's neighbor, like the star-gazer in the previous stanza, may be a fire-eating revolutionary, but she may not be perceived as such due to misconceptions about what women do. The ending suggests that woman's place in history is changing, in spite of the speaker's previous statements that things have always been the same. Boland again uses fire here to indicate a powerful change from one situation to another, as the neighbor is portrayed in dramatic, powerful terms. The metaphor of the burning plume suggests fire, a feather, and a pen, and these images in turn convey change, flight, and expression. Even if the neighbor is simply returning home to the domestic realm, Boland has already given her□and women in general□a measure of complexity and recognition by portraying woman in fresh ways for the public record.

Themes

History

The poem argues for two things: the recognition of women's contributions to art and history and the greater inclusion of women in public life outside of the domestic sphere. Throughout the poem, the speaker laments that the way of life for women has barely changed since the dawn of history, which she states in the first stanza. Boland emphasizes that women have been too preoccupied with daily household chores such as purchasing bread, doing the wash, and cooking soup to participate in more public events that would qualify for the historical record. Although she also acknowledges in stanza 8 that this relegation of women to the domestic realm has enabled women to avoid some of the grislier aspects of history, she also firmly decries this situation, likening it to being drawn self-destructively like a moth to a flame. In stanza 11, Boland rues the fact that women's history and anger about being left out has been ignored by music and the other arts when she writes, "And still no page / scores the low music / of our outrage."

Feminism

From the ironic title onward, the poem focuses on the exclusion of women from public life and calls for a need to change the situation. The speaker states that while technological advances have abetted society, the lot of woman has stayed largely the same. Using rhyme to emphasize her direct statements, Boland laments the lack of integration of women into public life. In writing this poem and elucidating how women have been left out of history□and specifically Irish history, with its fight for sovereignty from Britain□Boland seeks to set the record straight and give women a place in that record.

Change

Throughout most of the poem, the speaker emphasizes that the work and lives of women have "hardly changed / since a wheel first / whetted a knife." She declares that since the dawn of civilization, women have borne the brunt of domestic duties that have left little room for more glamorous activities such as "star-gazing," which is a metaphor for creative work, or "fire-eating," which is a metaphor for political revolution. The speaker stresses the seeming intractability of the situation, twice repeating the word "never" and stating that the same lot awaits "our [female] children." However, by writing this poem about women's work, Boland shifts away from the old mode of neglecting female contributions to society, by making those actions and frustrations apparent in the poem. In addition, Boland invokes the symbol of fire throughout the poem, which with its transformative properties, represents dramatic and thorough change.

Anger

From the title onward, the poem's tone is angry. The speaker illustrates over and over how women have been consigned to domestic responsibilities and excluded from other events. The knife in the first stanza hints at the anger this unjust situation has engendered, and the sense of anger seems to rise as the poem progresses. In stanza 11, Boland explicitly writes, "And still no page / scores the low music / of our outrage." The exact rhyme of "page" and "outrage" underscore a sentiment of extreme dissatisfaction and frustration. In addition, the word "low" reinforces the self-mocking, angry attitude, alluding to "lowing," or the sound a cow makes. Boland seems to be saying that although women have been quiet about their outrage, the emotion is boiling beneath the surface.

Style

Rhyme

Boland uses full or exact rhyme (rhymes in which the two words have different initial consonants followed by identical stressed vowel sounds) as well as slant or half rhyme (only the final consonant sounds of the two words are similar, but the preceding vowel and consonant sounds are different) to differing effects in the poem. In several sections, she uses exact rhyme to emphasize the statement being expressed, as in the first stanza with "life" and "knife" and in the sixth and seventh stanzas with "time" and "crime." These instances of exact rhyme impart a sense of boldness and closure, which invigorate the statements about the role of women throughout history. Exact rhymes also serve to make the poem cohere as a whole, since Boland repeats rhymes (and, in fact, the same words) across many stanzas, as with the repetition of "same" and "flame" in stanzas 9 and 10. These repetitions give the poem a sense of unity and reinforce the idea that conditions have not changed.

Boland's use of half or slant rhyme undermines this sense of permanence. Boland concludes each of the last two stanzas with the half-rhyming words "plume" and "home." This half rhyme imparts a sense of shifting away from the restriction of exact rhyme, which mirrors the desire to expand the place of women beyond the private, domestic sphere. Whereas an exact rhyme would create a sense of closure, the half rhyme here indicates a slight opening outward.

Boland also uses internal rhyme (rhyme within a line, rather than just at the end of lines) to create a sense of both cohesiveness and subversion. In stanza 4, she internally rhymes "cash" with "washing" and "wash." The internal rhyme in this instance marks a shift away from the structure she established in the first stanzas, which employed end rhyme in the first and fourth lines. By using internal rhyme instead, Boland establishes that the poem will depart from traditional regular form. This change reinforces the theme of how society needs to shift away from the tradition of restricting women to domestic duty.

Assonance and Alliteration

Boland uses assonance (repetition of similar vowel sounds) and alliteration (repetition of similar consonant sounds) to enhance her themes. For example, in stanza 3, she uses alliteration by repeating "l" sounds in "lives," "living," "lights," "loaf," and "left." This repetition of sound reflects the repetitive nature of women's work. The repetitive sound also imparts a kind of lulling effect. Similarly, in stanza 4, the use of assonance with the repetition of "a" sounds in "cash," "washing," "wrapped," and "wash" reinforces a sense of repetitive action.

Symbolism

Boland uses the symbol of fire throughout the poem to express the notion of progress, as well as the steady flame of the home. The discovery of fire by early humans ushered in civilization, as people could cook food, improve tools, and protect themselves at night. Fire is first mentioned in stanza 2, with flame signifying passion, technological progress, or history. In stanza 6, Boland uses the term "fire-eaters" to describe what women "never will be." In this instance, fire again symbolizes something passionate and public and something forbidden to women. She again invokes the symbol in stanza 10, when she contrasts the flame of the hearth, or the symbol of home, with the flame of history, or the symbol of revolution. Again, she uses a symbol to illustrate how women have been excluded from participation in wider culture. At the end of the poem, Boland refers to fire again in describing the neighbor's mouth as a "burning plume" and asserting that "she's no fire-eater / just my frosty neighbour." The contrast between the burning plume and the frozen breath of the neighbor makes the ending ambiguous, as it is unclear whether the neighbor experiences the transformative power of fire or the stasis of ice.

Historical Context

During the early 1980s, when the poem was written, the feminist movement was beginning to take hold in Ireland. Irish feminists seeking equal rights and opportunities for women gleaned insights from the gains of the feminist revolution that took place in the United States during the 1970s, as well as the gains of civil rights movements in the United States, Ireland, and elsewhere. Writers such as Boland also drew inspiration from feminist poetic predecessors, such as the American poet Adrienne Rich. In prose and poetry, Irish women writers such as Boland, Medbh McGuckian, Nuala ni Dhomhnaill, and Eilean ni Chuilleanain pioneered writing that explicitly addressed women's concerns and the fight for women's rights in the face of the then mostly male-dominated body of Irish literature. These writers also sought a place for women and women's concerns within the fight for Irish identity and nationhood, which had taken place over centuries to combat colonization by Great Britain.

Critical Overview

The collection in which "It's a Woman's World" appears, *Night Feed*, stirred some controversy upon its publication in 1982. Along with Boland's *In Her Own Image*, *Night Feed* marked a departure from her first collection by focusing on the role of women in Irish literature and society. Some early critics dismissed Boland's poetry as "woman's writing," or unimportant in subject matter, while other critics lauded Boland's woman-centered, feminist perspective, as well as her technical agility.

Many of the poems in *Night Feed* were republished in Boland's collection *Outside History*, along with poems from her 1983 collection *The Journey* and newer poems. With *Outside History*, Boland gained wide recognition in the United States for her poetry, which bolstered her reputation in Ireland. Published in 1990, *Outside History* was praised for its craft and its ennoblement of previously overlooked subjects. Writing in the *Women's Review of Books*, Jody Allen-Randolph notes, "By taking as her subject the routine day that most women in Ireland live (caring for children, washing, cooking and sewing), Boland renews the dignity of demeaned labor and establishes a precedent for its inclusion in Irish poetry."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hong earned her master of fine arts in creative writing at the University of Texas Michener Center for Writers and is a writer-in-residence at Richard Hugo House. In the following essay, Hong discusses Boland's use of alliteration, assonance, and rhyme to reinforce her ideas about the role of women in history.

Boland's poem "It's a Woman's World" argues for the greater inclusion of women in public life outside of the domestic sphere and for the recognition of women's contributions to history and art. From the poem's ironic title onward, the poem focuses on how women have been consigned to household duties, which have kept them from participating in activities that are more widely recognized, such as political activism. As a feminist, Boland argues that this exclusion of women from the larger culture needs to change, and she expresses her outrage over the situation, using rhyme and other techniques to emphasize her points.

From the poem's first stanza, Boland emphasizes that the work and lives of women have "hardly changed / since a wheel first / whetted a knife." These lines set up a major theme of the poem, which is that from the dawn of civilization women have been restricted to domestic duties that have left little time for more glamorous activities that would garner public recognition. Boland elaborates on this idea in the following nine stanzas, citing examples of how women have been consumed by household chores, in spite of the technological advances that have occurred over the centuries. The speaker declares that women have measured or "milestoned" their lives with unseen markers: the forgotten loaf of bread or packet of detergent, or the wet untended laundry.

By noting how easily these tasks are forgotten, Boland highlights how unmemorable such daily chores are and implies that women are so preoccupied with a constant stream of responsibilities that they are overworked and apt to forget one thing or another. By using alliteration and assonance, Boland reinforces the sense of how repetitive women's domestic work is. In stanza 3, for example, she invokes a series of "l" sounds in "lives," "living," "lights," "loaf," and "left," which create a repetitious, lulling effect that mirrors the unremarkable nature of daily tasks. In stanzas 3 and 4, she also repeats vowel sounds with the "i" sounds of "milestone," "lives," "oversights," and "lights," and with the "a" sounds of "cash," "washing," "wash," and "wrapped." All these repetitions of sound enhance the feeling of deadening sameness that Boland declares has been the lot of women throughout time.

In the next three stanzas, Boland extends her ideas about women's roles by writing, "like most historic peoples / we are defined / by what we forget // and what we will never be: / star-gazers, / fire-eaters. / It's our alibi / for all time: // as far as history goes / we were never / on the scene of the crime." In these lines, Boland expresses the idea that rather than being defined by what they do, women are identified by what they cannot be, with star-gazers standing in as a metaphor for intellectuals or artists and fire-eaters representing passionate people of action. The speaker explicitly asserts that being

consigned to the domestic sphere has functioned as an excuse or "alibi" for women's non-participation in history.

By using the phrase, "like most historic peoples," Boland also draws parallels between women's experiences and those of other oppressed or disenfranchised groups, including the Irish, who fought against colonization by the British for centuries. This comparison, however, is not uncomplicated, as Boland's phrase also points to the fact that Irish women were left out of the political battles for Irish nationhood and that during the twentieth century the Irish government actively restricted the roles women could play in society. As Christy Burns notes in her essay "Beautiful Labors: Lyricism and Feminist Revisions in Eavan Boland's Poetry":

Women [in 1920s Ireland] were ushered back into the domestic realm with the help of both legal and rhetorical gestures. Most significantly for Boland's concerns, the government's equation of womanhood with marriage rhetorically marked a stark separation between the 'home' that was the political and geographic space of Irish politics and the 'home' that was to be the realm of women.

For Irish women, the phenomenon Boland describes of being limited to the domestic realm was a reality enforced by Irish society at large. Boland's description of women as "historic people" ironically alludes to the omission of women from other Irish struggles.

Throughout the poem, the speaker expresses anger and frustration over the relegation of women to the margins of history. In stanzas 8 and 9, Boland acknowledges that the restriction of women to the home has enabled them to avoid some of the nastier aspects of history, as she writes, "When the king's head / gored its basket, / grim harvest, / we were gristing bread // or getting the recipe / for a good soup." The tone is bitterly ironic. The juxtaposition of the gored head with the "good soup" is grisly and self-mocking. In addition, Boland's use of sardonic alliteration with the repeated "g" and "gr" sounds in "gored," "grim," "gristing," "getting," and "good" heightens the sense of anger and self-recrimination.

The sense of outrage over women's limited roles in society peaks in the following lines, as the speaker states, "It's still the same: // our windows / moth our children / to the flame / of hearth not history." These lines emphasize the idea that the role of women has remained unchanged and that there is little hope for future generations, as our presumably female children will be drawn inevitably to the realm of the hearth, which symbolizes the home. By using the metaphor of the moth's attraction to the flame, Boland reinforces the idea that the domestic path is seductive but deadly, as moths generally die when they are drawn toward flames.

Boland further notes that part of the problem is that women's anger over their limited roles in history has gone unnoticed. In stanza 11, she asserts that "still no page / scores the low music / of our outrage." The "page" represents the public record of both history and art, which has excluded the contributions of women and women artists. With these lines, Boland calls attention to the omission of women from the arts, as their "low music"

has been completely unrecognized. In an interview with Marilyn Reizbaum in *Contemporary Literature*, Boland states:

As an Irish woman poet I have very little precedent. There were none in the nineteenth century or early part of the twentieth century. You didn't have a thriving sense of the witness of the lived life of women poets, and what you did have was a very compelling and at times oppressive relationship between Irish poetry and the national tradition.

Boland's poem subtly suggests that the lack of women in the arts□especially in the traditionally male-dominated world of Irish poetry□has led to a persistent misinterpretation of women's actions and a lack of recognition of women's real contributions to both history and culture. In stanzas 12 and 13, the speaker states, "Appearances reassure: / that woman there, / craned to / the starry mystery, // is merely getting a breath / of evening air." The woman in these lines is a star-gazer, engaging in creative or intellectual pursuits that have traditionally been forbidden to women. However, Boland implies that due to the misperception that women cannot be artists, this woman is mistakenly seen as someone merely going about her day. In these lines, Boland argues that women have, in fact, been active participants in public life, but that those actions have been dismissed as inconsequential.

Boland concludes the poem by elaborating on how pernicious and misleading the idea of women as homemakers and only homemakers can be. The last lines are ambiguous as one cannot be sure whether it is just the speaker's wishful thinking that makes the neighbor seem like a revolutionary fire-eater or if the neighbor is, in fact, a fire-eater in unassuming guise. In either case, however, Boland presents the thrilling possibility that with this woman and others, there is much more than has traditionally met the eye. The vivid image of the neighbor's mouth as a burning plume simultaneously signifies a feather, a pen (as in the phrase "plumed pen"), and a flame, and these elements in turn connote freedom, expression, and change. While other people might automatically conclude that the woman is simply going home to fulfill expected domestic duties and roles, the poet-speaker sees□and wants to see□something more exciting going on.

The poem argues powerfully for both the need for change and for change's imminent possibility, with the poet herself amending the situation she has described. Although Boland's rhetoric may seem pessimistic with her insistence that things have not changed for women throughout history, her words belie the fact that in this very poem, transformation has occurred. Unlike her poetic predecessors, Boland focuses attention on the daily lives of women, giving their contributions a place of importance in the public record. Even as she claims that "no page / scores the low music / of our outrage," she herself is setting the record straight by naming both the exclusion of women from the public sphere and women's anger, and by asserting that women have and are shaping the world in ways that may remain unnoticed. Boland uses her role as a poet to recognize a previously overlooked past and present. As Shara McCallum puts it in her *Antioch Review* essay: "If history, as Boland recognizes, is often a site of forgetting, then retelling myths, legends, and other culturally shared stories in poetry becomes an act of recovery."

In "It's a Woman's World," Boland recovers women's history by making women's hidden concerns, actions, and work apparent. She also uses her technical agility to enhance her ideas. As mentioned, Boland frequently uses assonance and alliteration to heighten the effects of her words, repeating vowel and consonant sounds in various ways. In addition, Boland uses rhyme throughout the poem to bolster her meanings. In several instances she uses exact end rhyme to emphasize her points, as in "life" and "knife" in the first stanza, and "time" and "crime" in stanzas 6 and 7. The rhymes in these cases call extra attention to her statements about the role of women in history. The exact rhymes and repetitions throughout the poem, such as the repetitions of "same" and "flame" in stanzas 9 and 10, also serve to give the poem a sense of unity and to reinforce the idea that conditions have not changed.

However, Boland's use of slant rhyme undermines this sense of permanence or of enduring injustice, as she concludes the poem with the word "home," which half rhymes with "plume" in the previous stanza. Each of these words echoes the earlier exact rhymes of "flame/same" and "time/crime"□but these concluding words only half rhyme with these previous pairings, in addition to only half rhyming with each other. The excessively half-rhyming concluding words shift away from the established pattern of the previous stanzas, recalling the earlier sounds but changing them significantly, with the "u" and the "o" replacing the old "a" and "i" sounds. This shifting of vowel sounds out of the restrictive groove of exact rhyme mirrors the desire Boland expresses throughout the poem to revolutionize women's roles and to expand their opportunities beyond the old limitations of hearth and home. Whereas an exact rhyme at the end of the poem would have imparted a sense of tightness and affirmation of the old rules, the half rhyme here suggests an opening outward, a shifting away from the old paradigms, with the home resounding the burning plume of fiery and eloquent transformation.

Source: Anna Maria Hong, Critical Essay on "It's a Woman's World," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

While creating the poems in *Night Feed*, Boland looked to the paintings of Jean-Baptiste Chardin and Jan van Eyck for inspiration. Find a painting by one of these visual artists, and write your own poem, story, or play based on the painting.

Research the history of an occupation that is thought of as traditionally female, such as nursing, quilting, or cooking. Trace the development of the occupation, and prepare a presentation on how the job has changed in recent years. You may want to compare the occupation to its traditional male counterpart, such as doctor, tailor, or chef.

Stanza 8 of Boland's poem alludes to a historical beheading of an unnamed king. Research the story of Judith and Holofernes, and then find versions of the story in literature and painting and present a comparison of some of these depictions of the tale. Discuss how the details of the story vary in different versions.

Research the history of the feminist movement in late twentieth-century Ireland. Create a time line of events. Then give an oral report discussing the major issues feminists sought to address, the groups involved, and what effects the movement has had on politics and culture in Ireland.

Boland invokes the image of fire several times in the poem. Research how the discovery of fire has impacted human civilization. Also find out about the contributions of French chemist Antoine Lavoisier to our understanding of how fire works. Then create a comic strip or play based on your findings.

Research the history of the wheel. Prepare and deliver a demonstration showing how the wheel developed and how the wheel works. Use drawings, photographs, and diagrams to support your presentation.

What Do I Read Next?

Boland's collection *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967—1987* (1996) contains her five early volumes of poetry, including *Night Feed*.

Boland's poetry collection *Against Love Poetry: Poems* (2001) features poems about the contradictions of daily love and the necessity of women's freedom.

In *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995), Boland blends autobiography with polemic to elucidate her ideas about the roles of women in Ireland and of women poets in the traditionally male-dominated Irish literary world.

The anthology *Stories by Contemporary Irish Women* (1990) features fiction by Mary Lavin, Edna O'Brien, Julia O'Faolain, and others.

Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose (1993) contains the American feminist poet's poems, prose, and criticism on her work.

The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (1903) contains poems by this prominent Irish poet who influenced Boland's writing.

Selected Poems 1966—1987 (1990) comprises poems by Boland's colleague, the Nobel laureate and Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

The Irish Women's History Reader (2000) contains essays about different aspects of the lives of Irish women since 1800.

The American poet Rita Dove's collection *Selected Poems* (1994) features poems by this Pulitzer Prize—winning, former U.S. poet laureate.

Further Study

Haberstroh, Patricia Boyle, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets*, Syracuse University Press, 1996.

In this book, Haberstroh analyzes the work of five Irish women poets, including Boland.

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