Novelty Journals

ISSN 2394-9694

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences
Vol. 6, Issue 4, pp: (41-46), Month: July - August 2019, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Myths of the Underworld in the Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Study of Two Underworld Poems by Eavan Boland

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Abstract: **This study sheds light on the uses of the underworld myths in Eavan Boland's poetry, in addition to their creative and realistic uses. When people refer to an unpleasant situation or experience, they unconsciously describe it as "Underworld" also as "Hell" which has become a popular figure of speech these days. The conception of Underworld usually indicates an underground place of eternal punishment or suffering where escape is impossible. In many of her poems, the Irish poet Eavan Boland uses the Greek and the Roman myth of Ceres and Persephone. Also, the myth of the voyages to the Underworld by Aeneas to encounter his father and other myths. In her mythmaking or revising old myths, Boland subverts and revises the emblematic image of women in myths, trying to empower women and writing an imaginary version of woman's silenced history. In this study, two selected poems by Eavan Boland have been analyzed showing how Boland artistically and expressively used the myths of the Underworld in her poetry to revise the ancient image of women in male-dominated myths.**

Keywords: **Aeneas, Ceres, Emblematic image, Evan Boland, Hell, Myth, Persephone, Punishment, Underworld.**

I. INTRODUCTION

In his essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," (1923) , T.S. Eliot esteems James Joyce for using myth in his masterpiece Ulysses and clarifies why using what he called "the mythical method" was integral for his time writers: "It was simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." For hundreds of years, the myths of the Underworld have inspired many writers and poets and the Underworld have been a charming place to many Irish women poets as Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian, Eavan Boland and others to explore many human concerns as self, society, life, the cosmos, the divine, death, and the afterlife. Undeniably, the stories of the Underworld are the oldest and most often retold stories in western literature.

Eavan Boland's poetry often contains images and symbols of transition as the Underworld. Boland's personal experience as an Irish woman poet had a significant influence on her use of the notion of transition repeatedly in her poetry. As a child, Eavan Boland endured the journey from Ireland to England. As a mature and married woman, she left the urban Dublin to live in the suburban Dundrum, and once she became a mother, she also became aware of the intergenerational transition and her new role that aging indicates. Thus these experiences have influenced Boland's poetry. A reader of Boland's poems would observe Boland's use of images and symbols of transition in her poetry as the Underworld.

Many ancient well-known myths have persisted in inspiring many contemporary writers and poets as the story of Persephone, the gorgeous daughter of Demeter, Persephone was kidnaped and taken to the Underworld. To make her stay with him forever, the god of the Underworld let her eat a few seeds of the underworld fruit, the pomegranate, and whoever ate even a few seeds of this fruit, he would love living in the Underworld. Consequently, Persephone became

Underworld's god's bride. As well, the voyages to the Underworld by Aeneas to meet his father and the fascinating myth of Orpheus's descent in the quest for his beloved Eurydice. Many other mythological stories also have influenced the twentieth-century writers and poets alike.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A myth is an ancient story most connected with something made up and not real. Myths are supernatural tales of gods and heroes; they have usually been stories of pagan religions. The tales Zeus and Hera, Perseus, Odysseus, and Theseus, are mythic tales. The myths of specific cultures are called "Mythologies." The study of myths and mythologies is also called "mythology." The English word "myth" is derived from the Greek word mythos, which means word or story. Historically, myths have been used by people to clarify the ambiguities of the universe. According to Campbell, in the underworld myths, the protagonist's journey is preceded by a "call to initiation" and parting from family and home atmosphere. Descending into the Underworld is the traveling into the depths of the earth or the depths of oneself. It is a time of loneliness and uncertainty, grief and risk, torment, terror, estrangement. Thus, do the mythic characters of Gilgamesh, Cybele, Ulysses, and Aeneas pass through the doors of the Underworld; thus does Dante go through the freezing circles of hell in *The Inferno*.

In the great ancient myths and epics, traveling to the Underworld indicated a journey to the dominion of the dead or the gods. This world with its natural features and scenery copied our world, with deserts, huge rocks, large plants, burning ponds, swamps, and mire, in this world time may be suspended, a 24-hour voyage may seem like a lifetime, as it has happened to Dante. In this ghostly underground kingdom, the hero endures trials and experiments and may be arrested, captivated, or imprisoned. During this travel, the protagonist meets followers and rivals, loses property, or gets a present or find pearls.

III. METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

- Collecting the data about:

a. The use of myths in modern poetry.

b. Some of Eavan Boland's poems.

- Selecting the data about:

a. The use of Underworld's myths in Eavan Boland's poetry.

b. Two of Eavan Boland's Poems which are integrated with the underworld myths.

Data Analysis

The paper procedure is describing, analyzing and interpreting the data selected:

a - Describing how mythical stories of the Underworld are used in two of Eavan Boland's poems to discuss contemporary women issues and experiences.

b- Analyzing the lines in which the mythical stories are used.

c - Interpreting the mythical symbolism figures used in the selected poems.

IV. BODY OF ARTICLE

Transition in Eavan Boland's Poetry

Eavan Boland occupies a controversial place among other Irish poets. She openly criticizes the male-dominated literary tradition which portrays women as "passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status" (OL 134), Boland has repeatedly been accused of merely duplicating these mythical emblems (Craps 166).[1] When Boland was a child, she has been influenced by bodily and emotional banishment, and this can be observed by Boland's use of imageries of transition in her

[1] Stef Craps (2009) further refers to the responses by Longley (1994), Meaney (1993) and Wills (1991).

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ISSN 2394-9694

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poetry as using the image of the Underworld in many of her poems. When she was only six, she moved from Dublin to London. At school in London, she has been criticized by a teacher because of her noticeable Irish Accent, and this was a sort of discrimination against her, this made Boland feel like an outsider in an alien environment. The transition occurred by the journey between Boland's motherland and England inspired her to write "An Irish Childhood in England: 1951" (Boland 1990: 107). When Boland got married, she moved from the capital city of Dublin to the suburb of Dundrum. This shift was another flash of transition in her life, causing a significant influence on her intellectualizing of poetry. Boland switched from the male-dominated tradition to the search of a new voice which harmonizes with her new reality. Boland observed that there was "a powerful tradition ... of the male poet. Irish poetry was male and bardic in ethos. Historically the woman is the passive object of poetry. We aren't supposed to write poems; we are supposed to be in them" (Battersby 1998: 3).

Another flash of transition in Eavan Boland's life occurred when she became a mother. Being a poet and a mother at the same time has been a challenging matter that influenced the poetry of many poets such as Anne Sexton, Elisabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath. Also, Boland's aging contributed to the element of transition in her poetry. Also, Boland experienced a period of transition from being a daughter to becoming a mother, and from a mother to daughter again. To represent this swap in roles, Boland uses the myth of Ceres and Persephone in her poetry. Boland wrote several poems in which she referred to the Great Famine implicitly or explicitly. In these poems, Boland sheds light on the voiceless Irish women during the famine and criticizes the Irish male poets' treatment of women in a reductive way. Almost one million people died during this mass starvation in Ireland in the 1840s, and millions more had to leave Ireland and start a better life away. This dreadful event was a powerful example of what is called a "hell on earth." In her famine poems, Boland is more concerned with the many domestic consequences than the factual account of this traumatic calamity, and she focuses on the female victims, who have always been outcasts in Irish tradition.

The Poem *Journey*

In her poem "The journey" Boland goes back in time on a trip she made where Irish women suffered from awful conditions in their local workhouse [2]. Attempting to rejoin these deprived women, Boland regards this place as her own private "Underworld" (OL 174). In this poem, Boland revises the old male descent trip to connect the past with the present and the tradition with a particular aptitude. In this poem, Boland contrasts the stylistic and formal language used in Aeneas' great Underworld journey, with the daily language used by the speaker's own domestic experience. The downward movement is repeatedly suggested: "down down down […] the way of stairs winding down to a river" (ll. 33–36). The Underworld world that they reach resembles the speaker's rural environment. Attempting to revisit the terrible grief and suffering, Boland connected tradition and modernization.

In this poem, Boland is not concerned with the protagonist's journeys. Instead, she takes a marginal part, portraying the sad parting of mother and baby by an early death. This poem's epigram is a quotation from the Book VI of the Aeneid (Thurston 2009, 96)[3]in which Virgil depicts the babies seen by Aeneas at the gate of hell. Those babies had been "torn from their mothers' breasts" and died before their time. This 96-line poem (24 quatrains) begins with the comment that there has never been a poem written on the "real thing" as the antibiotic. Instead, poets waste their time on "emblems." At the beginning of the poem, the speaker blames the traditional poets for wasting their lines on "the obvious / emblem" (ll. 8–9). Instead, her poem addresses "the real thing, a mother's dreadful grief at the illness of her child, who "startled in a dream" (l. 19). The "antibiotic" (l. 2) might at least have healing effects. The poet attaches her fears over her child's sickness with her image of these other mothers regretting their children's deaths. Thus, Boland opposes the domestic and personal with the poetic tradition.

When the speaker finds herself in a dreamy mental state ("not sleep, but nearly sleep," l. 25), Sappho, the emblematic woman who functions as a guide, appears suddenly to the speaker and leads her and the reader down into hell, a journey to the past, down into the darkest corners of traumatic memory. The repetition of "down down down" (l. 33) arouses a

[2] Throughout the years Boland differentiates between history and the past – ―how one was official and articulate, and the other was silent and fugitive‖ (Allen-Randolph 2007, 131–132). This opposition is analogous to the earlier distinction between myth and history, respectively. Boland is especially drawn to the latter – almost Underworldly – the place of whispers, shadows, and vanishings.

[3] In A False Spring, Boland looks back on her younger self during college years, when she was "studying / Aeneas in the Underworld" (ll. 10–11). Her traditional schooling explains her affiliation with mythology and the chosen setting of the Underworld

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sense of displacement, signifying how a shocking experience is emblematic and wordless ("the way of stairs winding down to a river" (l. 36)). For Boland, this journey goes downwards into the Underworld as well as backward into time. Boland's subversive plan is the change to a female viewpoint: a suburban mother replaces the male hero. Furthermore, the concentration is no longer on the protagonist's adventures but the miseries of previous generations of mothers and their infants. Therefore, Boland portrays the Underworld as "an oppressive suburb of the dawn" (l. 44). The "duality to place" (OL 154) is pictured in the poem. First, a detailed description of the speaker's domestic, suburban surroundings is displayed: an untidy room, scattered clothes, books, and unfinished drinks. Then the setting is shifted to an infernal and mythical setting.

During the decent journey, the speaker goes through two different phases, and she experiences a sense of fear at the sight of these "terrible pietàs" (l. 56). However, Sappho instantly warns her to be "careful" (l. 57) in her decision on these disturbed women that they are like the speaker in various ways ("like you;" l. 65) frightened of the illness of her child, the speaker ultimately expresses sympathy for these ghostly mother figures from the past. She is powerless "to reach or speak to them" (l. 73). Sappho draws attention to the marginal facts: the starving mothers who are marginalized by Irish history. Although her guiding tour is informative, the speaker does not understand anything ("nothing was changed; nothing was more clear," l. 93). The emblematic guide in the poem, Sappho does not only work as a guide; she also has in a maternal role, treating the speaker as her "own daughter" (l. 85). About this mother-daughter relationship, Sheila C. Conboy comments "Boland addresses the woman writer's problem of matrilineage by exposing within the typically masculine heroic structure the poet speaker's wish fulfillment in having Sappho as her mother and guide" (70). Hence, the poem is also a celebration of the "poetic bond" between the poet-speaker and her guide (Conboy 69). Although Sappho reminds the speaker that this poor vision is beyond poetry, it is definitely "not beyond love" (ll. 80). Sappho does not want her adopted "daughter" to forget the suffering of their foremothers, whose voices can only be saved in memory: I have brought you here, so you will know forever /the silences in which our beginnings are/in which we have an origin like water. (ll. 86–88).

In the last stanza of "The Journey," the poet gets up to discover that "nothing has changed" (l. 93): her desire to know is unsatisfied, her quest remains unanswered. This absence of termination shows the unbridgeable distance between the past and present. As Michael Thurston comments: "Sappho […] shows Boland that poetry is limited in its capacity to respond to many generations of maternal and familial suffering, but that poetry must act within those limits (2009, 98). The foremothers' can be reached only by making their shadows visible and silences audible. Stef Craps conforms that poetry duty "is not to break these silences by filling them up with words, but to preserve, honor, and respect them by listening to them and making them audible as silences" (171). In "The Journey," Boland uses the male literary theme of descending to the Underworld, but she switches the concentration to the female experience. Boland's journey to the Underworld is different from katabasis[4]Boland's descent to the Underworld expresses sympathy with the foremothers' agony; in this poem, Boland presents Sappho as the female version of the Dantesque Virgil. [5] Although the poet identifies that words are often insufficient to describe the horror of this experience, the poem succeeds in expressing what is beyond expression. While this grief is awful, yet, it can be recalled "in the practices of love's archaeology '(l. 69).

The Poem *Pomegranate*

The theme of the poem "The Pomegranate" is mother love, in this poem Boland describes her mother-daughter relationship by making use of the ancient myth of Ceres and Persephone to express the everyday experience of motherhood. She joins her personal life with "the only legend [she has] ever loved" (l. 1), that of "a daughter lost in hell" (l. 2) and a mother's effort to save her. This myth is particularly apt because it can be entered from two different views, as Boland writes in allusion to this myth: "I can enter it anywhere" (l. 7). First, the speaker sympathizes with Persephone, an "exiled child" (l. 11) in London's "underworld" (l. 12) of "fogs and strange consonants" (l. 9). These lines allude to Boland's lonely childhood experience in London, which resembles Persephone's imprisonment in the Underworld. "Later" (l. 12), Boland sees through the eyes of Ceres, "searching for [her] daughter at bed-time" (l.14).

[4] The descending into, or "katabasis" in Greek, involves journeying into the deeps of the earth or the depths of oneself. It is a time of solitude, doubt, grieve, danger, anguish, fear, and alienation, often estrangement from what people hold most dear.
[5]Dante's account is heavily derived from Book VI of Virgil's The Aeneid, written over 1400 years ago, describes Aeneas's journey into the Underworld. Boland and Dante share the views of life after death in their works, considering the massive changes the society had gone through during the interim.

In the second part of the poem, after the visual pause mirroring the variation in seasons, Boland ponders on her anxiety at the "coming loss" (OL 168). Her daughter's growth to adulthood worries her a lot. As the title shows, the main symbol in this poem is the pomegranate, which acts as a symbol of change, an emblem of the daughter's sexual development. The speaker's daughter has now become a teenager, standing on the verge of adulthood. In his book *The poetry of Eavan Boland: a postcolonial reading (2008)*, Pilar Villar-Argáiz identifies how the eating of the historic fatal fruit was essential for the poet to become matured: "By viewing her childhood exile as a journey into the Underworld, Boland believes that this painful experience in her life has provided her with the potential for growth, insight and Transformation" (154–155). Rachel Falconer's argues that every descent involves a transformation or rebirth of a new self (4). Villar-Argáiz comments that it is undoubtedly in the Underworld that "Persephone is transformed from an innocent and virginal child into an autonomous and compelling figure with new power and status" (154). This poem shows the "duality to place" (OL 154) that we confronted in "The Journey." The speaker displays a clear difference between the Underworld, "the place of death, / at the heart of legend" (l. 37–38), and the real suburb, which "has cars and cable television" (l. 44) and which factually shows "another world" (l. 46).

Although these two worlds are different, they seem to have more in common. In Boland's prose work, *A Journey with Two Maps*, she remarks that "the underworld is with us all the time" (97). Thus, the suburban setting is the mythological Underworld. The speaker's child is just like Persephone; she "can be / hungry" (ll. 41–42). In their book, *Eavan Boland and the History of the Ordinary (2004)* Hagen and Zelman explain these verses as a "hunger for experience, for that which lies apart from the comfort of the home and the close parent-child bond" (110). In this poem, the personified version of Ceres admits that the "beautiful rifts in time" (l.48) are the only gift a mother can offer her daughter. The motionless images of the unchanging landscape are substituted by lively seasonal imagery. As summer reaches its end, the speaker knows that winter is "inescapable" (l. 22), that time of year when Ceres has to let her daughter go to her husband Hades in the Underworld. The poet here emphasizes the importance of "human dimension [of] time‖ (OL 153). Winter does not only represent darkness and infertility, more significantly, but it is also a preface to motherly loss.

At the end of the poem, the mother gets an internal struggle. She wonders if she should "warn" (l. 42) her hungry child not to eat the pomegranate, for "there is still a chance" (l. 42) to rescue her. However, at the same moment, she comprehends that she can only watch helplessly. The story will be repeated, "the legend will be hers as well as mine," but the mother "will say nothing" (l. 54). At last, she allows her daughter to live her own life. Andrew Auge comments that Boland's revision "culminates not in a return or restoration of the lost daughter, but in the mother's recognition of the daughter's inevitable loss" (125). Hagen and Zelman (4) conclude that the Ceres myth is central to "Boland's value system; it is instructive to her, reminding us that loss accentuates value as darkness frames light." In this poem, the mother could not stop the threats of growing up, and eventually, she accepts the loss as a result of her maternal love. The mother knows that she has to allow her daughter's growth.

V. CONCLUSION

Eavan Boland's poetry generally contains images representing transition . In her poems, she often uses experiences of alteration and evolution. Boland's personal life has affected her poetry. Thus the notion of transiting permeates her poems. Eavan Boland revises the male-dominated myths of the Underworld to get a separate female poetic voice. The theme of the Underworld journey allows Boland to check her relationship with women of the past and present generations. In the two poems discussed in this paper, Boland challenges the untruthful myth of femininity, mainly through the eyes of Ceres, whom she portrays as an energetic and lively mother. Boland chooses the myth of Ceres and Persephone in many of her poems as the Underworld in this myth has powerful female implications. Despite Boland's use of prevailing images, mythology is insufficient to reach the authentic experience. In her poetry, myth is revised to breathe life into the silenced Irish women who have been marginalized by the male-dominated literary tradition. Boland produces new, Irish human myths, which form exciting themes to converse with the future.

Boland has arisen as one of the most critical feminine voices in Irish poetry. Many critics have criticized Boland's revising of women's role in Irish mythology and history. By reexamining these myths and history, Boland has succeeded in recovering herself as an Irish woman and poet. Boland's poetic improvement mirrors the political and cultural changes in Ireland over the last few decades. In her poems, Boland explored some controversial themes like self-esteem, child abuse, eating disorders, and violence against women. Many other critics admire her esthetical Awareness, emotional words, the

powerful sense of lyrical ethics, and her use of the real to expose buried stories in Irish history. A few critics criticized her authoritarian feminist analysis of her poems, asserting that this diminishes her contribution to modern poetry, and others accused her of mythologizing the domestic and suburban life.

In conclusion, Eavan Boland's poetry is brilliantly exceptional and delightful to read. Boland uses dominant themes, settings, and symbolism to develop and add profundity to her poetry. She is a very brilliant poet and deserves all appreciation, and her rewriting of the hellish journey is a way to connect past with the present. Traveling to the Underworld produces an appropriate structure for apprehending and understanding a shocking Irish past by joining its apparent fragments to bad experiences in Boland's private life, creating exceedingly subjective poetry, which is written in a cautious style and repeatedly inquires itself. Her lyrical themes harmonize someplace on "the edge of a dream" (OL 172), the place where Boland finds herself as a poet.

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