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Think Piece: Object Lessons

Eavan Boland starts her book *Object Lessons* off with a story about her grandmother. At first, the introduction seems to be a simple anecdote to introduce the narrator's life by starting at what she may deem as an important beginning. However, the story of her grandmother was more than that. It became the premise of the point she would make throughout her novel, which is that women have been left out of Irish poetry.

In the Preface, Boland writes that "There were times when I sat down at that table, or came up the stairs, my key in hand, to open the door well after midnight, when I missed something," and she goes on to say, "I wanted a story. I wanted to read or hear the narrative of someone else - a woman and a poet - who had gone here, and been there" (xvi). Boland explores in her book this missing voice and history. She shows the reader how the woman is left out of the narrative of Irish poetry. Actually, she clarifies, the *real* woman is left out of Irish poetry. The woman who "had lifted a kettle to a gas stove. Who had set her skirt out over a chair, near to the clothes dryer, to have it without creases for the morning. Who had made the life meet the work and had set it down: the difficulties and rewards; the senses of lack" (xvi). This woman is missing in most Irish poetry. The woman who we have instead is, in a sense, a shell of woman. She is an emblem, becoming whatever her writer wants her to represent. She has lost her voice and becomes a passive figure. Boland critiques the writing of women as emblematic national figures stating that, "Once the idea of a nation influences the perception of a woman, then that woman is suddenly and inevitably simplified. She can no longer have complex feelings and aspirations. She becomes the passive projection of a national idea" (136).

What this does is erase the Irish woman, the real one, from history. Her voice is silenced and with it a part of Ireland's past. When a woman or woman poet goes to find herself in Irish poetry she will see that she is not there. The woman may not see herself as part of the past of the country that is a great part of her and her identity. The woman poet who looks to Irish poetry and tries to find herself amongst the voices of other Irish poets will find silence, and when she tries to write Irish poetry she will find herself on the outside of an exclusive club. Boland says that she found "Poetic convention - conventions, moreover, which I had breathed in as a young poet - whispered to me that the daily things which seemed to me important and human, were not fit material for poetry. That is, they were not sanctioned by poetic tradition" (252). What she realized is that women's voices, their past were not "fit material for poetry," which in turn would lead her onto a path of getting that past and voice heard and she does that, in part, through this book.