Eavan Boland’s *It’s a Woman’s World* Commentary

Eavan Boland’s *It’s a Woman’s World* discusses the suppressed role that women have had in human history. The poem’s title is ironic in itself in that it expresses the opposite idea that is developed in the poem. It also serves to introduce the bitter tone that prevails throughout the work.

The first eight lines discuss how the role of women has remained unchanged, “since a wheel first / whetted a knife,” which implies that it has retained the same focus on domesticity since the dawn of civilization. The “flame / [that] burns more greedily” could be a reference to the 20th century’s advocating of political and social revolutions, including stronger support of freedom of expression and women’s rights movements, which is accentuated by the personification of the flame. However, the lines “[but the] wheels are steadier / but we’re the same” suggest that technology has progressed, but women’s role in society has remained unchanged. This point is emphasized by rhyming of the words “life” with “knife” in the first stanza, and “flame” with “same” in the second stanza, which conveys to the reader a sentiment of monotony that the speaker associates with the domesticity of the role of women throughout history.

In lines 9 through 18, it is apparent that the speaker is angry with the exclusion of women from a life outside of the house. These two stanzas focus on the repetitive chores that take up a woman’s daily schedule. Women are stressed by daily chores, such as buying bread, washing clothes and cleaning dishes. Because of these endless tasks, women are restrained to a domestic lifestyle. To emphasize this repetitiveness, Boland especially uses alliteration, assonance, rhymes, and imagery within lines 9 through 18.

When these lines are first read, the repetition of the “l” sounds is very apparent. The repeated use of this sound in words such as, “milestone”, “lives”, “living”, “lights”, “loaf”, “left” creates a calming effect, which emphasizes the dullness of a woman’s life. The constant repetition reflects how a woman’s day is consumed by continuous chores that create a boring, mundane life. The alliteration of the “w” sounds and the assonance of the short “a” is also very noticeable in these two stanzas. For example, Boland uses the words, “washing”, “wrapped”, “wash”, “wet” to emphasize the “w” sounds. She uses the words, “cash”, “washing”, “wrapped”, “wash” to stress the short “a” sound. These techniques also portray how a woman’s life is dominated by monotonous routine.

The random rhyming scheme in these two stanzas is used as juxtaposition to a woman’s repetitive lifestyle. She shifts the structure of the rhymes from external to internal rhyme from stanza 3 to stanza 4. In stanza 3, Boland uses the rhyme, “oversights” and “lights” in the last two lines. However, in stanza 4, Boland uses the rhyme “register” and “powder” in the middle two lines. This change in rhyme pattern shows a shift that is not evident in a woman’s life, and therefore juxtaposes the mundane nature of the life of women.

The imagery is also very important because it shows how a woman’s life is always consumed by chores. For example, the image of bread, washing powder, the cash register, and the “wash left wet’ all create an image of a domestic lifestyle. The
image of the light, which Boland uses continuously, could represent the home, which is all a woman is concerned with.

Overall, these lines portray how a woman is defined by what she forgets and what she cannot be. She is defined by the milestones that go unnoticed. She is responsible for things that everyone in the world just takes for granted. Boland emphasizes this point by repeating the word “left”. Things are forgotten, just like woman have always been forgotten in history.

In lines 18-29 of ‘It’s A Woman’s World,’ the speaker conveys that women are only remembered by their faults throughout history and that women have never been and will never be actively involved in history. This statement is recognized throughout the tone of this passage, which is a tone of bitter resentment. The tone is established through word choice. By using words such as “forget,” “never,” and “alibi,” the speaker shows that she is resentful because of the lack of involvement of women throughout history. The word “alibi” is especially powerful because it shows that women will never be “star-gazers” or “fire-eaters” because they are busy doing menial labor, such as “getting the recipe for a good soup.”

This tone of bitter resentment is also conveyed through the use of alliteration. The repetition of the “w” sound is repeated throughout this section contributes to the anger developed all throughout the poem. By using the “w” sound repetitively, there is emphasis put on the phrases “what we forget” and “what we will never be.” These phrases convey the entire meaning of this section. Because of the emphasis on these phrases, the tone and the meaning of the section are conveyed.

In lines 29 to 44 the domestic role of women in history is emphasized through the contrasting images of the guillotine and of the baking of bread. The image of kings being beheaded is made more dramatic through unorthodox use of parts of speech with the noun “gory” used as a verb, “gored”. The connotations of this word are melodramatic, bloody, and gruesome. In the same stanza the image of baking bread is presented, and is in stark contrast to the first image. The juxtaposition between the two images is emphasized through the use of rhyme, where the word “head” and the word “bread” rhyme. The alliteration used, “gored”, “grim”, “gristing”, “good” and “gossip”, is present in the description of both images and highlights the fact that both were occurring at the same time. The domestic image of women is also one of recipes of good soup being received, one that strikes a reader as incredibly bland in comparison to the guillotine image.

After these contrasting images are presented, the speaker refers to the unchanging role of women today. The speaker also refers to the future by implying that their children will also follow the same domestic path because he flame of the hearth represents the home. Here, there is another noun used as a verb, the word “moth” is used as a verb to suggest the inevitable attraction to this lifestyle, and is a direct comparison that can be interpreted as a metaphor.

The last image presented is that of records of music, which represent the records of events in history from which women are excluded. The particular use of the word “outrage” at the end of this stanza marks a change in tone, since it is the first expression of blatant frustration in the poem. It should be noted that throughout this section there is a sense of continuation emphasized by enjambment and could be interpreted as a build up to the final “outrage”. 