

## Mock 2018

Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry is deeply personal and engaging, offering us insights into human experience as well as historic events. Her use of clear, concise language is a technique in many of her poems, yet many of her poems also contain a sense of ambiguity. Without a doubt, her use of descriptive imagery helps the reader to experience the worlds she presents in her poems. Ní Chuilleanáin's poems 'Fireman's Lift', 'Following' and 'The Bend in the Road' all offer the reader different perspectives on human experiences. Her poem 'Translation' gives us insight into the horrific historical event of the Magdalene Laundries.

In Ní Chuilleanáin's poem 'Fireman's Lift', she discusses the passing of her mother. She has described this poem as a "cheering-up poem" when her mother was dying, and this is what makes this poem so unique. She explores death in a beautiful and positive way and the language she uses reflects this, "I was standing beside you looking up". While the language here is simple, the line seems to signify both Ní Chuilleanáin's position as she watched her mother die, but also is her reflecting on her and her mother's experience of seeing the painting "The Assumption of the Virgin" on the roof of the cathedral in Parma, Italy. Ní Chuilleanáin creates beautiful imagery to describe this painting and it appears to me that Ní Chuilleanáin is comparing her mother dying to the scene depicted in the painting, which is a beautifully aesthetic and complimentary comparison.

The poet makes the beauty of the painting clear to us in order to enable us to capture the essence of what a special experience this was for her, "We saw the work entire, how light/ Melted and faded bodies". The people in the painting who "melted and faded" seem to symbolise the people who came and went from her mother's life and to whom the poet is now paying tribute.

Ní Chuilleanáin's tone is calm throughout the poem, giving the impression that she is at peace with her mother dying. Ní Chuilleanáin creates a beautiful image, depicting how death is part of the natural cycle, "The crick in the branch loaded with fruit". Ní Chuilleanáin displays her love for her mother in no uncertain terms when she clearly states, "this is what love sees". The sense of respect for her mother that is present throughout this poem has evoked a great sense of respect

for my own mother within me. 'Following' is a poem of Ní Chuilleanáin's which explores a similar theme from a different perspective.

In her poem 'Following', Ní Chuilleanáin pays tribute to her father and the life he led. By taking the role of a story teller, Ní Chuilleanáin tells the 'story' of her father's life, but at the same time also appears to be revealing to us her struggle to come to terms with his death. The language in this poem is not direct, and it has layers of meaning. The poem opens with a girl who "follows the trail of her father's coat through the fair". This girl appears to be the poet, yet the fact that she refers to herself in the third person shows her own struggles to accept her father's death. Ní Chuilleanáin creates a detailed description of the fair in order to facilitate the reader's involvement in the poem, "Elbow like a plumber's bend".

The second stanza takes on a nightmare-ish quality and sends chills down my spine. The dark images presented reveal to us not only the hard life her father lead, but also the poet's battles with her own demons, "Corpse rise from the wakehouse". The sibilance in this line contributes to enhancing its eerie effect.

In the final stanza, the setting completely changes again, and it appears that Ní Chuilleanáin has come to terms with her father's passing. Soothing images of her father in heaven are used to create this sense of peace, "His clothes all finely laundered". The language in this stanza evokes positive connotations, such as when she describes her father as the "bindings" who held their family together, which in my opinion is a fitting tribute. 'The Bend in the Road' also sees Ní Chuilleanáin pay tribute to her family members who have passed on, as well as reminisce on her childhood.

'The Bend in the Road' is undoubtedly my favourite of Ní Chuilleanáin's poems. It causes me to reflect on the importance of memories in my own life and leads me to appreciate my own childhood experiences. Through simple, colloquial language, Ní Chuilleanáin describes her memories of "the place where the child/ Felt sick in the car". Ní Chuilleanáin's open style allows us to experience these memories, and as a result I feel I can really connect with her.

Ní Chuilleanáin uses child-like similes, which make clear to us that it is childhood memories she is referring to, “the tall tree like the cat’s tail”. Her reflective tone, “You are taller now than us”, adds a conversational element to the poem and contributes to the relaxed atmosphere.

The beautiful image Ní Chuilleanáin creates of her memories, “Piled high, wrapped lightly, like the one cumulus cloud/ In a perfect sky, softly packed like the air”, perfectly captures the fragility and preciousness of our past experiences in our lives. This place has come to symbolise the “faces never long absent from thought” and has come to mean so much more than just a mere bend in the road. The nature imagery, “The tree is taller...quite covered in with green creeper”, cleverly converges the theme of nature with the passing of time to show the natural course life takes.

‘Translations’ is a completely different poem to the other three I have discussed. This poem deals with the historical event of the Magdalene Laundries and effectively ‘translates’ decades of silence about this tragedy into meaningful poetry.

The language throughout this poem is painfully simple and Ní Chuilleanáin’s message is clear. The powerful opening line, “The soil frayed and sifted evens the score”, clearly tells us that in death we are all equal, and how all humans make mistakes, yet these poor girls were made suffer for theirs. The depiction of a scene in a laundry makes me shudder, “Steam danced around stone drains and giggled and slipped”. The dynamic verbs of vitality and joy used here emphasises what the girls in the laundry had stolen from them – their youth and happiness.

As the poem progresses, Ní Chuilleanáin tells both sides of the tragedy when she speaks on behalf of the nuns who were forced to run the laundries, “Until every pocket in her skull blared with the note”. This vivid image of a nun appalled by the immorality of her own actions, “a parasite that grew in me”, gives me a new insight and has taught me not to be so quick to judge the actions of others. This image of the nun is striking and has stayed with me. This poem is a fitting tribute to both the girls who were in the laundries, as well as the nuns who were forced to run them. The image of a nun dropping her laundry keys, “Let the bunched keys I bore slacken and fall”, is incredibly powerful and teaches us about the importance of letting go of the past and not holding on to grudges. ‘Translation’ is an immensely thought-provoking piece of poetry which gave me the

opportunity to learn more about the issue of the Magdalene laundries and develop greater insights on the role of the nuns in the ordeal.

Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry is thoroughly engaging and offered me new insights on the subjects of personal loss, as well as the Magdalene laundries. Ní Chuilleanáin's use of direct language, vivid imagery and sometimes ambiguous meanings cause me to think for myself and feel very deeply. Ní Chuilleanáin's open style is different to that of other poets, and for this I commend her. As Ní Chuilleanáin herself once said, "I chose poetry because it was different", and through her compelling poetry, she has clearly established herself as one of the most distinctive Irish poets of all time.