

A Christmas Childhood

I

One side of the potato-pits was white with frost –
How wonderful that was, how wonderful!
And when we put our ears to the paling-post
The music that came out was magical.

The light between the ricks of hay and straw [5]
Was a hole in Heaven's gable. An apple tree
With its December-glinting fruit we saw –
O you, Eve, were the world that tempted me

To eat the knowledge that grew in clay [10]
And death the germ within it! Now and then
I can remember something of the gay
Garden that was childhood's. Again

The tracks of cattle to a drinking-place, [15]
A green stone lying sideways in a ditch
Or any common sight the transfigured face
Of a beauty that the world did not touch.

II

My father played the melodion [20]
Outside at our gate;
There were stars in the morning east
And they danced to his music.

Across the wild bogs his melodion called
To Lennons and Callans.
As I pulled on my trousers in a hurry
I knew some strange thing had happened.

Outside in the cow-house my mother [25]
Made the music of milking;
The light of her stable-lamp was a star
And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle.

A water-hen screeched in the bog, [30]
Mass-going feet
Crunched the wafer-ice on the pot-holes,
Somebody wistfully twisted the bellows wheel.

My child poet picked out the letters [35]
On the grey stone,
In silver the wonder of a Christmas townland,
The winking glitter of a frosty dawn.

Cassiopeia was over
Cassidy's hanging hill,
I looked and three whin bushes rode across
The horizon – the Three Wise Kings. [40]

And old man passing said:
'Can't he make it talk' –
The melodion. I hid in the doorway
And tightened the belt of my box-pleated coat.

I nicked six nicks on the door-post [45]
With my penknife's big blade –
There was a little one for cutting tobacco.
And I was six Christmases of age.

My father played the melodion,
My mother milked the cows, [50]
And I had a prayer like a white rose pinned
On the Virgin Mary's blouse.

Annotations

[1] *potato-pits*: shallow pits, usually covered with mounds of straw and earth, in which potatoes are stored in winter

[3] *paling-post*: fence post

[5] *ricks*: stacks of hay or corn

[6] *gable*: the side wall of a house

[8] *Eve*: refers to the mythical Garden of Eden, as recounted in the Book of Genesis

[9] *clay*: in Kavanagh's poetry, clay is associated with deceit and corruption

[10] *germ*: a micro-organism that causes disease; a tiny seed

[15] *transfigured*: transformed into something more beautiful and luminous

[17] *melodion*: a small accordion

[32] *bellows wheel*: a device for feeding oxygen into a fire in order to keep it alight

[35] *townland*: describes a small area of rural Ireland

[37] *Cassiopeia*: a northern constellation of stars

[39] *whin bushes*: gorse bushes

Tease It Out

Part I

1. The poet remembers his childhood in county Monaghan:
 - What does he recall happening to the potato pits? How did he, as a young boy, respond to this sight?
 - The young poet heard a sound when he put his ear to the fence posts. Suggest what might have caused this sound. How did he, as a young boy, respond to this sound?
 - **True or false:** The light that poured through the gaps between the hay bales seemed to come from heaven itself.
 - **Class Discussion:** Do you agree with Kavanagh that these sights and sounds were really 'magical' and 'wonderful'?
2. The poet focuses on 'knowledge' and the 'world':
 - **Class Discussion:** What does Kavanagh mean by the term 'world', as he uses it in this poem?
 - The 'world', we're told, tempted the young poet. What did the world offer him?
 - **True or false:** The poet gave in to this temptation.
 - **Class Discussion:** 'Knowledge is usually presented as a good thing but here it is associated with death and loss'. Discuss this statement as a class. Would you agree that the poet uses 'knowledge' in a specific and unusual way?
3. The poet remembers other sights from his childhood:
 - **Class Discussion:** The poet uses the metaphor of the Garden of Eden to describe childhood. Suggest why he makes such a comparison. Is it an effective one?
 - **True or false:** The poet can summon memories of childhood whenever he wishes.
 - What phrases indicate that the poet, when he was a boy, found delight and mystery in extremely humdrum sights?
 - **Class Discussion:** 'Such ordinary sights, according to the poet, were only beautiful because the 'world' had not touched them'. Discuss this statement as a class.

Part II

4. The poet remembers his father playing music on a Christmas morning:
 - Where was the father sitting? What instrument did he play?
 - What effect, according to the young poet, did this music have on the stars that were still visible in the morning sky?
 - What effect did it have on the family's neighbours, such as the Lennon and Callan families?
 - Do you think the father's music really had such an effect on the world around the young poet? Give a reason for your answer.
5. The poet describes other memories of that long ago Christmas morning:
 - **True or false:** The young poet got dressed quickly as if he was eager to be outside.
 - **Class Discussion:** What activity was his mother engaged in? How might this activity have produced a kind of 'music'?
 - Mention three other sounds the poet heard on this particular Christmas morning.
 - What phrases suggest that the entire landscape was covered in a crisp white frost? Describe in your own words how the young poet responded to this sight.
6. The poet describes what happened when he went outside:
 - **True or false:** The old man passing by didn't like his father's music.
 - What gift did the young poet receive for Christmas? What does he do with this new possession?
 - What phrase indicates that the young poet, like many children, could be shy around adults?
 - **Class Discussion:** What simile is used to describe the young poet's prayer? Would you agree that it is a striking one? Would you agree that it is a symbol of childhood innocence rather than a symbol of religion?

Exam Prep

1. **Personal Response:** 'Kavanagh presents childhood as a time of extraordinary wonder and suggests that we shouldn't be in a hurry to acquire knowledge and leave childhood behind'. Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer.
2. **Class Discussion:** 'This poem, especially in its first part, presents an overly negative view of knowledge and experience, associating it with death corruption and decay'. Discuss this statement as a class.
3. **Theme Talk:** Consider the phrase 'I knew some strange thing had happened'. Is the poet referring to a change within his own self or to a change in the world around him? Did such a change actually occur or was it simply a product of the young poet's imagination? Give reasons for your answer.
4. **Theme Talk:** Why do you think the poem is called 'A Christmas Childhood' rather than the more obvious 'A Childhood Christmas'? Does the poem offer us more than a straightforward account of what one Christmas was like for the child? What else does it offer?
5. **Exam Focus:** 'Kavanagh's poetry expresses a longing to see the world as though through a child's eyes and to rediscover the magic and mystery of everyday'. Write an essay in response to this statement, making reference to this poem and three others on your course.

Language Lab

1. **Class Discussion:** The poem's first part contains several references to the myth of the Garden of Eden. Can you identify them? What do they suggest about the poet's attitude to childhood, innocence and experience?
2. For the young poet, the sights and sounds of his parents' farm seemed to merge with those of the nativity in Bethlehem two millennia ago:
 - What aspect of the landscape reminded him of the stable where Jesus was born?
 - What aspect of the landscape reminded him of the 'the Three Wise Kings'?
 - What reminds him of the Virgin Mary?
 - What does this 'fusion' of Monaghan and Bethlehem suggest about the poet's childhood imagination?
3. **Class Discussion:** The poem's second part is rich in musical effects. Consider the following phrases and suggest which poetic techniques are used in each one:
 - 'There were stars in the morning east/ And they danced to his music'.
 - 'Made the music of milking.'
 - 'Somebody wistfully twisted the bellows wheel'.
 - 'The winking glitter of a frosty dawn!'.

A Christmas Childhood



LINE BY LINE

Children, because they are so innocent, find wonder in the most ordinary things. Kavanagh thinks back to his own childhood, remembering some of the everyday sights and sounds that filled him with astonishment. He found wonder, for instance, in the sight of frost forming on the outdoor pits that were used for storing potatoes. There was also something ‘magical’, he recalls, about the sound of metal fence-posts vibrating in the wind. Equally thrilling was the evening light in a field full of ‘ricks’ or haystacks. The poet was awestruck, too, by an apple tree in December. The tree, he remembers, retained a few pieces of fruit which were covered in frost and glinted in the winter light.

But this childhood innocence could not last. For Kavanagh, like all young children, was ‘tempted’ by the world, by which he means the ‘world’ of sophisticated adult experience. Kavanagh, like all young children, was eager for the ‘knowledge’ that this adult world seemed to offer. He wanted adult experiences, adult understanding and adult consciousness. The knowledge offered by the world, however, came with a terrible price. For gaining this knowledge meant losing his childhood innocence. He was no longer capable of finding wonder in the everyday sights and sounds that surrounded him. Kavanagh emphasises this point when he declares that this knowledge emerged from ‘clay’, which in his writing is always a negative term, suggesting death, deceit and disappointment.

Kavanagh compares the loss of his childhood innocence to the story of the Garden of Eden. Adam, in that famous Bible story, inhabited a miraculous and blissful garden. For children, too, the entire world is a ‘gay/ Garden’, a place of wonder and delight. This is because every single aspect of the world strikes them as being marvellous. Adam, in the story, was tempted by Eve. The poet, as we’ve seen, was tempted by ‘the world’: ‘O

you, Eve, were the world that tempted me’. Adam succumbed to temptation and ate the fruit. The poet, similarly, succumbed to temptation and consumed the knowledge offered by the world. The price of Adam’s new knowledge was exile from the Garden of Eden. The price of the poet’s new knowledge was expulsion from the ‘gay/ Garden’ of childlike wonder.

There are moments, Kavanagh declares, when he can remember what it was like to view the entire world as such a garden of delight: ‘Now and then/ I can remember something of the gay/ Garden that was childhood’s’. He recalls what it was like to be thrilled by the most everyday sights and sounds. He recalls how ‘any common sight’ resembled a beautiful face that had been ‘transfigured’, that had been made astonishingly radiant and glorious. But the poet, like every other adult, has swapped innocence for knowledge. He can remember and relive certain moments of childlike wonder. But he will never have new experiences of this type. He can never recapture that childhood mentality. Never again will such ‘common’ or mundane sights fill him with astonishment and awe.

Remembering Christmas

In the poem’s second section, the poet remembers a Christmas morning from his childhood. He was only six years old, or ‘six Christmases of age’. Like many children on Christmas morning, the young poet woke up early. It was still ‘dawn’, so early that when he looked out his window stars were visible in the winter sky. He saw that the morning was a cold one, that the whole landscape was covered in a ‘silver’ layer of frost.

The young poet made his way to the front door of the house: His father was playing the melodeon, a type of button accordion, at the front gate. The sound of his playing drifted across the ‘wild bogs’ around the poet’s house. His mother, meanwhile, was busy in the ‘cow-house’. Because it was still quite dark she was milking the cows by lamplight. People

from the locality were making their way to early mass, their footsteps crunching the ice as they trudged along the country road. A passing mass-goer praised the quality of his father's playing: "Can't he make it talk –/The melodeon".

The young poet, exhibiting the shyness we often associate with six-year-olds, remained hidden in the doorway until this neighbour had gone by: 'I hid in the doorway'. Perhaps his self-consciousness is evident in his body language, specifically the manner in which he tightens his coat around him. The young poet, it seems, had been given a new penknife for Christmas. We get a sense that this present, with its 'big blade' and its 'little one for cutting tobacco', made him feel grown up. He used the knife's big blade to carve six notches in the door frame, one for each year of his life so far.

Many aspects of this Christmas morning struck the young poet as being beautiful or wonderful. He found wonder, for instance, in the 'silver' layer of frost that covered the landscape. He found wonder, too, in his father's melodeon-playing, too, imagining that his father's music caused the stars to dance and summoned various families, the Lennons and Callans for instance, from around the locality. Even the sound of cows being milked beguiled the young poet. We can imagine him lingering outside the cow-house listening to the sound of fresh milk spilling into the metallic bucket: 'Outside in the cow-house my mother/ Made the music of milking'.

Bethlehem in Mucker

The six-year-old poet, we can imagine, had been learning about Jesus' birth and the story of the nativity was fresh in his mind. On that morning, then, his imagination ran away with him and he fancied that Jesus's birth was happening this very morning in the parish outside his window. From the moment he woke, he had the sense that some incredible event was taking place: 'I knew some strange thing had happened'. And when he looked out from the farmhouse door, the landscape of his native Monaghan seemed to merge with the landscape of Bethlehem all those centuries ago.

The frost that covered the landscape around the poet's house seemed to merge with the 'frost of Bethlehem' that might have been present all those centuries ago on the morning of Christ's birth. The cowshed for a moment seemed like the stable where Jesus was born. A stable-lamp had been hung at the stable door. The young poet imagined that this was the star that hovered above the stable where Christ was born: 'the light of her stable-lamp was a star'. The poet noticed three whin bushes blowing in the wind. To the young poet, they seemed to be moving across the landscape, as if they were the Three Wise Kings approaching on their camels: 'three whin bushes rode across/ The horizon – the Three Wise Kings'.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Metaphor, Simile, Figures of Speech

The poet uses a wonderful metaphor to capture the evening light at harvest time. The 'ricks' or stacks of hay have been arranged in a wall, that is described as the 'gable' or wall of 'heaven itself'. The light that filters through the gaps between the ricks is said to emanate from paradise. An equally vivid simile is used to describe the young poet's prayer, which is compared to a white rose, specifically one that might have been pinned to the Virgin Mary's blouse. The poet, then, associates his youthful prayer with stainless whiteness, with innocence and virginity.

Verbal Music

There is an onomatopoeic quality to the phrase 'Mass-going feet/ Crunched the wafer ice' in which we can almost hear the ice being broken by the trudging feet of the poet's neighbours. Onomatopoeia is also present in line 32, which describes the sound of the bellows being twisted to stoke the fire on this freezing Christmas morning. The clashing 't' and 'w' sounds mimic the shrill whistle of the bellows wheel being turned: 'Somebody wistfully twisted the bellows wheel'.

INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

This poem, as we have seen, is all about the fall from innocence into experience. The poet, having been tempted by the world of adult sophisticated experience, has lost his sense of childlike wonder. 'Now and then' he can remember particular moments from his childhood when he was filled with wonder and delight. Most vivid of all, it seems, is his memory of the Christmas when he was six years old. But he will never enjoy such wonder in his adult life. The poet has been cast out of childhood's 'gay/ Garden' and there can be no going back.

Kavanagh, it's important to note, titles the poem 'A Christmas Childhood' rather than, as we might expect, 'A Childhood Christmas'. Kavanagh, therefore, associates his entire childhood with the Christmas season. Christmas, of course, has many different associations, both secular and religious. But Kavanagh has in mind, no doubt, the mystery and awe experienced by children around the festivities, as well as the concepts of sinlessness and salvation associated with the infant Jesus. The poet tellingly remembers a Christmas when he was six years old. Seven, traditionally, is held to be the age of reason, when children start to gain the knowledge and experience that Kavanagh calls 'the world'.

A CELEBRATION OF THE EVERYDAY

Like many of Kavanagh's poems, 'A Christmas Childhood' emphasises the beauty and strangeness that exist in common, everyday things. Usually, we are too busy and too preoccupied to notice the beauty in the mundane things that surround us. Yet the poem gives many examples of mundane things that can appear beautiful and special if we look at them the right way: a simple green stone, for instance, or the tracks made by cattle as they wander to a watering hole.

Ghazal

The sky is a dry pitiless white. The wide rows stretch on into death.
Like famished birds, my hands strip each stalk of its stolen crop: our name.

History is a ship forever setting sail. On either shore: mountains of men,
Oceans of bone, an engine whose teeth shred all that is not our name.

Can you imagine what will sound from us, what we'll rend and claim [5]
When we find ourselves alone with all we've ever sought: our name?

Or perhaps what we seek lives outside of speech, like a tribe of goats
On a mountain above a lake, whose hooves nick away at rock. Our name

Is blown from tree to tree, scattered by the breeze. Who am I to say what, [10]
In that marriage, is lost? For all I know, the grass has caught our name.

Having risen from moan to growl, growl to a hound's low bray,
The voices catch. No priest, no sinner has yet been taught our name.

Will it thunder up, the call of time? Or lie quiet as bedrock beneath
Our feet? Our name our name our name our fraught, fraught name.

Annotations

Ghazal: an Arabic and Persian verse form where a poem is constructed as a chain of couplets, each of which ends with the same word or phrase

[7] **rend:** rip or tear apart

[18] **fraught:** full of or containing something, usually something undesirable, such as dangers or difficulties

Tease It Out

1. The speaker describes the plantation on which she works and the hardships she must endure:
 - The plantation on which the speaker works is vast. What phrase indicates this?
 - What does the condition of the speaker's hands suggest about the manner in which she is being treated by her owners?
 - **Class Discussion:** What image does the speaker use to convey the danger that her people might forget their original heritage and identity?
2. The speaker imagines what it would be like for her people to rediscover their identity.
 - What do you think they would 'rend' or rip up if this happens?
 - 'Can you imagine what will sound from us ...?' Describe in your own words the kinds of sounds the speaker and her people would make at this moment.
 - **Class Discussion:** The speaker considers the possibility that the identity she longs for exists 'outside of speech'. Can you list some of the non-verbal elements that might shape this identity?
3. The speaker considers the possibility that her original African identity may not in fact be recoverable:
 - Describe in your own words the metaphor the speaker uses in line 9 to illustrate this. Is it an effective comparison in your opinion? Give a reason for your answer.
 - **True or False:** The speaker imagines all her fellow slaves calling out in unison. How does she characterise the sound they would make?
 - What line indicates that white Christian society is ignorant when it comes to understanding the African American people?
4. The ancestor imagines once again that she and her people might rediscover their 'name', their original African identity.
 - **True or False:** The speaker imagines that their 'name' will crash like thunder from the skies above.
 - **Class Discussion:** What do you think the speaker means by the 'the call of time'? What does it suggest about the effect that rediscovering their identity will have on the speaker and her people?
 - Do you think the poem ends on a note of hope? Give a reason for your answer.

Exam Prep

1. **Personal Response:** Which of the following emotions do you think define this poem: despair; longing; joy; rage? Give a reason for your answer.
2. **Class Discussion:** 'The ghazal form in Eastern poetry is often associated with frustrated desire, which is reflected in the ancestor's longing to reclaim her lost identity'. Discuss this statement as a class.
3. **Theme Talk:** "Ghazal" uses striking imagery to highlight the manner in which the African American people were stripped of their identity and power'. Write a short essay in response to this statement.
4. **Exam Focus:** 'The poetry of Tracy K. Smith constantly finds new and very effective ways of talking about race and African Americans' historical sufferings.' Write a short essay in response to this statement, making reference to 'Ghazal', 'I Will Tell you The Truth About This' and 'The Greatest Personal Privation'.

Language Lab

1. **Class Discussion:** This poem, as the title indicates, is a ghazal, a form of poetry that involves a series of couplets each ending with the same word. What impact does this repetition have as you read the poem? Would you agree that it powerfully reinforces the poem's theme? Give a reason for your answer.
2. In Stanza 2, Smith presents us with the nightmarish vision of a ship sailing backwards and forwards forever across an ocean of 'bone'. What does this image suggest about history in general and the Atlantic Slave Trade in particular? Do you find it an effective analogy? Give a reason for your answer.
3. The poem's opening line features an instance of pathetic fallacy, which occurs when human emotions are attributed to the natural world. To what does the speaker attribute her white owner's cruelty?
4. Stanza 4 features a most striking simile. To what does the speaker compare the identity that she and her people long to rediscover? What does the comparison suggest about how easy or hard rediscovering this identity will be?

Ghazal



LINE BY LINE

This powerful poem confronts the Atlantic Slave Trade, which took place from the 16th to the 19th centuries. During that time, at least 12 million Africans were abducted, enslaved and shipped to the Americas. Many of them, like Smith's own ancestors, were put to work in the cotton fields of the southern United States. In 'Ghazal', Smith imagines one such ancestor and makes her the speaker of the poem, giving voice to this long-ago woman's suffering, hopes and dreams.

The ancestor is working in the cotton fields, picking the cotton buds from one stalk after another: 'my hands strip each stalk'. The plantation on which she works is vast, with 'wide rows' of cotton plants stretching on as far as the eye can see. The conditions under which she labours are terrible. The sky above her is a 'pitiless white', offering no cloud-cover from the midday heat. The cotton rows, she claims, 'stretch on into death', suggesting that she will be forced to work on this plantation until she dies. The ancestor also describes her hands as being 'famished', which suggests that her owners provide her with minimal rations.

The ancestor, as she labours in the fields, thinks about 'our name', about the names her family members might have had when they were still living free in Africa. But these names of course were taken away from the ancestor's family when they were enslaved because their white owners quickly renamed them Jack or Tom, Mary or Beth. And over time, as the generations passed, their original African names were forgotten completely. But the term 'name' refers also to their African language, culture and identity as a whole. The speaker worries the longer her people spend in slavery, the more they will forget this original heritage. The ancestor uses a powerful image to capture this process of forgetting, claiming that that she is stripping not only cotton but also her own name. With every day, every hour, she spends working in the fields her African identity is further eroded.

The ancestor meditates on history, which she views as a sorry tale of suffering and exploitation. She uses a powerful, nightmarish image to convey history's horrors. She thinks of a ship sailing back and forth 'forever' between two continents. The two continents are separated not by a conventional ocean but a vast pit of human bones. On the shore of each continent there are 'mountains of men', vast piles of living human bodies that are shipped back and forth across the bony sea. The ancestor then focuses on the engine of this imaginary ship, which is presented as a vast and grinding mechanism. Everything that belongs to her family, and to her people as a whole, has been fed into this engine and shredded. This powerfully captures how the ancestor's people were deprived of their liberty and dignity, of their customs and religion, of their original African way of life.

Only one thing, the ancestor suggests, has passed through the engine's mechanism unscathed. And that is 'our name'. For the ancestor believes there is still some aspect of her African identity that has survived enslavement and exploitation. She dares to hope that it might yet be rediscovered and reclaimed. The ancestor imagines what such a rediscovery might be like for herself, her family and her people. They would 'rend' or rip up the identity they were forced to adopt as slaves, renouncing the English names and the Western way of life that were imposed on them. They would 'claim' once again their original African heritage, the identity that is the only thing they 'ever sought' or wanted. The ancestor envisages that this would be a great moment of celebration for her people. She imagines them erupting in songs and cheers of jubilation as they celebrate this reconnection with their African past.

The ancestor considers the possibility that the identity she longs for exists 'outside of speech'. Perhaps she's referring to American English speech, the speech she and her people were forced to adopt when they were enslaved. This suggests that the ancestor's original identity can only be reclaimed by renouncing English and learning (or re-learning) the African languages her people would have originally spoken. Or perhaps

the ancestor is referring to speech in general. This suggests that the ancestor's original identity can't be reclaimed simply by engaging with African languages. Such a reclaiming would actually involve a radical change of lifestyle. It might require the adoption of African dress, diet, customs, religion and so on.

The ancestor considers the possibility that her original African identity may not in fact be recoverable, that it has been lost forever. She uses a beautiful metaphor to describe this. Her identity is compared to ripe buds of cotton on a plant. The passage of time, meanwhile, is compared to a stiff breeze. The breeze removes the buds from the plant and scatters them, blowing them hither and thither. The passage of time, similarly, scatters the poet's African identity, making it impossible to rediscover: 'Our name/ is blown from tree to tree, scattered by the breeze'. The poet, however, cannot be certain that this is the case: 'Who am I to say what...is lost?' Perhaps her identity might still be out there awaiting rediscovery, like buds of cotton 'caught' amid the grass of some distant field.

The ancestor, as she labours in the cotton field, imagines all her fellow slaves calling out in unison. They would begin, she imagines, with a moan of despair. Their voices would then rise together to a 'growl' of anger before culminating in a 'low bray' of defiance. Perhaps the ancestor is imagining her fellow slaves rising up against their overlords. Or perhaps she's imagining them defiantly expressing their uniqueness and individuality in the face of their terrible circumstances.

The ancestor imagines once again that she and her people might rediscover their 'name', their original African identity. She imagines that their name might sound like thunder rising from earth. She imagines that sound like the 'call of time' itself, like some vast resounding echo that emanates through the universe. This suggests, of course, that rediscovering their African identity will have an immediate and profound effect on the ancestor and her people. Their lives will be altered in a sudden and very dramatic fashion. But the ancestor also imagines the 'name' might be a 'quiet' sound, an almost imperceptible background noise. This of course suggests that rediscovering their African identity will have a more subtle effect on the ancestor and her people. Their lives will be altered in ways that are important, though perhaps less obvious to the outside world.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Form

A 'ghazal' is an ancient Persian and Arabic form of poetry. The rules that govern this form are extremely rich and complex. Smith follows two of these constraints. Her poem is written in couplets or two-line stanzas and each couplet ends with a refrain or repeated phrase ('our name'). The ghazal form in Eastern poetry is often associated with frustrated desire, which is reflected in the ancestor's longing to reclaim her lost identity. The form, with its repeated refrain, is suited to obsession and fixation, which reflects the ancestor's obsessive desire to reclaim her identity, the only thing she has 'ever sought'.

RACE AND HISTORICAL SUFFERING

This is one of several poems where Smith speaks on behalf of history's forgotten victims. In this instance she gives voice to one her own ancestors, a woman who worked and suffered on one of America's many slave plantations. This focus on forgotten voices, this desire to let history's victims speak again, is also evident in 'The Greatest Personal Privation' and 'I will tell you the truth about this'.

'Ghazal', like 'The Searchers' and 'The Greatest Personal Privation', highlights the theme of racial hatred and inequality. It reminds us of the millions of Africans that were victims of the Atlantic slave trade. It reminds us that these individuals lost not only their liberty but also their names and very identities. It reminds us, too, of the brutal conditions they were forced to endure amid the 'wide rows' of cotton where they worked.

The poem, it must be noted, presents an extremely bleak view of history, one quite different to the optimistic outlook that features in many western history books. Here, history is presented as a cruel and inhuman force, one that brings brutality and destruction to countless individuals and to entire countries and civilisations. History, as we've seen, is associated with oceans of bone, with vicious, all-consuming engines and with mountains of human bodies.

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

'Ghazal', like several other poems by Smith, highlights the relationship between the personal and the political. The greatest injury endured by the ancestor and her people was the loss of their 'name', of their African identities. Indeed, this name, the ancestor declares, is all that she and her people 'have ever sought'. She wonders, in stanza four, what it might take to rediscover this identity. She wonders, in stanzas three and six, what such a rediscovery might actually be like, imagining jubilation and the different effects such reclaiming might have on her people.

But the ancestor also worries that her name might never be recoverable. We see this with the repetition of 'fraught' in the poem's final line, which suggests that the whole idea of identity is bound up with difficulty and uncertainty. The ancestor's African identity, as we learned in stanza one, is being eroded more and more the longer she and her people spend in America. There is a real danger that their identity will disperse and dissipate forever like blossom in the wind.

'Ghazal', while centred on the African experience, also brings to mind the suffering of other displaced peoples throughout history. We might think, for instance of Jews, Ukrainians or even of the Irish experience during the Famine times. It reminds us that so many nations were stripped of their culture and identity and had to struggle to regain their 'name'.

EAVAN BOLAND SAMPLE ANSWER

Write a personal response to the poetry of Eavan Boland.

Of all the poets on the Leaving Cert, Boland is the one who has most to say about the war, violence and mayhem that has marked the beginning of the twenty-first century. Much of her work is influenced by her desire to confront history in all its misery and darkness: 'out of myth into history I move'. Her work deals compassionately with history's victims, both from the nineteenth century and from the recent past, while reserving a special place for the sufferings of women. Her poetry, therefore, is particularly suited to the time of global violence in which we live now. Yet she is also a poet of hope, and her work holds out the possibility that history's myriad victims may not have suffered entirely in vain.

One of the things I like most about Boland's poetry is its deep sense of humanity and compassion. Again and again she writes about history's victims. Her work stands as a memorial to those forgotten people who suffered and died because of war, disease and man's inhumanity to his fellow man. Boland's intense sensitivity to the 'evil that men do' is evident in 'The War Horse'. The sight of the horse that has wandered from the 'tinker camp on the Enniskerry road' fills her with dread as her blood becomes 'still/ with atavism', and the horse is transformed into a symbol of the violence that filled the world in general, and Northern Ireland in particular. The beast 'stumbles on like a rumour of war' through her neighbourhood, reminding her of the 'screamless dead' of Irish history, the forgotten victims of that 'cause ruined before, a world betrayed'.

Ireland's troubled past is also remembered in 'The Famine Road', where Boland remembers the victims of the Great Famine who found work and a little money building roads 'from nowhere, going nowhere'. I liked the way this poem brought the plight of the Famine victims graphically to life. They are presented almost as zombies, as 'Sick' and 'directionless' beings on the verge of cannibalism: 'cunning as housewives, each eyed -/ as if at a corner butcher - the other's buttock'. Particularly moving was the account of the worker who becomes sick with a contagious disease. The other workers avoid this 'typhoid pariah' and will not even pray with this poor man as he suffers his death throes. Similarly, in 'Outside History' Boland faces up to the reality that history is a bloody business. With a memorable use of hyperbole she declares that there are as many of its victims buried in the earth as there are stars in the night sky: 'those fields,/ those rivers, those roads clotted as/ firmaments with the dead'.

'Child of Our Time' is another poem where Boland's immense compassion is evident. Here, she laments the death of a young boy who was killed in the Dublin bombings of 1974. This child should be hearing fairy stories and learning the 'names for the animals you took to bed'. Instead, he has had his maimed body removed from the ruins of a bombed building. What I found almost unbearably moving about this poem was that it forced us to acknowledge the true price of war. It backs the reader into a corner where he or she must realise that war is not a Hollywood movie or video game, but a serious business

that has 'robbed the cradle' of many a child throughout the world. The poem suggests that 'idle talk' about patriotism, honour and freedom is not worth the life of a single child. This is a poem I would love all world leaders who take their people to war for no good reason.

Yet Boland's compassion is not simply reserved for the victims of major events such as famine and war. I also admired her because she is acutely conscious of the fact that for centuries women have been routinely victimised by a male-dominated society. We get a sense of this awareness in 'The Famine Road', which presents the tragic case of a woman who is unable to have children: 'Barren, never to know the load/ of his child in you'. Somehow, however, her situation is made worse by the unsympathetic attitude of the male doctor who brings her this bad news: 'take it well woman, grow/ your garden, keep house, good-bye.' 'The Shadow Doll' also presents women as victims of a male-dominated society. Marriage, in this poem, is a tool whereby women are oppressed and controlled by men. In this instance, Boland's compassion is directed toward a young nineteenth-century bride-to-be who seems terrified at the prospect of her upcoming wedding. Boland also depicts the confusion and uncertainty she felt on the night before her own wedding, describing herself as being 'astray among the cards and wedding gifts'. The poem presents marriage as a trap for women, a restrictive force that leaves them 'Under glass, under wraps'. Marriage, the poem implies, transforms women into dolls to be admired and adorned, making them little more than the playthings of their husbands.

Yet one of the things that most attracted me to Boland's work is that it is not all doom and gloom. While the poems confront suffering head-on, they also offer hope. In 'Child of Our Time', for instance, Boland suggests that we might learn from the death of the young child: 'We ... must learn from you dead'. The child's death must spur us on to abandon the suspicion and hatred of the past, and find some way of living together in harmony and peace. We must give up the deadly 'idle talk' that leads to murder and mayhem, and replace it with 'a new language' of peace. In 'Outside History', too, Boland suggests that it may be possible to do something for the victims of history, to become 'part of that ordeal' which they suffered. She suggests that it may be possible to somehow comfort these victims, to 'kneel beside them, whisper in their ear'. Ultimately, however, the hope in Boland's poetry is outweighed by the despair. As a logical person, Boland is forced to conclude that there is of course nothing we can do for those who have suffered in the past: 'And we are too late. We are always too late'. While we might long for 'a new language' to prevent such atrocities occurring in the future, it is far from clear what this new language might be.

To me, Boland's poetry represents a fearless confrontation with much of what is wrong with today's world. She is fully willing to acknowledge the suffering and evil that chokes the globe in this day and age. Yet in an important sense, her work represents a triumph over this evil. While we might be 'always too late' to save the victims of history, we are certainly not too late to remember and pay homage to what they endured. By doing so, we might ensure that their suffering was not completely in vain. The poems themselves, therefore, represent a kind of triumph over this forgetfulness, for as long as there are eyes to read, history's victims will survive in Boland's poetry.

EMILY DICKINSON SAMPLE ANSWER

Write about the feelings that Emily Dickinson’s poetry creates in you, and the aspects of her poetry (content and/or style) that help create those feelings. Support your points with reference to the poetry by Emily Dickinson on your course.

Of all the poets I studied for my Leaving Cert, Emily Dickinson was the most fascinating and memorable. If I am honest, I have to admit that when I first read her poems I did not enjoy them. They seemed so dark and strange, and I felt uncomfortable reading about so much death and despair. But I could not forget them. Lines and images from her poems stayed with me long after poems by the other poets on the course had vanished from my mind. I found myself coming back to the poetry of Emily Dickinson, curious to get a better understanding of what her poems were trying to convey. The more I read them, the more fascinating they became. Certainly the poems are dark at times, but poetry is so often about the painful side of life, the sadness and anguish that we inevitably suffer. Dickinson’s poetry seems to take an unflinching look at such anguish and despair. But her poems are also about hope and life and happiness. As I read her poetry, I found myself swinging between joy and sadness, hope and despair. No other poet on the Leaving Cert had such an effect on my feelings.

Perhaps the three poems I struggled with most at the beginning were ‘I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain’, ‘After Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes’ and ‘The Soul Has Bandaged Moments’. They seemed so dark and strange and bleak. When I first read them, I did not quite understand what the poet was saying, but the imagery and tone of the poems had an immediate impact. ‘I Felt a Funeral’, for example, is an uncomfortable poem to read. The funereal imagery and the repetition of words like ‘treading’ and ‘beating’ made me feel uneasy. The poem is so claustrophobic; it is as though we are trapped with the speaker in the dark confines of her mind, locked into her suffering. The throbbing rhythm of the lines is unpleasant in its monotony: ‘And when they all were seated,/ A service like a Drum/ Kept beating – beating – till I thought/ My Mind was going numb –’ As the poem progresses, we are carried further and further away from the everyday world, and led swiftly into a frightening limitless space where nothing seems to make sense anymore. When I read the poem now, it sends a chill down my spine.

‘After Great Pain’ is probably less frightening – but no less disturbing – than ‘I Felt a Funeral’. I always think of ‘After Great Pain’ as the sequel to ‘I Felt a Funeral’. I don’t think of the latter as a poem about dying, but rather as a poem about terrible mental suffering. ‘After Great Pain’ describes what follows such a cataclysmic episode. It is a disturbing and harrowing read. Once again, Dickinson uses such effective imagery to convey complex feelings. Or perhaps it is better to say that this poem is about feeling absolutely nothing at all. A sense of great numbness and shock pervades the poem. I find it an uncomfortable reading experience. Like ‘I Felt a Funeral’, this poem depicts somebody

who has been shattered by strain and anguish. The speaker hardly seems connected with reality at all. ‘The Feet, mechanical, go round –/ Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –/ A Wooden way’. The poem closes with a description of people freezing to death in the snow. It leaves the reader uncertain as to what comes next: ‘First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –’.

The numbness that is evident in ‘After Great Pain’ is also evident in ‘The Soul Has Bandaged Moments’. Again Dickinson deals with anguish and despair. With this poem, however, I felt less claustrophobic. It is a less intense experience than ‘I Felt a Funeral’ and ‘After Great Pain’. Perhaps this is because the poem contains moments of release. The great thing about reading Dickinson’s poems is that when (what she terms) ‘moments of Escape’ are introduced, you get a real sense of excitement and joy. When she drops a ray of sunshine into her poems, we the readers bask in its brief warmth, certain that it will not last. ‘The Soul Has Bandaged Moments’ sways between anguish and hope. As I read it, I felt extremes of despair and joy. Like ‘I Felt a Funeral’ and ‘After Great Pain’, the poem concentrates on times when the speaker is overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and helplessness: ‘The Soul Has Bandaged Moments –/ When too appalled to stir’. Dickinson uses frightful imagery, such as the figure of the ‘Goblin’ with his ‘long fingers’ and ‘The Horror’ that seems to be always awaiting her return. But then the poem also describes the speaker ‘bursting all the doors’. As the speaker ‘dances’ and ‘swings’ I find my spirits soaring, caught up in the dizzy ecstasy of the poem. Where only moments before we were locked in the dungeon of despair, suddenly we are ‘delirious borne’ and touching ‘Liberty’.

A similar sense of hope and ecstasy is apparent in ‘I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed’. The poem portrays an enjoyment of nature that is wild, manic and intoxicated. Dickinson suggests that we should be so open to the beauty of the natural world that it intoxicates us the same way liquor does:

*Inebriate of Air – am I –
And Debauchee of Dew –
Reeling – thro endless summer days –
From inns of Molten Blue –*

There is such a sense of release in this poem, of abandonment and recklessness. When I read the poetry of Emily Dickinson, I get the sense that she was somebody who moved between extremes of emotion, from terrible lows to ecstatic highs. None of the other poets on the course quite matched her in terms of emotional impact. No other poet managed to move me quite the way Emily Dickinson did.

I think that of all the poets I studied for my exams it is Dickinson who I will remember longest. I have tried in this essay to explain the effect her poems have had on me, but it is a complicated thing to do. Feelings are a hard thing to relate, and I think one reason why Dickinson is such a great poet is that she managed to put into words what many have felt but could never explain. It’s like ‘a certain slant of light’: we have all experienced what Dickinson is writing about, only we could never quite find the words to express it. There is ‘a certain Slant of Light’ on ‘Winter Afternoons’ and it most definitely ‘oppresses, like the Heft/ Of Cathedral Tunes’.