

**Questions**

**2015** *'Ní Chuilleanáin's demanding subject matter and formidable style can prove challenging.'*

'Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin on your course.'

**Sample Questions:**

1. 'Ní Chuilleanáin is a truly **I**maginative poet, exploring other **W**orlds and realms in an **I**nventive fashion.' Write a response to this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poems you have studied.

The realm explored in 'Street' is not as strange and otherworldly as LS but its very mundanity, coupled with an inventive point-of-view, makes both the place and the poem fascinating.

2. 'Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry reflects her interest in traditional worlds and is rich in symbolism and allusion.' To what extent do you agree or disagree with this assessment of her poetry? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin.

The place which is explored in 'Street' is not traditional like a thatch cottage but it is a recreation of a working-class milieu, common the world over and though the language used is quite simple, it is rich in symbolism. TW ... S... A

3. 'Ní Chuilleanáin writes about people and places in poems full of vivid imagery.' Write your response to this statement, supporting your answers with suitable reference to the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin on your course.

We meet two people on the 'Street' and though there is much ambiguity and mystery in their depiction, we can picture them and the place itself quite vividly. P Pl.. I

4. 'Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin writes on public and private themes in a way that engages and fascinates.' To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support the points you make with suitable reference to the poems by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin on your course. PP... EF..

**Notes courtesy of The Dobbyn Digest, Aoife O'Driscoll and John Ryan.**

## 1. *Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Night*

### **Title**

The unusual title of this poem comes from the first line of *The Birth of Antichrist* by William Dunbar a 15<sup>th</sup> century Scottish poet. His poem uses the setting of a dream to depict a gruesome battle between good and evil. Ní Chuilleanáin may have recalled the line when she saw the moon shining ‘in the silence of the night’; Lucina comes from the Latin for ‘light’ and is very similar to the Latin term for the moon: ‘luna’.

### **In Brief**

This poem recounts a night spent sleeping in a ruined old chapel without the comforts of modern civilisation. The poet details her ‘up close’ encounter with nature and the memories and thoughts the experience brings up for her.

### **Stanza by Stanza**

The poem starts with an image of a clear starry sky with the poet underneath reading a book by candlelight. She describes herself as being ‘without roast meat or music/ Strong drink or a shield from the air’, a description which conjures up images of a medieval feasting hall.

Despite having to wash in cold bog water and having bats for company she ‘slept safely’, feeling secure and relaxed in this natural environment.

In the third stanza the mood alters:

*Behind me the waves of darkness lay, the plague*

*Of mice, plague of beetles*

*Crawling out of the spines of books,*

The word ‘plague’, which is repeated three times, hints at times of mass death and destruction. The ‘waves of darkness’ ‘behind’ her seem to refer to terrible events from the past. She mentions Cromwell hinting at the violence and devastation his forces brought to Ireland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

*Plague shadowing pale faces with clay*

*The disease of the moon gone astray.*

‘Pale faces’ shadowed ‘with clay’ might refer to mass burials of plague victims and ‘the disease of the moon gone astray’ hints at the old term for mental illness, lunacy, which comes from the Latin for moon.

The atmosphere of gloom does not last long in the poem, however, as she asserts: ‘In the desert I relaxed, amazed’. She is in awe of the beauty of nature which, for her, is a very positive and heartening presence.

*Sheepdogs embraced me; the grasshopper*

*Returned with lark and bee.*

There a sense of growth and renewal, of nature overcoming the challenges of the past. She spots a hare ‘absorbed, sitting still/ In the middle of the track’, a line which echoes the opening of *On Lacking the Killer Instinct* and may show this was from the same period in her life. She concludes the poem with the uplifting line: ‘I heard/ Again the chirp in the stream running’ implying that life is in continuous motion and constantly renews itself despite humanity’s moments of war and destruction.

### **Language/Imagery**

The poem is full of striking natural imagery including:

- The sky: 'Moon shining in silence of night/ The heaven being all full of stars.'
- The bog water: 'it was orange, channelled down bogs/ Dipped between cresses'.
- Dark imagery: 'beetles/ Crawling out of the spines of books'.

### **Assonance**

- 'shining in silence of the night'
- 'Plague shadowing pale faces with caly'.

### **Alliteration**

- 'Plague shadowing pale faces'

### **Figurative Language**

Stanza 4 consists of an arresting **simile** comparing her awe to that of the animals in the mosaic when they first saw the sky through a hole in the roof:

*amazed / As the mosaic beasts on the chapel floor*

*When Cromwell had departed, and they saw*

*The sky growing through a hole in the roof.*

## 2. *The Second Voyage*

### 3. *Deaths and Engines*

#### **In brief:**

Death and Engines focuses on the inevitability of death in all our lives. Each of us will encounter a moment when we are 'Cornered' by death and will have no way to escape. Some might survive encounters with death and feel 'relief' but they cannot escape it forever. A time will come when it will be 'too late to stop'.

#### **Stanza by Stanza:**

The poem opens with the image of a crashed plane in the snow visible from the plane she is on as it approaches Paris airport in winter. She compares the 'Tubular' fuselage to 'an empty tunnel'. The remains of the plane are 'burnt out' and black against the contrasting whiteness of the snow.

In the second verse the poet is aboard the return flight home facing the 'snow-white runways in the dark'. The poet associates the plane's metal wings with the coldness of death that will eventually seep into us: 'The cold of the metal wings is contagious'. When we are 'cornered' by death we will need a miracle to survive: 'Soon you will need wings of your own'.

She describes death as the moment where our lives and time finally intersect: 'Time and life like a knife and fork/Cross.' She uses the image from palm-reading of the 'breaking' of the lifeline hinting at a fatalistic view of life - that we all have an evitable destiny.

She concludes stanza 3 with an image reminiscent of the immensely tragic events of 9/11: 'the curve of an aeroplane's track/ Meets the straight skyline.'

The attacks on the Twin Towers in New York have left a huge psychological imprint on the generation of people who witnessed it either first hand or on television. We all wonder what the people on those planes went through before their tragic deaths. What is it like to know you are going to die but can do nothing to save yourself?

Sometimes death is cheated. People survive horrific accidents and live to tell their tale: "The images of relief:/ Hospital pyjamas, screens round a bed/ A man with a bloody face/ Sitting up in bed, conversing cheerfully/ Through cut lips".

Eventually we will all have to face it however: "You will find yourself alone / Accelerating down a blind / Alley, too late to stop."

#### **Final Stanza**

We won't feel any pain once we are gone but our families will remember us and grieve for us: "You will be scattered like wreckage;/ The pieces, every one a different shape /Will painfully lodge in the hearts /Of all who love you."

The poem associates death with modern transport: 'Engines' especially airplanes. These powerful machines that can fly above the earth and travel at huge speeds also expose our mortality and powerlessness in the face of death.

The images of planes crashing into buildings and a car accelerating down a blind/ Alley' play upon our fears being in a machine spiraling out of control and not being able to do anything to save ourselves.

**Language:**

Assonance (repeated vowel sounds) features strongly in this poem in the second and third verses creating a sombre effect:

'The snow-white runways in the dark/ No sound came over/ The loudspeakers, except the sighs/ Of the lonely pilot.'

'Time and life like a knife'.

#### 4. *Street*

The unnamed man in the poem is entranced by the butcher's daughter, but there is no indication of her being aware of, let alone reciprocating, his advances. She is called 'the butcher's daughter' rather than being given a name. This makes us think once again of the princesses, knights and various other characters in fairy tales of old who are defined by their role rather than their individuality. There is also something particularly local in the description of her: all that needs to be said is that she is 'the butcher's daughter'.

Her femininity seems at odds with her job: butchering is traditionally a male role. Does this lend a touch of exoticism to the description of the girl? The word 'butcher' immediately brings to mind blood and slaughter. Interestingly, the word 'blood' is never mentioned in the poem, despite its playing such an important role.

The butcher's daughter wears the white trousers associated with her trade. White is normally associated with innocence and purity, but here it is worn by someone whose livelihood is based on death. Dangling from a 'ring at her belt' is a knife. 'Dangling' has a number of meanings here. First, it can be seen as a casual acceptance of the violence of butchering: the knife is a tool of the trade and is always to hand even when not being used. Second, there is an element of threat in the description. The knife is carelessly worn, perhaps, but its bouncing movement at her hip reminds us that it is something the girl could easily wield at a moment's notice if necessary. Third, the dangling knife seems an oddly unfeminine accessory. We might expect the girl in the poem to wear dangling jewellery, perhaps, but not a knife! Finally, the word 'dangling' brings to mind the idea of something being held tantalisingly out of reach, pulling us forward as we strive to reach it.

The man in the poem is fascinated by the bright drops of blood left in the butcher's daughter's wake and finds himself staring at them. In fairy-tales and folk-tales, there is often a trail that one of the characters must follow. The trail here is made by spots of blood on the ground, which is a rather gruesome take on the idea.

There is a cinematic quality to the poem in that we move from shot to shot and we are drawn into the world of the butcher's daughter and the man who is likewise drawn to her.

The second stanza tells of the man following the butcher's daughter one day. As there is no sense that she is aware of his interest, this might be viewed as either sinister or romantic! The choice is yours. The lane behind the shambles (slaughterhouse) is 'slanting', suggesting perhaps that nothing in this little tale is straightforward.

The door through which she passes stands 'half-open' which indicates that her world is partly closed to him. Seeing beyond a door or boundary to try to discover the mystery on the other side is a major pattern in Ní Chuilleánáin's poetry. Doors are also associated with femininity: the poet says that 'anything hollow or enclosed' is linked to a female body that 'contains and then reveals'. So the half-open door here can be seen as a symbol of the butcher's daughter's sensuality or sexuality. It attracts the man, yet she is not easily attainable.

The door is also a symbol of the boundary between the public and the private. Inside the steps are 'brushed and clean' and the setting seems a tidy, domestic one with the shoes left neatly paired on the bottom step. As the butcher's daughter climbs the stairs, the residue of blood on her heels fades 'to faintest at the top'. Although the man may have fallen in love with her, she is mysterious and remote and moves further and further away from him throughout the poem until all traces of her have vanished. She is a mystery, and this is what makes her so fascinating.

The most engaging aspect of this poem is the potential for the reader to use his or her imagination. The poet does not force her views on us but rather offers us a glimpse into the characters' lives and allows us to draw our own conclusions. Ní Chuilleanáin explains her method thus: 'I write poems that mean a lot to me, but I can't expect them to mean that to other people. What I am trying to do is to suggest, to phrase, to find a way for somebody to pick up certain suggestions and to give things like visual clues, colour, light and darkness.'

## 5. *Fireman's Lift*

### *Summary and analysis:*

The poet explains the title thus: 'It's the way of lifting a disabled person of which I was reminded when I saw the nurses lifting my mother in her final illness. They were all young and pretty and she loved them.' In 1963, Ni Chuilleainain and her mother visited the cathedral in Parma where they saw Correggio's 16th century fresco on the cupola or dome. The painting shows the Virgin's assumption into heaven, and the poet links this to the idea of her mother being lifted into heaven too. The angels and saints helping to carry the burden of the woman in the fresco are mirrored by the nurses carrying and caring for the poet's mother in her final illness.

Although the subject is death, the focus is on ascending to heaven. Ni Chuillanain calls this a 'cheering-up poem', written 'when my mother was dying because I absolutely knew that she would want me to write a poem about her dying.'

The poem opens with Ni Chuillanain's memory of standing with her mother, gazing up at the fresco in the cupola. The dome is compared to a 'big tree' as it reaches towards the heavens. The light and brightness of the point in the church where the roof 'splits wide open' gives this stanza a positive, uplifting tone.

The Virgin is being lifted upwards in a spiral by the angels. The work is difficult: she is 'Hauled' and the arms that lift her are 'heaving', but the love and support that surrounds the woman is clear from the words 'Supporting' and 'crowding'. The mention of the 'mist and shining' makes the scene otherworldly and mystical.

The poet and her mother step back, as she imagines the painter longed to do so that he might see his work in its entirety. Those who can see it from below marvel at the blend of architecture, light and paint as all blend together so that the angels' limbs seem to be dangling in the space of the cupola.

The dome is likened to a 'stone petticoat' under which the viewers gather. Ni Chuilleainain has said playfully that staring up at the Duomo is 'like looking up under someone's skirt' 3 and she also believes that the metaphor captures the comforting and loving image of 'churchgoers being enclosed like children under their mothers' skirts'.

The act of lifting the Virgin is one of love and her weight is gladly born by those who turn their bodies into bridges, cranes and cradles as they hoist her heavenward.

Writing the year after her mother's death, Ni Chuilleainain said of 'Fireman's Lift': 'When I found myself compelled to write about Correggio's Assumption of the Virgin, I could only concentrate on one aspect, the way it shows bodily effort and the body's weight.'

The compassion and respect the teams of angels show as they bow their heads reminds Ni Chuilleainain of the nurses gentle care of her mother in her sick bed. The reader is invited to share in the poet's hope that, like the Virgin in the fresco, her mother will also ascend into heaven when the time comes. 'Ni Chuilleainain has said that, on one level, the poem is about the nurses who looked after her mother when she was dying, but we can not fail to note the ways in which the cathedral architecture and Correggio's painting are interrelated to express a sense of loss, as the Virgin figure disappears behind the edge of a cloud. The poem ends here, for beyond the cloud is the mystery, another of Ni Chuilleainain's boundaries and crossings, the secret behind the edge unknowable.'

## 6. *All for You*

## 7. *Following*

## 8. *Kilcash*

### **Background**

Kilcash is a translation of an early 19th century ballad called *Caoine Cill Chaise*. It recounts the tale of the death of Margaret Butler, Vicountess Iveagh (d. 1744) and the subsequent decline of Kilcash castle and estate in Tipperary.

Margaret Butler (Lady Iveagh) had been sympathetic to the plight of Catholics under the oppressive Penal Laws and sheltered many priests, bishops and a number of Gaelic poets. In the ballad her death moves the writer to lament her tolerance and to compare the cutting down of the woods of Kilcash with the destruction of the Gaelic way of life under English rule.

### **Stanza by Stanza**

The tone of lament fills this ballad from the very first line as the poet mourns ‘the last of the woods laid low’. The once rich forests of Kilcash have been sold and the source of timber for the local community (a daily necessity at this time) is gone. Kilcash castle is empty: ‘Their bell is silenced now’ and the figure missed most by the local community is Lady Iveagh:

Where the lady lived with such honour,  
No woman so heaped with praise,

That ‘the sweet words of Mass’ could be heard in her home at a time when Mass was illegal shows her sympathy for the Catholic community. Her loss, and the crumbling of the castle, is symbolic of the destruction of the last shelter of the ordinary people against colonial oppression.

The poet proceeds, in traditional ballad fashion, to list examples of the decay of Kilcash. He mourns the ‘neat gates knocked down’, ‘the avenue overgrown’, ‘The smooth wide lawn...all broken’ and the paddock ‘turned to a dairy’. This once well-managed, thriving estate is desolate and eerily silent:

The roar of the bees gone silent...  
The musical birds are stilled

In the absence of Lady Iveagh’s protection the local people have been ‘depressed and tamed’ by colonial forces: ‘Even the deer and the hunter...Look down upon us with pity’. The place appears cursed, with nature itself appearing to mourn the loss of Lady Iveagh:

Mist hangs low on the branches  
No sunlight can sweep aside,  
Darkness falls among daylight  
And the streams are all run dry;

In the penultimate stanza the poet laments the wider problem of the loss of Irish freedom personified as a female figure who is exiled ‘to France and to Spain’. From the Flight of the Earls in 1607 onwards many generations of Gaelic and Norman chieftains fled to the continent after defeat to the English.

And now the worst of our troubles:

She has followed the prince of the Gaels –  
He has borne off the gentle maiden,  
Summoned to France and to Spain.

The final stanza strikes a more optimistic note looking forward to a future when the Irish might be free once more. This freedom will be greeted with great celebrations and rejoicing:

She may come safe home to us here  
To dancing and rejoicing  
To fiddling and bonfire

He also hopes that Kilcassidy may be ‘built up anew’ and last till the end of time: ‘May it never again be laid low.’

### **Language:**

Ballad Form:

As a translation of a 19th century Irish ballad this poem is intensely musical and features many of the elements we would associate with ballads.

1. 8 line stanzas
2. Regular rhyming scheme: ABCBDEFE
3. Regular metre – lilting iambic rhythm.
4. Lists: The list of decaying aspects of Kilcassidy is a common element of ballads.
5. Hyperbole: Descriptions are exaggerated for emphasis

Half-rhyme:

Half-rhyme is a rhyme in which the stressed syllables of ending consonants match, however the preceding vowel sounds do not match ie a ‘sort of rhyme’. Ní Chuilleanáin makes extensive use of half-rhymes in this poem and examples include:

‘praise’ and ‘Mass’  
‘down’ and ‘overgrown’  
‘Gaels’ and ‘Spain’  
‘here’ and ‘bonfire’

Assonance:

‘The musical birds are stilled’  
‘May it never again be laid low.’

Alliteration:

‘lady lived’  
‘game gone wild’  
‘preyed on the people’

Imagery

This poem is full of strong images of desolation and destruction. Beautiful natural images are contrasted with pictures of a barren landscape to highlight the loss:

No hazel, no holly or berry,  
Bare naked rocks and cold;  
The forest park is leafless  
And all the game gone wild.

The poet also contrast the noisy ‘commotion’ of the animals with the eerie silence that accompanies their absence:

The geese and the ducks’ commotion,  
The eagle’s shout, are no more,  
The roar of the bees gone silent,

### Atmosphere

A sense of doom pervades Kilcash and poet’s description of the haunted landscape of the ruined castle creates a bleak atmosphere in the poem.

### Tone

The tone throughout is one of bitter lament as the poet mourns the decline of Kilcash and the loss of Irish liberty. It lifts briefly in the final stanza with the picture of a better future where Kilcash is restored and Ireland regains its lost freedom.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan - a female figure who symbolized Irish Nationalism.

### Personification

The poet personifies Ireland’s freedom as an idealised young woman, ‘the gentle maiden’, who sought to look after her people as best she could:

Her company laments her  
That she fed with silver and gold:  
One who never preyed on the people  
But was the poor man’s friend.

This shows the poets attitude that Ireland prospered prior to English rule and he hopes that this lady or symbol of Irish freedom ‘may come safe home to us here’.

## 9. Translation

### **Background:**

The Magdalene laundries were institutions run by nuns. Some of the women in the laundries were unmarried mothers, others were locked away for what was euphemistically described as their own protection. Yet more were young girls transferred directly from the industrial schools.

Mary Norris ended up in a Magdalene laundry for disobeying an order. A teenage servant in Kerry, she took a forbidden night off, and was taken away to a convent. From there she was dispatched to the Magdalene laundry in Cork. Immediately on arrival, the nuns changed her name – standard practice in all the Magdalene laundries. "When I went in there," recalls Mary, "my dignity, who I was, my name, everything was taken. I was a nonentity, nothing, nobody."

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Mary Norris ended up in a Magdalene laundry for disobeying an order. A teenage servant in Kerry, she took a forbidden night off, and was taken away to a convent where the nuns had her examined to see if she was still a virgin (which she was). From there she was dispatched to the Magdalene laundry in Cork. Immediately on arrival, the nuns changed her name – standard practice in all the Magdalene laundries. "When I went in there," recalls Mary, "my dignity, who I was, my name, everything was taken. I was a nonentity, nothing, nobody."<sup>3</sup>

In 1993, property held by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge in Dublin which once served as a convent laundry was to be sold to a developer for public use. It was known at that time that some 133 graves existed, unmarked, in a cemetery on the convent grounds. The bodies were exhumed and reburied in Glasnevin cemetery. However, when the exhumation began, a further 22 unnamed and unrecorded bodies were found. Later, when the remains exhumed from High Park Convent were reinterred at Glasnevin cemetery, memorial gravestones were installed.<sup>4</sup> The poem 'Translation' was read at the reburial ceremony. The last Magdalene laundry closed in 1996.

### **Summary and analysis:**

The poet is concerned here with giving a voice to the voiceless. She is also keen that as well as the Magdalene women who suffered under a cruel and oppressive regime, we remember that the nuns who ran the laundries were not solely to blame but were acting on the authority of and with the approval of the government and society at large. 'Women from orphanages, Magdalene homes, mother-and-baby homes -and their families -are insisting on the stories of these places - their loneliness, hardship, and not infrequent cruelty - being told. The Irish appetite for history asserts itself again, demanding recognition for events which were supposed to be outside history. As so often in the past thirty or so years, it is clear that the politics of Catholic Ireland are centered on the personal, sexual, and familial and that the live issues of the day spring from the need to acknowledge the past. While nuns figure in the stories that are being told now, they are flanked by others, perhaps the real authority figures: priests, doctors, and policemen. In the background are the politicians and bureaucrats who decide how little would be paid, and when nothing would be paid, for the upkeep of the powerless.'<sup>5</sup>

The poem opens with a description of the ground in Glasnevin cemetery. It has been broken up by the gravediggers in preparation for the reburial. In some ways, this might be seen to 'even the score' as the women are finally being recognised and properly

buried. The grave will contain remains of women from every county in Ireland, just as the mourners come from all over the country. The women in the laundries – wherever their places of origin – were linked by injustice and cruelty, now those who come to see them laid to rest are linked by a recognition of this injustice.

The second stanza brings us into the laundry itself. The opening is rather obscure: 'White light blinded and bleached out / The high relief of a glance'. It could refer to a statue high above the workers (the word 'relief' hints at that) which is bleached by the steam so that it cannot be seen clearly nor can its gaze fall on the workers. If it is a religious statue, then it can offer no comfort as it is 'blinded' and 'bleached out'. This description may also refer to high windows which offer no relief to those who hope to glimpse the outside world: the bright light shining in and the rising steam mean that nothing can be seen and the confinement of the laundry room remains absolute. The word 'blinded' is an interesting one and could also be seen to refer to the blindness of society to these women's plight. Ni Chuilleanain often uses architecture as a metaphor and in her poem 'Bessboro' about the mother and baby home in Cork, she sees the 'high blind windows' as hiding the history of the place. 6

The language in the remainder of the second stanza contrasts the misery of the women's working lives with the gaiety and fun more generally associated with youth. The steam dances, giggles and slips down drains and across water. There is an irony to this as the women have no such opportunity for levity or uninhibited movement. We might also think of children who dance and giggle: any children born to these unfortunate women were quickly taken from them and placed for adoption.

In the third stanza, the poet calls on us to help these women as they go to their final rest. The imperative 'Assist them now' brings to mind the words of a prayer, which is fitting in the context of the poem. The women are reduced to small piles of remains lying under the earth and leaving only raised ridges to show where they lie. They are described as being under a veil, which can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, they are hidden from sight by the 'veil' of the earth. But of course the word 'veil' also reminds us of the nuns who ran these institutions; their actions and their treatment of the women were hidden or veiled from the outside world as they were protected by the Church. Ni Chuilleanain also used this image of the veil in her poem about the Bessboro mother and baby home, describing the mist and rain as veiling the building and obscuring its story. The spirits of these women are 'shifting' under the earth as they search for their identity. It is easy to imagine how they might not rest in peace when we consider the way they were treated in life and the anonymity and indignity of their first burial.

The poet imagines one voice attempting to be heard above the 'shuffle and hum' of work in the laundry. The imagery used to describe the women's work is overwhelmingly negative. The soap they use is compared to 'rotten teeth' as it shrinks to a ragged edge, and the women's grasp of the clothes is 'melted' in the scalding water they use. Their desperation and cry for help is futile as only 'The edges of words' can be heard against the grinding of the machinery.

But the voice 'Had begun' and is at last being heard, albeit from the mouths of others who have taken up their cause.

Finally the voice is loud enough to be heard, perhaps even by a nun who worked in the laundry and was, in her own way a victim of the attitudes of Irish society at that time. We can all hear of the injustice now and it is as loud and unignorable as 'an infant's cry'. By mentioning the baby, the poet reminds us of all those infants who were taken from their mothers soon after birth.

Grass may take root on the grave, but the memory of the steam from the laundry will still rise to form a cloud over our country's history.

The laundry, which was intended to wash away the Magdalene women's sins, has also washed the workers clean of 'idiom' or names which were used to diminish and demean them. They were also given 'temporary names' when they entered the laundry and left their past behind, just as the nuns who entered the convent took saint's names to signify the beginning of a new life.

The final stanza of the poem can also be seen as referring to the nun who bore the 'bunched keys' of the laundry. Her role as prison guard over these women has ended and she too, can rest in peace now. The 'parasite' or 'spell' that grew within her has gone and she too can rest in peace. The poet shows compassion for all of those who were involved in the laundries and recognises that the nuns were reflecting society's attitudes towards the 'fallen' women. Those who tacitly supported the laundries have escaped unscathed, by and large, and left the religious orders to take the brunt of the blame.

The title of the poem now makes sense to the reader as we see that she has translated the women's suffering and their forced silence into words.

## 10. *The Bend in the Road*

### **In Brief:**

The Bend in the Road is a poem about memory and nostalgia for the past. It recounts a tale of a child getting sick on a journey with the whole family and how the location, that 'bend in the road', becomes synonymous with that event. The poet realizes that our surroundings are filled with the memories of our loved ones even if they have passed away.

### **Stanza by Stanza:**

A child feels sick on a trip to the lake and the family pull the car over to the side of the road, with the windows rolled down, to let the child recover. The poet remembers a 'tree like a cat's tail' and 'the shadow of a house'.

Every time the family passed the location since they have remembered how the child got 'sick one day on the way to the lake'. The child has grown up and is now taller than the poet and her husband and the surroundings at the bend in the road have also changed. The tree has grown and the house has become 'quite covered' with 'green creeper'.

The poet reflects on all that has happened in the past 12 years and on the people they have lost: 'the faces never long absent from thought'. These people were taken away by disease: 'we saw them wrapped and sealed by sickness'. They were so weak that even sleep seemed a burden to them: 'the piled weight of sleep / We knew they could not carry too long'.

To the poet this bend in the road is a place of memory for all these people and all her memories, not just the one in which her child got sick: 'This is the place of their presence: in the tree, in the air.'

### **Language:**

Figurative language: The poet uses similes in many of her images. She describes the tree as 'like a cat's tail' and the spirits of the dead being 'like one cumulus cloud/ In a perfect sky.'

Atmosphere: There is a serene and peaceful atmosphere in this poem. This 'bend in the road' is described as 'silent' and seems a place where little happens.

Alliteration: 'A tall tree, like a cat's tail'. And 'sealed by sickness'.

Assonance: 'Piled high, wrapped lightly, like...'

## 11. *On Lacking the Killer Instinct*

### **Summary and analysis:**

This poem is part of a collection called 'The Sun-fish'.

Ní Chuilleanáin wrote the poem about her father's final illness, connecting it with a story he had told her about running away from the Black and Tans during the War of Independence, when he was only nineteen years old: 'He said he never felt so well in his life as when he was running, so I've been trying to put that into a poem.'<sup>1</sup>

The title of the poem is intriguing and makes us consider the instinct to kill: is it animal, human or both? Is it something we all possess or are there those who lack it? It also makes us think of the 'fight or flight' response which determines whether we react to danger or stress by fleeing or standing and fighting.

The style of the poem is cinematic as we move rapidly between a number of images of stillness and movement, past and present, animal and human.

The poem opens with the image of a hare 'sitting still' in the middle of a 'grassy track'. It is 'absorbed', but we don't know what it is that has caught its attention. Ní Chuilleanáin has gone to this place in the hills to avoid dealing with her father's illness and impending death. The hare's stillness is calming and contrasts with the poet's flight from the stress of being with her dying father.

The sight reminds Ní Chuilleanáin of a photo in the morning paper, showing a hare being pursued by two greyhounds. The dogs are described rather negatively: they are foolishly large and clumsy: 'absurdly gross' and 'tumbling over' compared to the agile little hare which 'shoots off to the left'. The poet's sympathy for and empathy with the hare is clear; she refers to it as 'she' although she can't possibly know its gender.

Even though the hare is terrified, it is also filled with a 'glad power' as it evades the pursuing dogs. The adrenaline rush it must be feeling reminds her of another chase which may, on the face of it, have appeared unfair and unequal but which also showed that cleverness and quick-thinking can allow a seemingly weak prey to elude a stronger predator. In 1921 her father managed to escape capture by the Black and Tans and he said that he 'never felt so well in his life' as at when he was running. The 'gladness' he felt at that time echoes the 'glad power' of the hare in a few lines earlier. He is running in the semi-darkness of dusk and there is a sense of confinement in the descriptions of 'narrow roads' and 'high hedges', which again links him to the coursed hare which must elude its pursuers within the limits of an enclosure. For both, escape seems impossible.

Neither the hare nor the poet's father should have been hunted in this way, but both display their ingenuity as they fool their pursuers. Although the photo in the paper cannot have shown how the hunt ended, Ní Chuilleanáin imagines that the hare tricks the 'stupid dogs' by doubling back on her own scent and then springing 'out of the frame' of the photo and away to permanent freedom. The dogs are not as fast as she and they are contrasted with the hare as they work or 'labour' to catch up while she springs, doubles back and finally 'gets off'. Once again, there is a flashback to a different place and time. The dogs become the 'growling' lorry and the poet's father, like the hare, tricks the hunters by darting off in an unexpected direction. He takes refuge in a house and snatches up a towel to partly cover his face. By pretending to be drying his face and appearing confused by the soldiers' appearance, the poet's father manages to evade capture. Fortunately for him, the occupants of the house are willing to harbour him and he stays the night there, emerging into a 'blissful' dawn. The word 'blissful' conveys the young man's relief and delight at having escaped unscathed. Now, however, the poet wonders if he should have done such a thing. His presence put the family in the 'sheltering house' at risk and the Black and Tans may well have burned it down if his ruse had failed and he had been caught there.

Whether he was right or wrong to run, the poet acknowledges her father's bravery and determination. His courage inspires her to go back to face the awful reality of his final illness. She washes herself in 'brown bog water', probably in a ritualistic, symbolic way more than anything else, and goes back to the town. The poem ends with the image of the hare which was instrumental in setting the poet on the train of thought that led to her return to her father's death bed. It seems that in the poet's mind it has almost become the same hare that ran so frantically from the greyhounds but it has found peace now in its 'hour of ease'.<sup>2</sup> This is a positive and uplifting message on which to end the poem and reinforces

the idea that the poet's decision was the right one. Earlier in the poem, when she first saw the hare, Ní Chuilleanáin said that she saw her 'suddenly again' in the morning paper. Of course it is not the same animal, but it is what it stands for that is important to the poet.

## *12. To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009*

Niall Woods is Ní Chuilleanáin's son and Xenya Ostrovskaia was the woman he married in September 2009. Ní Chuilleanáin wrote the poem to commemorate their wedding and give her blessing to their marriage.

In the poem she references many different folk tales both Irish and Russian and also the Book of Ruth from the Bible. These stories all deal with people starting out on adventurous journeys and, to varying degrees, feature 'happily ever after' endings. The poet's message is that one has to take risks and persevere to earn the good things in life, especially love.

### **Stanza by Stanza**

The poem opens with a direct address to the couple about to be wed. She says that when they 'both see the same star/ Pitching its tent on the point of the steeple' it will be time for their journey together to begin.

### **The folk tale references**

The Red Ettin – a tale about three sons setting out on journeys – each one is given the choice to take a full loaf and their mother's curse or half a loaf and their mother's blessing. Only the youngest son makes the latter choice and he succeeds in marrying a beautiful princess.

Sleeping Beauty – the familiar folktale of a cursed princess rescued by a courageous prince.

The Firebird – a Russian folktale about an emperor whose golden apples are being stolen at night-time. The emperor commands his sons to find out who the thief is and only the youngest son succeeds. He sets out on journey to catch the culprit, the firebird, and eventually succeeds and marries a beautiful princess.

The King of Ireland's Son and the Enchanter's Daughter – the story of a prince who loses a wager to an enchanter and has to complete the tasks set by him. Eventually he succeeds marries the enchanter's daughter!

### **The Book of Ruth:**

The final story she references is the Book of Ruth from the Bible. Ruth was a Moabite who travelled far away from home to marry an Israelite. After her husband died Ruth remained loyal to her mother-in-law Naomi saying 'whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.' She eventually married again largely as a result of her loyalty to Naomi and lives happily ever after.

All of these references encourage courage in the face being far away from home. Niall and Xenya's marriage is seen as the start of a great adventure and she tells them not to be afraid to 'leave behind the places' that they know. The stories from their respective cultures will keep them connected to home: 'All that you leave behind you will find once more.'

### **Critical Comments on Ní Chuilleanáin:**

Her poems depict edges, borders, and crossings between different kinds of worlds: physical and metaphysical, life and death, past and present, human and natural, scientific and imaginative. As Irene Gilsean Nordin has suggested, Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry 'is informed by the theme of crossing: the crossing from one realm of experience to another, from the realms of the everyday and ordinary to the realms of the spirit world and the world of the other'. Intersections between these worlds and the edges where one touches another create many of the image patterns in her work, and borders often hold the key to meaning in her poems. Ní Chuilleanáin develops these ideas in the architectural imagery which recurs in her poetry, illustrated through what in one poem she calls the 'architectural metaphor'. Images of houses--walls, doors, windows, roofs, gables, hatches--and churches, convents, and ruins occur again and again, expressing diverse ideas. For Ní Chuilleanáin, the architectural metaphor is often connected with history, an interest she developed in her undergraduate years at University College Cork and graduate work at Oxford. For Ní Chuilleanáin, history is not only a journey into the past but also a key to the present: 'we are inclined to associate certain things with the past as something vanishing, where in fact, one is constantly made aware of the fact that the past does not go away, that it is walking around the place and causing trouble at every moment'. Dillon Johnston, in contrasting the poetry of Eavan Boland and Ní Chuilleanáin, argues that Ní Chuilleanáin's use of architectural imagery reflects her interest in Baroque art: 'Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry resists containment, within the literal or physical or domestic, as she wanders beyond borders and margins and walls of structures. She often represents such traversing of thresholds and boundaries in relation to architecture'.

### **Ní Chuilleanáin - Themes**

#### **Memory**

Memory and the process of remembering features in many Ní Chuilleanáin poems including: *The Bend in the Road*, *On Lacking the Killer Instinct* and *Kilcash*.

*The Bend in the Road* focuses on how memory connects with specific places and how these places can assume personal significance over time. Every time the poet passes a particular 'bend in the road' she remembers her child was 'sick one day on the way to the lake' and how the family associated that place with that event ever since.

*On Lacking the Killer Instinct* demonstrates the process of memory, how one thought can spark off a memory and another and another. A picture in the paper sparks off the memory of the time when her father was dying in hospital and then she thinks of her father as a young man.

*Kilcash* pays tribute to a heroic figure from Irish history, Lady Iveagh, and places emphasis on the importance of remembering those who have died.

#### **Love**

*To Niall Woods* is a vibrant celebration of romantic love that fervently believes in 'happily ever after'. In this poem Ní Chuilleanáin depicts an idealised, magical vision of love by referencing

traditional folk tales. She advises her son and his bride to have courage as they start out on the adventure of marriage together:

Leave behind the places that you knew:  
All that you leave behind you will find once more.

Street deals with love in a more ambiguous way. In it a man falls in love with the butcher's daughter who he watches passing by in the street. It appears to be a one sided attraction in that we do not get the butcher's daughter's perspective.

The dark side of love is hinted at when he follows her home one day and sees her bloody footmarks on the stairs. The reader is left guessing as to the outcome.

## **History**

On Lacking the Killer Instinct deals with a violent period in Irish history which Ní Chuilleanáin's father took active part – The War of Independence. She describes how he was chased by 'a lorry-load of soldiers', the Black and Tans, a notoriously ruthless force, on one particular occasion and thankful evaded capture. She criticises the need for such violence saying he 'like the hare should never have been coursed.'

Kilcash details the suffering endured by the Irish people as a consequence of colonialism. The suppression of religion and theft of natural resources: 'What will we do now for timber?' left the people poor and struggling for identity. Leaders were exiled leaving the people unprotected. The poet depicts the scene in apocalyptic terms:

Mist hangs low on the branches  
No sunlight can sweep aside,  
Darkness falls among daylight  
And the streams are all run dry;

Lucina Shynning in the Silence of the Night references Cromwell who was responsible for a violent and chaotic invasion of Ireland in 1649. She describes the dark moments of history as: 'the waves of darkness' behind her.

## **Death**

Death and Engines focuses on the inevitability of death in all our lives. Each of us will encounter a moment when we are 'Cornered' by death and will have no way to escape. Some might survive encounters with death and feel 'relief' but they cannot escape it forever. A time will come when it will be 'too late to stop'.

On Lacking the Killer Instinct deals with the very real death of her father and her struggle to deal with having to watch him die. She reveals that she 'ran away' to avoid the pain of seeing him suffer but felt guilty and eventually returned. She also addresses the thrill experienced by human and animal alike in evading death at the hands of a hunter quoting her father as saying he never felt 'Such gladness' as when he escaped the Black and Tans.

Kilcash is an elegy for Lady Iveagh who contributed so much to her local community when alive and whose absence was strongly lamented.

<p><b>Eilean Ni Chuilleanain- lines to memorise</b>  <u>The Street</u>  Subtle messages that unfold only through multiple readings  They resist easy explanations</p> <p><u>He fell in love with the butcher's daughter</u>  <u>When he saw her passing by in her white trousers</u>  <u>Dangling a knife on a ring at her belt</u></p> <p><u>One day he followed her</u>  <u>Down the slanting lane at the back of the shambles</u></p> <p><u>Her shoes paired on the bottom step,</u>  <u>Each tread marked with the red crescent</u>  <u>Her bare heels left, fading to the faintest at the top.</u></p>	<p><u>Translation</u>  <u>The soil frayed and sifted evens the score-</u></p> <p><u>White light blinded and bleached out</u>  <u>The high relief of a glance, where the steam</u>  <u>danced</u>  <u>Around the stone drains and giggled and slipped</u>  <u>across water.</u></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><u>Shifting</u></p> <p><u>Searching for their parents, their names,</u></p> <p><u>While the grass takes root, while the steam rises:</u></p> <p><u>Washed clean of idiom-the baked crust</u>  <u>Of words that made my temporary name-</u>  <u>A parasite that grew in me- that spell</u>  <u>Lifted- I lie in the earth sifted to dust-</u>  <u>Let the bunched keys I bore slacken and fall-</u>  <u>I rise and forget- a cloud over my time.</u></p>
<p><u>Fireman's Lift</u>  <u>I was standing beside you looking up</u>  <u>Through the big tree of the cupola</u>  <u>Where the church splits wide open to admit Celestial</u>  <u>choirs, the fall-out of brightness.</u></p> <p><u>The Virgin was spiralling to heaven,</u>  <u>Hauled up in stages. Past mist and shining,</u>  <u>Teams of angelic arms were heaving,</u>  <u>Supporting, crowding her, and we stepped</u>  .....  <u>This is what love sees, that angle:</u>  <u>The crick in the branch loaded with fruit,</u>  .....  A jaw defining itself, a shoulder yoked, The back  making itself a roof The legs a bridge, the hands 20 A  crane and a cradle.  <u>Their heads bowed over to reflect on her</u>  <u>Fair face and hair so like their own</u>  <u>As she passed through their hands. We saw them</u>  <u>Lifting her, the pillars of their arms</u>  .....  <u>(Her face a capital leaning into an arch)</u>  <u>As the muscles clung and shifted</u>  <u>For a final purchase together</u>  <u>Under her weight as she came to the edge of the cloud.</u></p>	<p><u>The Bend in the Road</u>  <u>This is the place where the child</u>  <u>Felt sick in the car and they pulled over</u>  <u>And waited in the shadow of a house</u></p> <p><u>Piled high, wrapped lightly, like the one cumulus</u>  <u>cloud</u>  <u>In a perfect sky, softly packed like the air,</u>  <u>Is all that went on in those years, the absences,</u>  <u>The faces never long absent from thought,</u>  <u>The bodies alive then and the airy space they took</u>  <u>up</u>  <u>When we saw them wrapped and sealed by</u>  <u>sickness</u>  <u>Guessing the piled weight of sleep</u>  <u>We knew they could not carry for long;</u>  <u>This is the place of their presence: in the tree, in</u>  <u>the air.</u></p>

<p><u>Kilcash</u>  <u>What will we do now for timber,</u>  <u>With the last of the woods laid low-</u>  <u>No word of Kilcash nor its household,</u>  <u>Their bell is silenced now,</u></p> <p><u>Mist hangs low on the branches</u>  <u>No sunlight can sweep aside,</u>  <u>Darkness falls among the daylight</u>  <u>And the streams are all run dry;</u></p> <p><u>Her company laments her</u>  <u>That she fed with silver and gold</u>  <u>One who never preyed on the people</u>  <u>But was the poor souls' friend</u></p> <p><u>My prayer to Mary and Jesus</u>  <u>She may come home safe to us here</u>  <u>To dancing and rejoicing</u>  <u>To fiddling and bonfire</u>  <u>That our ancestors' house will rise up,</u>  <u>Kilcash built up anew</u>  <u>And from now to the end of the story</u>  <u>May it never again be laid low</u></p>	<p><u>To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskia, Married in</u>  <u>Dublin 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2009</u></p> <p><u>When you look out across the fields</u>  <u>And you both see the same star</u>  <u>Pitching its tent on the point of the steeple-</u></p> <p><u>Leave behind the places that you knew;</u>  <u>All that you leave behind you will find once more,</u>  <u>You will find it in the stories;</u></p> <p><u>And every night he will tell you a different tale</u>  <u>About the firebird that stole the golden apples,</u>  <u>Gone every morning out of the emperor's garden,</u></p> <p><u>The story the cat does not know is the Book of</u>  <u>Ruth</u>  <u>And I have no time to tell you how she fared</u></p> <p><u>You will have to trust me, she lived happily ever</u>  <u>after.</u></p>
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<p><u>The Street</u>  She has a belief in the importance of the ordinary and the domestic as new metaphors for human experience  <b>First section</b>  Dangling- a close up shot captures a disturbing detail  Run on lines depict the rising emotions of the man  White is often associated with purity and innocence  The man is captivated  <b>Second section</b>  Narrative becomes increasingly menacing  “slanting” suggests a sinister backstreet  All is oblique, tilted, half concealed  “shambles”- to the outside world is a place of violence and mayhem  A typically ambivalent scenario  Unforgettable atmosphere of edgy anticipation  The poem reveals and conceals</p>	<p><u>Translation</u>  Macabre description of Glasnevin grave  <b>Line 4</b>  Imagines the grim laundry rooms  Delicate and precise language contrasts with the grinding oppression of routine manual labour  Their stolen youth and gaiety is poignantly conveyed through familiar images of the laundry  <b>Line 6</b>  Vigorous verbs  Line 7  Metaphor evokes image of stern Magdalene nuns  She attempts to communicate “translate” decades of silence into meaningful expression on behalf of the inmates  <b>Line 13</b>  Explores the experience of one of the nuns  She too has been exploited  Poet's tone shows an understanding of the woman caught between conflicting duties of care and indoctrination  <b>Final lines</b>  Voice of the convent reverend mother  Her punitive authority over other has haunted her beyond the grave  Measured and balanced approach shows genuine compassion for all institutionalized victims  The women, and those in charge, were in common confinement  She avoids being over emotional</p>
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<p><u><i>Fireman's Lift</i></u>  Extraordinary poem  Looking at Coreggio's celebrated ceiling mural  <b>First stanza</b>  Sense of intimacy and closeness between mother and daughter  <b>Second stanza</b>  Dynamic scene  Dynamic verbs "spiralling" and "heaving"  <b>Stanza five</b>  A coming to terms with deep personal loss  Her resignation is evident in the poignant image of a "branch loaded with fruit."  <b>Stanza 6+7</b>  Return to Coreggio's mesmerizing skill  The poem is a moving expression of the poet's enduring love for her mother  Infused with an outstanding sense of love loss and triumph.</p>	<p><u><i>The Bend in the Road</i></u>  <b>Stanza 1</b>  Use of demonstrative pronoun "this" gives significance to the location  Run on lines catch the flurry of activity  At the end of the stanza the routine narrative of everyday life quickly resumes  <b>Stanza 2</b>  There is a sense of time being concentrated  She marvels at how the child has grown into adulthood  <b>Tone: reflective and introspective</b>  <b>Final stanza</b>  Just as a cloud grows bigger as it absorbs moisture so the poet's loved ones buckle beneath the weight of their illness  The bend in the road now marks the place where lost family members now reside  A poem with meticulously accurate description  Some ordinary conversational language in it  The location is a metaphor for the reality of being human: everything in life changes</p>
<p><u><i>Kilcash</i></u>  Stanza one  Plaintive voice lamenting  <b>Tone: hopelessness</b>  Felling of the tress symbolic of the decline of the aristocratic Catholic family.  Narrator appears to express the desolation felt by the impoverished and leaderless Irish at the time  <b>Stanza Two and three</b>  Add to the maudlin sentiments  <b>Stanza four and five</b>  The abandoned tenants are depicted as pitiable  A sense of mordant despondency as a consequence of abandonment  <b>Final stanza</b>  The aspiration that the castle will be "built up anew" offers a clear symbol of recovery   Does the poet satirise the subservient native Irish?</p>	<p><u><i>To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskia, Married in Dublin 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2009</i></u>  She approaches the subject from an oblique Non- confessional perspective  <b>Stanza one</b>  Begins with warm advice from a loving mother  Romantic image of a harmonious vision  She illuminates details  She also counsels that it is the right time to go  She combines colloquial and fairytale language  <b>The tone is warm but also pragmatic</b>  <b>Stanza two</b>  Begins with the imperative warning "leave behind"  She consoles that past experiences can be found in stories  She weaves an intricate web of such stories  Is she saying that the path to true love is filled with difficulties and that only the brave are successful?  Has familiar elements of fairytales  Fairytale allusions  <b>Stanza three</b>  Reference to the couple's two cultural backgrounds  She introduces the Irish tradition  Is she warning that love must be cherished and never taken for granted?  Lasting love has to be won through daring, determination and sacrifice  <b>Stanza 4</b>  Genuine love can require uncompromising sacrifice  Two different cultures coming together  Last line placed apart to emphasise its significance  All the stories used are concerned with the essential qualities of a loving relationship  Courage, faithfulness, honesty  <b>Tone: sincere</b>  Mood is upbeat and forward looking</p>

Q. “Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is a truly original poet who leads us into altered landscapes and enhances our understanding of the world around us.” To what extent would you agree with this statement? In your response refer to the poems on your course.

Indicative material:

- fragmented narrative, innovative narrative blending
- collapse of time and place
- Dispassionate, detached tone of storyteller
- Biblical, historical and mythical references
- layered and interwoven nuances challenge the reader
- uncovers hidden dramas
- artistic, architectural references
- recurring optimistic themes of life and rebirth
- use of the continuous past, etc..

### **Sample Answer**

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem, “Translation”, provides an accessible platform for voices from the margin. The title stresses the importance to communicate decades of silence into meaningful expression on behalf of the Magdalen laundry inmates. She uncovers the hidden drama. This poem was recited at the reburial of those forgotten women in Glasnevin. She brought me to the graveside through her unnerving detail, “soil frayed and sifted evens the score.” Here is the stark reality of the communal grave and the horrifying injustice perpetrated on these women under the rule of an oppressive Catholic Ireland. Through layered nuances the reader is invited to consider. The symbol of gaoler and gaoled are vividly caught in the alliterative phrase, “the bunched key I bore”. The hard explosive “b” underscores the harsh, inhumane regime of these institutions. Alliteration is also effectively used in the lines, “White light blinded and bleached out/ The high relief of a glance.” Any human interaction which might soften these women’s lines was obliterated. The assonance of the broad vowel “a” effectively shows the loosening of authority’s grip on these women, the keys now “slacken and fall”. Contrast shows the youthful spirit of the incarcerated women in the midst of their harsh environment. Their essence is captured in the lively verbs, “where steam danced/ Around stone drains and giggled and slipped across the water.” But the poet also challenged me to consider the nuns as victims also of this repressive regime. The nun’s identity was removed, “the baked crust/Of words that made my temporary name”. Her conflict is detailed, “every pocket in her skull blared with the note” as she heard the child’s cry. I wondered about her exploitation. She felt a “parasite that grew in me”. Was this the power she wielded over the inmates? The poet allowed me to hear the voices from the institution, those of the young women and those in authority. At the grave the “grass takes root”. The “steam”, the voices from these laundries call out. The poet’s blended landscapes and layers of nuances enabled me to understand the dangers of unquestioning obedience to strict authoritarianism

**11 Created by Frances Rocks**

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### Sample Leaving Cert Questions

1. “Ní Chuilleanáin’s beguiling poems emerge from an intense but insightful imagination,” Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Write a response, supporting your points with reference to her poems on your course.

2. “Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s subject matter can be challenging at times, but her writing style is always impressive.” Write a response to this view, supporting the points you make with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.

### SAMPLE PLAN Q1.

INTRO: Ní Chuilleanáin’s innovative treatment of a broad thematic range – Irish history, myth, transience, memory, relationships, loss, religious life, the dispossessed, etc.

POINT 1: “Fireman’s Lift” – compelling treatment of her mother’s death. Importance of dramatic setting, as a context for personal experiences/memories. Poet’s sympathetic tone, atmospheric detail, artistic references.

POINT 2: “Following” – collapse of time, interwoven narrative, continuous past. (Vividly realised journey of girl through hurly burly of Irish fair day slips to ‘shivering bog’ and reference to Pharaoh’s decree to drown first born boys to stem growth of Israelite population, move to vision of utopia, image of book holding memories which live again through the power of relics, ‘The crushed flowers’.)

POINT 3: Dispassionate, detached tone of storyteller – “Death and Engines”, “Kilcash”. Underlying sense of the poet’s compassion. Interlinked narrative threads entice the reader. ETC.

CONCLUSION: Poetry can challenge /excite responses. Poet’s mesmeric exploration of universal themes invites readers to unravel the secrets of her work.

### Another Sample Question and Answer (J. Ryan):

Ní Chuilleanáin’s extraordinary poetic world reveals compelling narratives which challenge readers, due to her intense but also insightful imagination. Discuss with refers to her poetry.

The extraordinariness of Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetic world stems from the stories it presents to the reader. These tales prompt examination, analysis and response from readers due to the messages, subject matter and imaginative manner in which these are revealed. Every story Ní Chuilleanáin reveals is not definitive: rather each is open-ended, provoking examination and response based on the reader’s viewpoint. This is facilitated by the poet’s imaginative tendencies, as she creates worlds and individuals that range from the realistic to the fantastic, but that are constantly relevant and engaging to the reader. We see this in poems such as Street, The Bend in the Road, Second Voyage, Lucina Schynning in Silence, On Lacking the Killer Instinct, To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovaska.

Lucina Schynning is illustrative of the poet’s compelling narratives and insightful imagination. She creates a story about the ruins of a monastery with obvious links to the Irish quest for independence. As a result, the Irish reader is immediately prompted to respond to and explore the poem, due to the sympathy that will arise from the reader: the story has connections to the Irish experience and her troubled relationship with England. The poet therefore does not just present a message to her

readers, but also asks them to undergo a cultural and historical self-examination of sorts, considering their link to Irish descendants. Ni Chuilleanain brings this about through intense and insightful imagination, producing a now derelict part of Ireland destroyed by Cromwell, bleakly but succinctly evoking memories of Irish strife at the hands of English oppressors: "When Cromwell had departed... Behind me the waves of darkness lay." A metaphor is used to convey the damaging effect of the colonisers as they destroyed the way of life for the Irish populace, seen as the poet compares such an area to a desert: "In the desert I relaxed." The obvious intent is clear, as a desert cannot support plant and therefore any other form of life: the poet is thus remarking that the English affect on Ireland is damaging the living experience for the natives. However the metaphor is paradoxical as the speaker mentions relaxing in the desert now that Cromwell's troops have departed, which challenges the reader to consider whether they should be satisfied at their exit or simply dismayed at the permanent damage they have caused. The choice is not clear-cut, and this reveals the aforementioned cultural examination the poet expects of the reader, brought about by her imagination that presents the issue as ambiguous rather than definitive. It can therefore be seen that it is not just the speaker's mindset unsettled by thoughts of Cromwell's troops but also the reader, due to being similarly unable to determine how to assess such a damaging situation so as to find any good in it: "the plague/ Of mice, plague of beetles,/ Crawling out of the spines of books."

As the poem progresses Ni Chuilleanain continues to force the reader into a self-examination of sorts by rooting the text's story in a historical framework that they are connected to. The poet's use of the monastery is a metaphor for the Irish situation, as such religious places had been safe havens from the Roman conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries. The inclusion of this context once again alludes to the threat of foreign oppressors, however it also allows for a blurring of contexts as the destruction of the monastery is a consequence of English oppression at present. Therefore, as Ni Chuilleanain describes the destruction of this place the reader is asked to consider not just the destroying of a now ruined place but also the consequence, significance and morality of such an act, once again forcing the reader to undergo a significant examination of the poem's subject matter. The mention of "the chapel floor" and "mosaic" act as reminders of the now ruined monastery, with mosaic referring to a stained glass window that would once have allowed sunlight to shine into the monks who inhabited this space. Now however there is only darkness, intended not just to provide contrast but also symbolise the lack of activity in this space due to the aforementioned razing of the monastery: "Behind me the waves of darkness lay". Now that the speaker cannot reside in this space they must immerse themselves in nature, a commentary for the lack of suitable support in Ireland at the time of the poem. This once again forces the reader to consider whether the departure of Cromwell's troops should be celebrated, as there does not appear to be much hope in the aftermath: "Sheepdogs embraced me; the grasshopper/ Returned with a lark and bee".

The poet adopts the same approach elsewhere in her poetry, such as in her poem *Street*. Here the narrative presented to the reader is a love story, introduced with the mention of the poem's protagonist: "He fell in love with the butcher's daughter". However such an apparently definitive tale is still challenging to the reader, as this is not a conventional love story: rather there are implications that we should question the union. Ni Chuilleanain insightfully imagines the relationship in a realistic manner, rather than an idealised state where individuals are in a permanent state of ecstasy. Throughout the poem there suggestion that the female member of this union is

relegated to an inferior position, such as when the poet remarks that “One day he followed her/ Down the slanting lane at the back of the shambles”, immediately suggesting the male is the dominant partner in this relationship, the sentence structure indicating he determines proceedings in the romantic sphere. A similar hierarchy is seen when we enter the home, for while the two seem to share a domestic realm it appears as though the woman is restricted to a traditional role where there is no gender equality. She is responsible for chores and duties in the house, as we hear that “the stairs were brushed and clean”, with the mention that “Her shoes paired on the bottom step”, indicating she is intrinsically linked to such domesticity. As a result, it may be taken that Ni Chuilleainain’s simplistic style here is not coincidental but rather intentional, as the reader may consider it indicative of her perception of the relationship. If the reader does not consider it equal then s/he may presume such basic presentation as representative of a union that does not deserve elaborate or complex treatment. This may be why the relationship is only described in nouns, verbs and adjectives, such as “the paving-stones” of the street or the “dark shining drops” that fall on these. Similarly, the entrance to the home is described only as a door that is “half-open”, while the most expansive form is when we hear that “Each tread” was “marked with the red crescent/ Her bare heels left”.

The reader is again asked to respond to a narrative in *Bend In the Road*. The poem chronicles the changing viewpoint of individuals as they grow older, however once again this is not a wholly pleasant message. Rather, the audience is asked to consider and evaluate whether such alterations should be admired or lamented due to drawbacks present when such changes arise. The poem begins with the child’s view of the titular bend in the road, initially described in a simplistic manner akin to the presentation in *Street*. This resembles a child’s viewpoint, where elements are simply described and glossed over rather than analysing these. We hear the speaker gets sick while his parents “waited in the shadow of a house”, a place only distinguishable as it is located close to “a tall tree like a cat’s tail”. While there is an advance in viewpoint twelve years later, the reader is now asked to consider whether this improvement should be lauded. We do see a contrast as the speaker does not simply remark that they get sick, but rather presents this in a more advanced manner, detailing how this is now a “place where the child/ Felt sick in the car and they pulled over.” However the reader is left to wonder if the strengthening of viewpoint should be admired or disregarded as it does not seem wholly impressive. Ni Chuilleainain again uses her imagination effectively to present a story that requires a response from her reader, who must determine if description of the house that is “covered in/ With green creeper” is sufficient for the narrative, for they might also consider there is no worthwhile analysis of this place, or mention of its significance – all we are told is that this is “the place/ Where you were sick one day on the way to the lake.” A reader might indeed argue there is no worthwhile change to the person’s viewpoint when older, as we only hear of minor amendments to the perception of the scene, such as that the tree is “taller”, while the road is not even contrasted from the past, described “as silent as ever it was on the day.” The same line of thinking may lead a reader to conclude that the present viewpoint is not advanced enough to merit a celebration progression of perception, emphasised with the speaker’s basic description of the boy’s recuperation: “They opened the windows and breathed/ Easily,/ while nothing moved. Then he was better.”

The same combination of challenging but compelling narratives and insightful imagination is seen in another of Ni Chuilleainain’s poems, *To Niall Woods*. Here the poet explores the topic of abandoning the familiar world of childhood so as to

progress in life. This challenges readers as it does not appeal to the human desire for a settled way of being, however it also forces individuals to consider such behaviour, as it is often necessary to exit a world one has become accustomed to. Ni Chuilleanain forces the reader to consider this specific issue through her imaginative capabilities, creating the world of childhood in a romanticised manner. Doing so naturally appeals to the aforementioned human desire to remain in the realm of the familiar, as the reader will become drawn to the parent who offers compassion: they therefore will not believe “is the time to set out on your journey,/ With half a loaf and your mother’s blessing.” Similarly, when the poet’s son is told he will return to a changed world this initially appears warped and unsettling, such as the “talking cat”, the pet which is now humanised, and the handsome woman who cannot be understood, “The sleeping beauty in her high tower” who will speak in both “Irish and Russian”. However, after creating a narrative that allows the reader to become drawn to the world of the familiar, the poet then provides proof that movement away from this place should not be dismissed. She cites a girl named Ruth initially fearful of leaving the world of childhood behind: “When she went out at night and was afraid.” But she assures her son and the reader that this journey was ultimately beneficial: “You will have to trust me, she lived happily ever after.” Elsewhere she also recounts the Celtic legend of the King of Ireland’s son, who journeyed to the Land of the Mist to save his love, Fidelma. He had to “Leave behind the places that you knew” and “trusted to strangers”, emphatically illustrating his embracing of the unknown. As a result the reader is shown both endorsements for and against moving away from a familiar world, which naturally leads to an in-depth exploration of the issue at hand.

The final poem in which such the poet’s customary technique can be viewed is *The Second Voyage*. Here Ni Chuilleanain considers the theory that the past is a generalised timespan as opposed to being comprised of distinctive periods. She explores this through intensely insightful imagination, linking mythical and biblical examples to present them as similar and thus justify her aforementioned belief. The poet compares Adam to the epic hero Odysseus, who is connected to the mythical gods such Poseidon, the god of the sea who delayed the class figure as he returned home following the Trojan War: this is referred to by mention of “insults of the sea”. The intention is to compare two members of distinctively separate periods, however as the poem continues Ni Chuilleanain’s imaginative ability simultaneously undermines her attempt. The fantastical element of the mythical example, understandable as this genre is associated with the supernatural, poses a challenge to the reader who wonders if one can consider such a theory linking the entirety of the past if it is not wholly realistic. As a result, it is up to the reader whether Adam, the first human on earth, can be compared to Odysseus who is shown fighting a personified ocean to return home, with waves that are “Crocodiling and mincing past”, which meant he “rammed/ The oar between their jaws”. The reader will even wonder if Odysseus can plausibly contrast himself with Adam, due to the almost magical atmosphere of the mythical episode. It is therefore up to them to consider if Odysseus is justified in juxtaposing himself to Adam, as he claims the biblical figure had the luxury of being able to identify unique creatures, whereas the personified waves around him have no distinguishing features: “if there was a si single/ Streak of decency in those waves now, they’d be ridged,/ Picked and dented with the battering they’d had/ And we could name them as Adam named the beasts.”

As has been shown, Ni Chuilleanain’s works create an extraordinary poetic world, as she creates compelling narratives that challenge her readers. She does not provide messages that will allow a definitive or overriding response, but constantly forces the reader to adopt a viewpoint that suits their belief system. This is brought about due to her insightful imagination, which creates both realistic and fantastic worlds: however regardless of setting this always forces a response from her audience.