**Eilean Ni Chuilleanain’s demanding subject matter and formidable style can prove challenging.**

Eilean Ni Chuilleanain’s themes are diverse, she addresses the topics of history, religion and nature. However through her intricate use of language and engaging poetic devices her poetry and message can be understood. She offers an insight into her personal life in poems such as ‘Death and Engines,’ ‘Fireman’s Lift,’ and ‘The Bend in the Road,’ this aids our engagement with her work as we are offered a glimpse into a slice of her life.

‘Death and Engines,’ is a grim cold and harsh narrative. It explores a universal theme, the inevitability of death. Ni Chuilleanain’s approach to this striking and at times disturbing topic is both engaging and interesting. In her explanatory notes on the poem she indicates that two events inspired the writing of this poem, her father’s illness and the discovery of her friend’s car that had been obviously involved in a car crash. She also shares with her readers the fact that she suffers from a fear of flying, this information helps her readers to understand the poem on a more meaningful level. Ni Chuilleanain is unequivocally a poet who wishes to include her readers on her poetic journey. She uses dramatic sensuous imagery to depict the scene. This is inviting and engaging to the reader. ‘The back half of a plane black on the snow, nobody near it, Tubular, burnt out and frozen.’ As the plane makes it’s second attempt to land at Paris airport, Ni Chuilleanain notices this plane inspiring her to think ‘how light your death is.’ Later in the poem she describes ‘a man with a bloody face sitting up in bed conversing cheerfully through cut lips.’ This is a striking, compelling image. This man has been involved in an accident however this time he has been fortunate, he has survived. He is surrounded by ‘images of relief,’ like ‘hospital pyjamas’ however Ni Chuilleanain warns, ‘these will fail you sometime.’ This simple, accessible language is a harsh, chilling universally appealing warning. At some point we will all be forced to confront death.

Death also provides the subject matter for ‘Fireman’s Lift,’ the poem is a touching mother and daughter poem recounting a visit Ni Chuilleanain enjoyed with her mother to Parma cathedral where they marvelled at Correggio’s infamous fresco. The tone is intimate and personal, ‘I was standing beside you looking up,’ through the use of personal pronouns, Ni Chuilleanain invites her readers to come on the journey with her and her mother to Italy. Through the use of compelling, mesmeric imagery, she carefully conjures her fascination at the magnificent work of art ‘Where the church splits wide open to admit celestial choirs.’ Ni Chuilleanain admits that this is a cheering up poem, the message is comforting and consoling for anyone who has suffered loss. The word ‘cradle,’ captures the gentleness, compassion and protective nature of the angels and the nurses who cared for her mother at the time of her death. The poem ends on am image of love and loss, something we all can relate to but also conjures a sense of comfort and consolation. Heaven can sometimes be an obscure place, we do not really know where it is. The identification of heaven as a place in the clouds is reassuring. The Virgin Mary is on the brink of entering heaven, so too is Ni Chuilleanain’s mother. ‘She came to the edge of the cloud.’

Like ‘Fireman’s Lift,’ ‘The Bend in the Road,’ is also a memory poem dealing with the issue of death. The setting and the moment the poem describes is universally relatable, proving that Ni Chuilleanain is an inclusive poet. The use of personal pronouns offer a personal, intimate and revealing tone. Her child is sick during a car journey, they stop the car near a tree shaped like ‘a cat’s tail,’ it ‘waited too.’ Here Ni Chuilleanain’s style is humorous but also precise. Movingly and poignantly the poet is inspired to think about the loved ones who have become ill and have died since the first time the family stopped at this ‘bend in the road,’ she alludes to ‘the one cumulus cloud in a perfect sky.’ Her memories are strikingly compared to this cloud, as like a cloud’s shape our memories change over time. ‘This is the place of their presence: in the tree, in the air.’

Some imagery recurs in Ni Chuilleanain’s poetry, making it instantly recognisable and familiar. ‘Translation,’ in my opinion is her best poem. It a poignant yet powerful narrative depicting loneliness, hardship and cruelty suffered by the Magdalenes. At the end of the poem the poet creates a compelling yet familiar image, the Magdaelene’s voice imagines her and her fellow inmates rising in a great cloud of steam from the grave. This cloud like the one alluded to in ‘The Bend in the Road,’ serves as a powerful symbol, however in this context, the cloud is a shameful reminder of the whole Magdalene affair and of the nation’s need to tell and retell their story. We must never allow anything like this to ever happen again. The subject matter for this poem is incredibly interesting and Ni Chuilleaneain approaches the topic with sensitivity but also portrays a brutal honesty. It must be admired. Stanza one vividly sets the scene where the remains of one hundred and fifty women are being exhumed. ‘The soil frayed and sifted evens the score,’ the tone and language here illustrate resentment but also is suggestive of the women who were treated with such inhumane cruelty getting their own back. Their lives were obliterated, their identities stolen from them and the imagery used of a glance being ‘bleached out,’ conjures an image a statue of the virgin Mary that looks down on the Magdalene’s at work from where it hands high above them on the laundry wall. Yet the image’s paint has been whitened and bleached by the ‘White light,’ pouring in through the windows and the steam and chemicals rising from the sins. It’s ‘glance,’ offers no ‘relief’ or religious consolation to these women who were cruelly and inhumanely treated. Finally Ni Chuilleaneain feels that this women are receiving some kind of justice, ‘Until every pocket in her skull blared with the note – Allow us to hear it sharp as an infant’s cry.’ The Magadalene is empowered to speak in this poem, to tell of the torture, pain and humiliation she suffered. ‘Washed clean of idiom the baked crust of words that make my temporary name A parasite that grew in me.’ Ni Chuilleaneain bravely commands us to listen and compares the Magdalene’s voice to a sharp infant’s cry, horribly we assume that this was a familiar sound from inside the laundry.

‘Street’ while dealing with a very different topic to ‘Translation,’ is a short dramatic narrative, that too explores female empowerment but also female vulnerability. The ‘butcher’s daughter,’ strides confidently home from work, with a knife ‘dangling,’ from a ‘ring on her belt,’ one could perhaps say this women is strong , powerful and untouchable. However Ni Chuilleneain masterfully creates an ominous atmosphere of threat and danger surrounding this women. ‘One day he followed her down the slanting lane at the back of the shambles.’ I felt like I was at the cinema. I genuinely wanted to know how this unconventional love story unfolded. Did the mysterious man follow the butcher’s daughter upstairs? What happened next? Eilean Ni Chuilleanain’s intriguing creation of tension, suspense and mystery coupled with memorable, compelling imagery painted a cinematic picture of intense and uncomfortable fascination.

Eilean Ni Chuilleanain mastry of language vividly and graphically offers us a unique insight into her dominant themes of love, family and the treatment and depiction of females. We are introduced to Eilean Ni Chuilleanain through her poetry. By reading it we feel as if we know her. She cleverly uses her compelling love for her family and her passion for history to carefully construct a tapestry of rich, inviting poetry which is a pleasure to read.

***In another essay you may wish to refer to Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Nicht:***

The speaker is ‘reading’ her ‘book in a ruin by a sour candle without roast meat or music,’ this sensuous imagery indicates a quiet contentment with a simplistic, medieval lifestyle. The book however takes on a sinister significance and becomes diseased as a ‘Plague of beetles,’ seemingly crawl out of the ‘spines of books’. Despite a turbulent past suggested by the repetition of ‘Plague,’ ‘Cromwell’s,’ presence in Ireland and the reference to the eerie, threatening ‘shadowing pale faces’, the narrator is content to wash in ‘cold’ orange water which has ‘dipped between cresses’. Here Ni Chuilleanain sensuously depicts Ireland’s turbulent historical past. Yet she masterfully merges this theme with her unadorned love for nature. She believes in the ultimate power of nature to comfort, console and heal. The ‘sheepdogs embrace’, her is a loving and welcoming image. The ‘chirp of the stream running’, is a fitting soundtrack for which the poem to end on. It is a resounding example of triumph over adversity.