Paul Durcan’s poetry reveals a changing Ireland through his surreal imagery, unusual language and gentle humour. This is especially true in ‘Rosie Joyce’, ‘Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno’, ‘Wife Who Smashed Television Gets Jail’, ‘The Girl with the Keys to Pearse’s Cottage’ and ‘Sport’. He is a hugely original poet.

‘The Girl with the Keys to Pearse’s Cottage’ is a commentary on 1960s Ireland. Pearse was a leader of The 1916 Rising. He had a cottage in Rosmuc in Connemara. Cait’s family were caretakers of the cottage. Durcan paints a picture of the classic Irish beauty, a modern day Cathleen Ni Houlihan. His repetition of dark and his contrast with her ‘bright’ smile heightens her beauty. Pearse’s cottage is a metaphor for Ireland. Ireland was insular in the ‘side of a hill.’ It was isolated, the ‘two windows’ of the cottage symbolise this inward thinking of a particularly spiritual place. The alliteration of ‘bare brown…and…whitewashed walls’ heightens the simplicity but also poverty. Pearse, whose portrait hangs from the wall, is idolised and unquestioned. The Ireland he gave his life for is in a state of decay symbolised by the ‘peeling jambs.’ It ‘was best seen’ from the distance of an emigrant’s eyes. To live in such poverty was an altogether different story than the picture perfect postcard of the cottage. The metaphor comparing the ‘sun-red skirt’ to the passion of youth serves to heighten our sense of loss that the youth feel their only option is to emigrate. ‘Our world was strange because it had no future.’ The dark irony of the girl with the keys to Pearse’s cottage having to emigrate is not lost on the reader.

Durcan comments on a changing Irish society in ‘Wife Who Smashed Television Gets Jail.’ Women are voiceless in this Ireland. The husband is testifying against his wife in a court of law. It is truly an absurd situation. She is charged with smashing a television and faces jail. She has no say at all. The use of contrast between ‘smashed’ and ‘peaceably’ emphasises that the husband believes his wife is out of control. The repetition of the TV programme ‘Kojak’ highlights a society that glorifies violence and one that is obsessed with television. The wife is never given a name but the comparison with ‘Queen Maeve’ evokes an image of a warrior who ‘took of her boots and smashed in the television.’ In the surreal situation, Durcan gently makes fun of a society that allows ‘Kids…have a television for a father or mother.’ Durcan agrees with the woman and laments a society that is so anti-social. At least ‘down in the pub’ everyone is ‘talking.’ The judge rules against the woman and puts her in jail. 1980s Ireland denied women their voice. ‘Leave to appeal was refused.’ The use of the full stop shows there’s no room for differing voices in this society.

Once again in ‘Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno’, Durcan paints a picture of a changing Ireland. The nuns are a dying force in Irish life. Their energy and passion helped the people of Dublin. Using the metaphor of the nuns being the crew on a ship, we find that they helped ‘stitch and sew’ the fabric of Irish life together. They were ‘mothering’ and nurturing forces. Durcan constantly uses birdlike imagery to add gentle humour as he describes their ‘eerie aviary’. In an increasingly secular world, the nun admits to being a ‘weird bird’. She is a kind and understanding voice, recognising that the young teenage punks were the ‘conventional ' ones, their ‘warpaint’ an attempt to fit in. The surreal imagery of the angel Gabriel cycling a skybike at their deaths again adds a gentle humour to the poem. The listing of rebel imagery to describe the nun as ‘wild woman…the original rebel’ shows Durcan’s ability to see beyond stale stereotypes. The nuns gave up conventional dreams to follow Jesus. The past was a place where nuns and women were subordinates ‘darning…cooking…washing and ironing.’ It was a place of poverty, a holiday to Waterford with its palm trees was remembered with huge fondness. Durcan thanks their contribution to Irish life. Their prayers of comfort and healing have been a ‘torch song’ lighting Ireland’s future.

‘Rosie Joyce’ celebrates the birth of Durcan’s grandchild but also the renewal and growth of Ireland. Ireland has come alive. Durcan’s use of personification makes this all the more vivid. ‘Night had pushed up through the slopes of Achill.’ His listing of the new flowers creates a vibrant, colourful landscape. ‘bluebell… fuchsia…primrose.’ Durcan’s ancestors ‘Umbrella’d’ his existence. His Uncle Walter’s farm provides shelter and comfort as he reads the ‘joined handwriting of its ash trees.’ Ireland’s past is no gloomy shadow, instead Durcan’s use of personification reimagines the past as a comforting presence in his life. Durcan sees wonder everywhere in Ireland. His metaphor ‘Each canal bridge an old pewter brooch’ emphasises how the birth of his grandchild has reopened his sense of wonder at his everyday surroundings. Durcan celebrates Ireland’s diversity, that there is ‘No such thing…as a Uniform Ireland/And please God there never will be.’ Ireland is a natural family. Durcan personifies the ‘River Shannon and all her sister rivers/ And all her brother mountains.’ The multitudes of wildflowers are metaphors for Ireland’s people. His repetition of ‘Daymaker!’ and the joyous use of exclamation mark show his joy of being part of such a place. The gentle humour of the awkward encounter with his neighbour proves that this is a very real scene. This adds weight to the symbolism of the ‘Western Development Commission’ pointing towards Irish renewal.

While commenting on society, Durcan also explores the theme of family. In the poem ‘Sport’ we see a commentary on the dysfunctional relationship between him and his father.

Durcan’s original poetry holds a mirror to Irish society and its ever-changing nature. His surreal imagery and situations, humour and memorable language reimagines Ireland. A place of forced emigration in ‘The Girl with the Keys to Pearse’s Cottage’, a society of violence and exclusion in ‘Wife Who Smashed Television Gets Jail’, a country of alternative rebels in ‘Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno’and ultimately a place of renewal and growth in ‘Rosie Joyce’. Durcan embraces all its facets and never condemns.