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## Negative Polarity in Eavan Boland's 'The Famine Road'

Nigel McLoughlin

### Abstract:

The essay that follows outlines a cognitive stylistic framework to identify and analyse the pattern of negation in the poem 'The Famine Road' by Eavan Boland (1975) and the effects engendered on the reader through manipulation of the text worlds (Werth 1999; Gavins, 2007) created by the poem. It also traces the various voices of this polyphonic work and examines their interactions in terms of Stockwell's (2009) model of literary resonance. The framework is derived from a combination of Givón's (1993) classification of different types of negation, text world theory (Werth, 1999) and particularly Gavins (2007) development of text world theory to account for how metaphors draw together two often conflicting text worlds; and Stockwell's (2009) model of literary resonance which examines, identifies and analyses the various processes which act on literary figures as they are maintained, allowed to decay or are occluded by new figures. The analysis demonstrates how Boland manipulates these features in order to generate the felt absences of the poem, which act to communicate the sense of loss that pervades the poem. The analysis will also show how negation is used to draw into proximity and ground the metaphoric association between the two text worlds, which underpins the poem. Finally, the analysis will show how this strategy may allow this sense of loss to resonate for the reader.

**Keywords:** cognitive poetics, stylistics, negation, poetry, Eavan Boland, negative polarity.

### 1. Introduction

Negation may be defined as a linguistic process that is initiated by a syntactic, morphological or inherently negative verbal cue signalling a non-factual conceptual domain, which changes information currently in the common ground of the discourse. This brings two cognitive representations into conflict: that initiated by the negation, and the representation of the world as previously understood (Hidalgo Downing, 2002: 123). Tottie (1982) has argued that in order to deny a proposition, we must first create a mental representation of that proposition. Therefore negation is essentially context dependent and pragmatic in nature. Because of this, negation is capable of performing a significant function in literary and poetic discourse through its inherent ability to evoke conflicting worlds. In order to understand a negation, the reader must cognitively process the semantic content of the utterance as well as its context of use. This includes the local

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linguistic context; the more global context of the text as a whole; and the cultural and social knowledge shared by the parties to the discourse. This means that negation bears an asymmetric relationship to the corresponding positive statement because it inherently triggers more meaning than is contained in the semantic content alone (Hidalgo-Downing, 2000; Nahajec, 2009; Nørgaard, 2007). This quality allows it significant power as a poetic trope. The article that follows will analyse the poetic effects that may be achieved through its use.

Eavan Boland's work has been much studied by literary critics with regard to its feminist, historical and postcolonial themes, as well as its relationship between the personal and the political, and the role of women in Irish society (Clutterbuck, 1999; Conboy, 1990; Villar-Argaiz, 2008). In particular, the poem 'The Famine Road' has been seen in terms of unfeeling paternalistic government and their historical treatment of the Irish people and its relation to the treatment of women's bodies by the paternalistic medical establishment in Ireland (Sarbin, 1993). Several critics have noted the themes of 'elision', 'absence' and 'wound' in the poem and in Boland's work more generally (Auge, 2004; McMullin, 2000; Sarbin, 1993) but to date there has been no linguistic study of the pattern of negations within the poem and how they contribute to the poem's effects on the reader.

Taking as a starting point Givón's (1993) different categories of negation and using a framework drawn from Stockwell's (2009) model of literary resonance and text world theory (Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007), I propose to analyse the use of various categories of negation as attractors and their functions in forming unrealized sub-worlds of non-events or non-existence in Eavan Boland's poem 'The Famine Road' (1975). I will analyse these in relation to the maintenance, decay and echo of the attractors, and how negation is used to generate the felt absences of the poem, both in terms of the lives lost in the futile activity of building the famine road, and in the childlessness of the infertile woman whose

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body is metaphorically represented as a famine road in the final conceptual blend of the poem.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Negative Polarity**

Givón (1993, 202) outlines three categories of negation: syntactic, morphological and inherent. These are defined as follows: syntactic negation is the use of a separate negating particle such as 'no', 'not' or 'never' to indicate negation; morphological negation uses prefixes or suffixes such as 'un-' or '-less' attached to the word in order to give it a negative polarity; inherent negation is achieved through the use of words which are inherently negative in meaning but positive in form (Jepsersen [1917] 1966, 42). Examples of such words might be 'sad', or 'dead'. However, some may be more controversial, such as 'bald'. While it is true that this refers to an absence of hair (usually on the head), and therefore may be construed as negative, it depends for its negative quality on the fact that an absence of hair on the head has been historically seen as a 'bad' thing perhaps through association with age and disease. Givón (1993:190) states that the affirmative may be seen in terms of 'figure' because it refers to more cognitively salient events that happen against a less salient 'background'. It could be said that 'negation' reverses this polarity through drawing attention to, and thereby making a figure out of, the 'non-being or 'non-event'.

### **2.2 Text World Theory**

Werth's (1999) text world theory functions as a broader cognitive model within which to situate negation. In text world theory meaning is arrived at through participants in a language event interacting via text and context, taking into consideration both the immediate situation and accrued social and cultural knowledge. Text world theory is seen as consisting of three levels:

1. The discourse world where the participants interact, which includes contextual and cultural knowledge brought to the language event by participants.
2. The text world itself, which consists of the mental representation of the world constructed by the text. This is the world as it is depicted by the discourse and populated by what Werth has called 'world building elements' (1999, 180) such as characters and objects.
3. The sub-world level which involves 'departures' described by Werth (1999, 216) under three broad headings:

a) Deictic – which involves things like flashbacks or direct speech which direct us to other text worlds by disrupting the deictic signature of the conceptual world through alternations in time, place and point of view;

b) Attitudinal – which involves glimpses of other text worlds through interaction with the thoughts, beliefs and purposes entertained by protagonists as opposed to the their actions in the main text world; and

c) Epistemic – which are modalised propositions used by participants or characters to refer to hypothetical, modal or otherwise alternate text worlds.

Negation is seen as belonging to the epistemic sub-world level because negation can 'change the world-definition' through the 'deletion of parameters' in order to form unrealised sub-worlds of non-events or non-existence (Werth, 1999, 252). Werth distinguishes between two different functions of a negative sub-world. In the first function, negation serves to reverse expectations that are already present in the contextual or pragmatic common ground of the discourse. The other function of negation is to introduce new information into the common ground of the discourse in order to negate it. Werth refers to this as negative accommodation (1999, 253-4). It is this device that 'allows the

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recipient to deduce the expectation which the negation itself defeats or removes (1999, 254).

Text world theory has been further augmented by Gavins (2007) particularly in relation to the conceptual blending involved in metaphor. In metaphor, our mental representation of the originating text world remains prominent in attention. However, further text worlds created by the metaphor produce a concurrent blended world at the same level as the originating text world. Readers must process these text worlds simultaneously; perhaps even toggling between them, in a similar way that one perceptually toggles between the two versions of a Necker cube. This tends to occur where metaphors are difficult to resolve, particularly where the ground of the metaphor may not be immediately clear and the reader must work to make the metaphoric connection.

### **2.3 Resonance**

Stockwell (2009, 2011) has adapted a framework from Carstensen (2007) and applied it to literary readings. This framework describes negations and deletions in terms of felt absences and lacunae. Visually, figures are regarded as positive blobs, which have edges that are processed along with their shapes. By extension, negative blobs focus attention on absences or holes and these too have edges that belong to them, but in this case, they are only edges. The negative figure can then be understood as a lacuna in literary reading that engenders a sense of felt absence. Stockwell (2011, 43) describes this sensation as 'something unspecified or removed, rather than never having been mentioned or evoked at all.' The effect of the lacuna is to produce feelings that are resonant of gaps and indeterminacy. These may be feelings of unspoken threat, vagueness, uncertainty, or some other 'delicate and rarefied perception' (Stockwell, 2011, 43). Elsewhere Stockwell (2009, 28) associates such resonance with an 'aura of

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significance'. In the case of negation, which generates a lacuna, it is the felt absence that resonates with significance.

The model of literary resonance proposed by Stockwell (2009) is especially useful in the consideration of possible mechanisms by which negation may affect the text world. An attractor, which Stockwell describes as a conceptual effect rather than a specific linguistic feature, may be said to form a figure. Stockwell lists these attractors as: newness, agency, topicality, empathetic recognisability, definiteness, activeness, brightness, fullness, largeness, height, noisiness, and aesthetic distance from the norm. These figures may be maintained; they may be allowed to decay through gradual disengagement, or they may be occluded by another figure. Occlusion may be thought of as negation of the occluded attractor through its replacement. It is also possible that the absence of the occluded attractor may become a lacuna or a felt absence. In Stockwell's classification, negation acts as a 'newness' attractor, because it creates a mental switch from one text world where things exist to another text world where they do not. This change in ontological status changes the relationship between the recipient of the language act and the experienced embedded world. This is because the reader must imagine, however fleetingly, a separate world in which the negated state does exist; this imagined world is then marked as being negated by the text world.

The text may change readers' attentional foci through what are referred to as shifts (which have the effect of apparent motion); zooms (which have the effect of apparent changes in size) or state changes (which capture attention through newness such as sudden appearance). Stockwell's literary resonance model and text world theory offer a complementary system through which the cognitive effects of negation in literature can be analysed. In the next section, I will undertake such an analysis, using the framework outlined above, in order to examine how Boland uses negation as an attractor in a poem that gradually draws two separate text worlds into direct relation through metaphor.



### 3. Negative Polarity in 'The Famine Road'

Boland makes use of all three of Givón's categories of negation in 'The Famine Road' (Boland [1975] 1995, 29-30). The poem starts with the inherently negative term 'idle' (line 1) to describe the Irish and to introduce the justification for unpaid forced labour. This is reinforced by syntactic negation 'no coins' (line 2) and 'no less' (line 3). The phrase 'give them no coins' (line 2) initially suggests refusing charity, where 'coins' might be given rather than earned, but we must revise this assumption following the introduction of 'toil' (line 3) and 'give them roads' (line 6). At this point 'no coins' acts to reverse the assumption that one should be paid for undertaking labour. Thereby negating the earlier assumption that the 'coins' might be related to charity. In effect this leads to a double negation: the Irish are neither to be given coins out of charity, nor are they to be allowed to earn them in return for their labour.

While 'no less' is syntactically negative, it functions to positively reinforce the need for toil, in that it asserts that it is necessary to the Irish character. The first three lines thus maintain negation as a significant attractor, which is then allowed to decay before being echoed in the repeated morphological negation 'nowhere' (line 7). This echo combines an active verb implying motion, 'forces' (line 6), with an image of stasis: 'from nowhere, going nowhere' (line 7), and the resulting blend offers an image of Sisyphean labour. The grammatical construction of 'give them roads' (line 6) is interesting, in that they are not being given 'roads' at all, the roads do not yet exist, they must build them. This may also be thought of as an act of negation, where the reader is initially asked to form the concept of roads being given, and then negate that concept through the realisation that there are no roads, the Irish are to be forced to build them. The trope of negation is allowed to decay over the following three-line stanza whereby the speaker, assumed to be a doctor, begins to inform a woman of some unspecified diagnosis. We later realise the diagnosis is that she cannot have children.

The third stanza mirrors the first in terms of the pattern of negation, thus echoing and renewing the attractor: 'Sick' (line 11) and 'away' (line 12) are both inherently negative; 'directionless' (line 11) is a morphological negation; and the syntactic negation 'not' (line 13) after the modal verb 'could' (line 12) occurs as part of a question which implies the positive. Again these negations act as an attractor, and again that attractor is allowed to decay over the second half of the third stanza before being subtly picked up again with an inherent negation in the three-line stanza that begins at line 17. The reader senses that the woman is receiving bad news related to a medical condition, although this news is not specified: 'anything may have caused it' (line 17). The word 'spores' (line 17) links this back to the famine because it was the fungal potato blight, *Phytophthora infestans*, that caused the Irish famine and this was spread by spores (Harris 1999). This caused the potatoes to melt and fester in the fields. The first line in isolation is ambiguous and might be taken to refer to what caused the famine. This ambiguity is resolved because the following line, 'a childhood accident', (line 18) negates that reading, making it clear that the something that has been caused is more personally related to the woman.

The fifth stanza echoes the negations of the first and third stanzas but uses several implied inherent negations spread throughout: 'dusk' (line 20), 'melt', 'death' (line 25). There are also further examples of syntactic negation: 'no more' (line 23); and morphological negation: 'without' (line 20). This time though the negation is reinforced by the doctor's speech in the following three line stanza: 'you never will, never you know' (line 26), preventing the decay, and maintaining negation in the foreground as the poem works towards its conclusion in the final two stanzas. In these, the absence is maintained in the reader's focus with inherent negation: 'it has gone' (line 29), 'idleness' (line 30) and 'fester' (line 33). The first of these later develops a positive sense from the committee's viewpoint in that the project has gone better than they expected, but in the order the reader encounters them, the first three words of line 29 are an inherent negation. The image of the 'bones' (line 34) seen by Jones through his carriage window is both a

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*memento mori* and an image of absence of life and absence of flesh, which echoes the dying man of stanza five, in effect showing his negation. This absence of life is further echoed in the final three lines through syntactic negation 'never' (line 36) and an implied positive which is generated using the same strategy previously used: implying a positive by using a syntactic negative, this time framing a question: 'what is your body /now if not a famine road?' (lines 37-38).

At this point the two text worlds are brought into touch as a means of grounding the metaphor expressed in the negative question above. The ground of the metaphor is resolved through the connections between the text worlds of the poem: the woman's body may be developed and husbanded, but it will not fulfil the implied function of reproduction, just as a famine road never leads anywhere and is worked and built for no purpose. The reader toggles between the two original text worlds: the world of the famine and the world of the infertility diagnosis (detailed below), and the new blended text world of the metaphor, where a childless body is a road without a destination.

The structure of the poem weaves together two distinct text worlds, which alternate through the poem. One is the text world of the mid-nineteenth century through which a number of voices develop the story of how famine roads came to be built and the purpose they served. The second text world is that of the contemporary where a woman is receiving a diagnosis that she will never bear children. There are a series of shifts between these, which serve to occlude, and in effect negate, the previous text world. There are also new attractors, such as new speakers, which manifest within both text worlds and occlude previous attractors within those text worlds. For example, the first stanza begins with Trevelyan speaking. In the text world of the poem, he addresses the committee. The poem's narrator commenting on the action follows this. This commentary is addressed to the reader. This is then followed by direct speech from a member of the relief committee who explicitly addresses Trevelyan and implicitly addresses the other

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committee members in asking the question: '[m]ight it be safe,/ Colonel, to give them roads...' (lines 5-6). The third and fifth stanzas contain no direct speech but there are rhetorical questions. These may be seen as the poem's narrator addressing themselves and the reader. The seventh stanza is entirely in the voice of Jones, who reports to Trevelyan what he observes, presumably in writing, since it 'signs off' as '[y]our servant Jones' (line 35), which is unlikely to be part of a spoken report. Alternating with this gross structure, the italicised stanzas two, four and six may be interpreted as direct speech from a doctor, breaking the news to a woman that she is unable to bear children. The final stanza may be interpreted as the woman's thoughts as she considers the consequences of what she has been told. The reader also becomes the addressee of all of these speakers through reading the poem.

The polyphonic nature of the poem results in constant deictic, attitudinal and epistemic departures to new sub-worlds. The new speakers disrupt the deictic signature of the conceptual worlds, while the windows into the thoughts and beliefs of each of the voices present in the poem allow us temporary glimpses into other text worlds. The rhetorical questions, negations and modalised constructions also raise the possibility of other conceptual worlds throughout the poem. The alternation between the contemporary and the historical text worlds and the repeated occlusions of attractors by new ones may be thought of as a series of negations because the reader is repeatedly directed to attend the new world or the new attractor and cease to attend the previous one. The previous text world and the previous attractors may continue to resonate although no longer held in attention. This resonance may also be experienced after the reader has finished reading the poem and has moved their attention elsewhere.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The analysis of 'The Famine Road' in the previous section demonstrates that Boland has cleverly used negation at several levels in the poem in order to generate a

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complex and unsettling felt absence. On one level, Boland uses syntactic, morphological and inherent negation to generate negative attractors, which resonate through being echoed at various points throughout the poem. On another level, she uses the structure of the poem to have new attractors occlude and negate previous ones, both in terms of shifts between text worlds in the poem, and through shifts into new sub-worlds through the use of deictic, attitudinal and epistemic departures. The fact that negatives occur much less frequently than positive clauses (Halliday and Jones, 1993), makes them a powerful attractor when they occur as frequently as they do in 'The Famine Road'. This strategy makes the reader very conscious of the level of negation and the implied absences which blend very powerfully in the closing lines to capture the sense of hopelessness, futility, inertia and absence in the woman's final self-reflexive, self-accusatory question.

The strategy of negation is particularly powerful because the use of negation involves the establishment of a proposition as well as its cancellation (Clark and Clark 1977, 110) and thereby presents a felt absence through the evocation of a mental frame, which is later negated (Lakoff, 2004). The famine could be seen as a lacuna in the Irish psyche, which generates a felt absence through the millions of lives lost or irrevocably changed through emigration. From an Irish perspective, the two could be seen as similar, because many of those who emigrated during and after the famine were never seen again. It was a time of mass negation; a time of systematic negation of Irish language and culture, as catastrophic to 'mother Ireland' as the discovery of barrenness becomes to the woman's conceptualisation of her own body in the final metaphor.

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