Derek Mahon – Summaries and Quotes

* Grandfather
* Day Trip to Donegal
* Ecclesiastes
* After the Titanic
* Rathlin
* Antarctica

**Grandfather**

**Summary**

* Sonnet in which Mahon paints a portrait of his grandfather
* His grandfather (typical of many Belfast men) had worked in the Harland and Wolff shipyard, but after an injury reverted to his childhood
* Mahon captures the mischievous innocence of a man no longer burdened by responsibilities

**Quotes**

* Wounded but humorous
* The landscape of a childhood only he can recapture
* Discreetly up to no good / Or banging around the house like a four year old
* His shrewd eyes bolt the door and set the clock / Against the future
* Nothing escapes him; he escapes us all

**Day Trip to Donegal**

**Summary**

* A trip to Donegal is recounted, but very few details of the trip are actually given
* Those on the trip are never identified
* Imagery unusually dark and unsettling given the title
* Most of the poem is devoted to the aftermath – the trip home, and the effect of the day on the poet
* Memory of the power of the sea haunts poet and proves to be a disturbing influence
* Extensive use of sibilance

**Quotes**

* The grave grey of the sea the grimmer in that enclave
* A writhing glimmer of fish
* Flopping about the deck in attitudes of agony and heartbreak
* The sea receding down each muddy lane
* That night the slow sea washed against my head
* Muttering its threat to villages of landfall
* At dawn I was alone far out at sea / without skill or reassurance
* Vindictive wind and rain

**Ecclesiastes**

**Summary**

* Densely structured commentary on evangelical Protestantism that was a feature of Mahon’s childhood
* Unusual syntax, mirrors speech patterns of street-corner preachers
* Unlike many of Mahon’s poems in that it deals directly with the Northern Ireland of his youth
* Ironic and sardonic, but directed largely at Mahon himself

**Quotes**

* God-fearing, God-chosen purist little puritan
* The tied-up swings
* Not feel called upon to understand and forgive
* And love the January rains when the darken the dark doors
* Stand on a corner stiff with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun

**After the Titanic**

**Summary**

* Written from point of view of Bruce Ismay, president of the White Star Line (owners of the Titanic)
* Ismay pleads for consideration and sympathy but succeeds only in appearing selfish

**Quotes**

* I sank as far that night as any hero
* Pandemonium of prams, pianos, sideboards, winches, boiler bursting and shredded ragtime
* The old man stays in bed on seaward mornings after nights of wind
* Dim lost faces
* My poor soul screams out in the starlight
* Include me in your lamentations

**Rathlin**

**Summary**

* Oblique commentary on the Troubles
* Mahon approaches modern conflict by meditating on ancient clash
* Conflict referred to was between northern Irish chieftain, Somhairle Bui and English forces – Somhairle Bui sent the women and children to stay on Rathlin, hoping they would be safe. Instead they were massacred
* Suggestion is put forward that the Troubles will one day be as distant and borderline mythical as the Rathlin massacre

**Quotes**

* A long time since the last scream was cut short
* Then an unnatural silence; and then a natural silence
* We land as if we were the first visitors here
* Bombs doze in the housing estates but here they are through with history
* Unsure among the pitching surfaces whether the futures lies before us or behind

**Antarctica**

**Summary**

* Poem recalls the bravery of Captain Oates, a member of Scott’s expedition to the Antarctic
* Suffering badly from frostbite, and aware that he was slowing down his team, Oates left the tent and walked out into a blizzard
* Written in villanelle form – extremely restrictive and stylised

**Quotes**

* I am just going outside and may be some time
* At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime
* Goading his ghost into the howling snow
* The numb self-sacrifice of the weakest
* He takes leave of the earthly pantomime