

## Poetry Essay Writing

## Derek Mahon



To what extent do you **agree or disagree** that Derek Mahon makes **effective** use of a diverse range of imagery and an engaging **style** to explore **complex thematic** concerns which are powerfully relevant to the modern world.

- Brief OP – Question-facing / no quotation
- Brief CP – Mirroring OP
- 5-7 RICC paragraphs / sections – evidence based paragraphs with a clear identity and **critical analysis**
- Approx. 1,000 words
- 4-6 poems addressed
- Re-read – clean as you go

**Opening Paragraph**

A man “goading his ghost into the howling snow.” A “pandemonium of prams, pianos, sideboards, winches, boilers bursting.” A “Metaphysical wind.” A preacher standing on a corner “stiff with rhetoric.” A “mad bastard” gunned down in a “blind yard, between ten sleeping lorries and an electricity generator.” Yes, on reflection, there is no doubt that the Derek Mahon poems I have studied are filled with **a diverse and rich range of images**. That fact alone makes his style of writing **engaging**. When combined with his **narrative approach**, and his ability to use the stories he tells as a way of introducing and exploring often **quite complex thematic and philosophical concerns**, it seems obvious to me that this poet’s work is **powerfully and immediately relevant to the modern world**.

**RICC #1 (part A)**

Nowhere is that relevance more apparent than in ‘**A Chinese Restaurant in Portrush**’, (CRP) a poem which explores **distinctly modern themes of identity, emigration, and integration**. This poem, which is typical of Mahon’s **narrative style**, is built around a distinct, clever, and recognisable **symbol**. The setting is the sea-side town of Portrush, before the ‘*invasion*’ of tourists arrives to disrupt the peace. Mahon uses **similance** to establish a quiet, contented atmosphere in the opening sequence when he

describes “Before the *first visitor comes the spring / Softening the sharp air of the coast / In time for the first ‘invasion’*. His attention to **seemingly incidental details** results in the **cinematic image** of a girl who “*Strides past the Northern Counties Hotel, / Light-footed, swinging a book-bag...*” This line, with its **carefully selected, precise verbs** and the **inventive compound adjective**, highlights the **appeal of Mahon’s style**.

### RICC #1 (part B)

At the heart of the poem is a **character**, “*The proprietor of the Chinese restaurant*”, who “*Stands at the door as if the world were young...*” This **beautiful simile** is so **striking**. The **monosyllabic language** is as simple as the image being painted. This man, who is far away from home, separated from family, from culture and from his roots, is not despairing. He is filled with hope and with optimism. He looks out over the Atlantic Ocean and there, in the distance, is “*An ideogram on sea-cloud – and the light / Of heaven upon the mountains of Donegal...*” This **wonderful image** conveys Mahon’s **thematic and philosophical observation with such clarity**. The shape of the sail is reminiscent of a Chinese symbol. The owner of the restaurant is thinking of home. But there is beauty in this new place too, as the light shines, lighting up the distant Donegal hills. **This exploration of the theme of identity and emigration is executed with such skill, through the juxtaposing images of the ideogram and the light of heaven, that it perfectly represents how Mahon’s ability to craft and shape striking images makes his work so engaging and thought-provoking.**

### RICC #2 (part A)

That **engaging** and memorable style of writing is **also** evident in the extraordinary ‘*As It Should Be*’ (ASB), a poem **which conveys a powerful message about intolerance and extremism that feels as though it is not just relevant to the modern world but written about our troubled times**. Once again, Mahon’s brilliance as a narrative writer is evident. The reader is struck by the immediacy of the opening line, “*We hunted the mad bastard*”, and drawn into a shocking account of a murder. The victim is killed “*in a blind yard, between ten sleeping lorries and an electricity generator.*” **The power of this story, and the fact that the poem is, in effect a soliloquy in which a killer justifies his actions, is striking.** **Contextualisation**

### RICC #2 (part B)

However, what makes the poem really **intriguing** is the opening two lines of the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza, when the speaker says, “*Let me hear no idle talk of the Moon in the Yellow River.*” **Here again**, Mahon’s ability to choose the perfect image is evident. The ‘Moon in the Yellow River’ is a reference to philosophy, to discussion, and to ethics and morality. This man dismisses any such discussion, and, in that moment, the reader is given a clear insight into his mind. He is blinded by certainty. He feels he knows how the world “should be” and will kill anybody who disagrees with him. **Once again, Mahon’s ability to craft**

complex and substantial images offers the reader an insight and new perspective on human existence that is powerfully relevant in a modern world which seems to be increasingly marked by intolerance, impatience, and anger.

### RICC #3 (Part 1)

'Ecclesiastes' is another poem in which Mahon explores thought-provoking thematic concerns which feel utterly modern. The poem is about Mahon's identity as a "purist little puritan" and how he comes from a dour and severe place where, on Sundays, there was "shipyard silence" and "tied-up swings." These details made the poem difficult to relate to until I understood the underlying philosophical meaning. The poem is about the disconnect that can come about between generations. It is about utterly modern concerns, about how difficult it is to forge our own path in the face of family and cultural expectations. All of Mahon's poems are essentially about the human experience, and this one element that makes his work so compelling and engaging. The other factor, of course, is his use of language and choice of symbols, and that quality is also present in 'Ecclesiastes'

### RICC #3 (Part 2)

The key is Mahon's adroit choice of metaphor. In particular, the idea of burying "that red bandana" and not "feeling called upon to understand and forgive." Once again, as is the case with CRP and AISB, it is Mahon's precision, his ability to choose the perfect symbol to convey complex ideas, that makes his work so accessible. The red bandana is a clever choice, representing as it does artistic freedom and individuality. The idea of rejecting empathy and forgiveness communicates the concept of conformity and the sacrifice needed to achieve acceptance, and that is communicated through the **clever choice of symbolism**.

### RICC #4

**This consistently diverse, original and powerful use of metaphor is a hallmark of Mahon's work and adds a depth and complexity to his poetry.**

There are so many examples. In 'After the Titanic', Mahon refers to Bruce Ismay's suffering when he says, "*The tide leaves broken toys and hat-boxes silently at my door.*" This **metaphor clearly communicated** the long-lasting impact of trauma, and Mahon's concern that we understand the experiences of others before we rush to condemn and ostracise.

**Rathlin** is an **extended metaphor** and, to Mahon, the island represents Northern Ireland's future, and its past. It is the custodian "*of a lone light that repeats one simple statement to the turbulent sea.*"

This is an **innovative and cinematic use of language**. Again, the **symbol effectively conveyed the point** the poet wished to convey, and again, the message, about how we must try to learn from the lessons of the past if we are to escape the curse of repeating them, is again immediately relevant to the world in which we live.

### CP





