

**ECCLESIASTES
BY DEREK MAHON**

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**COMPREHENSIVE
ANALYSIS**

CONTEXT

- Derek Mahon's Ecclesiastes is a poem that delves into the themes of religious rigidity, cultural identity, and the existential struggle between isolation and engagement with the world. The poem appears to critique the cold, puritanical worldview that rejects human warmth, emotion, and engagement with life, opting instead for a detached, rigid, and ascetic existence. The speaker suggests that while one could retreat into a life of zeal and austerity, such a life is one of isolation, devoid of the richness and complexity of human experience. The title Ecclesiastes references the book of the Bible, which meditates on the meaning of life and the vanity of human pursuits. Mahon's poem can be seen as an exploration of similar themes, questioning the value of a life lived in rigid adherence to dogma and the denial of emotional or human connection.

STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

- "God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God- / chosen puritan little puritan that, / for all your wiles and smiles, you are (the / dank churches, the empty streets,"
- The poem opens with a direct address to "God," setting a reflective and somewhat ironic tone. The speaker suggests that someone could "grow to love it"—referring to a life of strict, puritanical devotion. The repetition of "God" and the use of terms like "God-fearing" and "God-chosen" introduce religious imagery, and the word "puritan" reinforces the idea of a life dedicated to religious zeal. The description of "dank churches" and "empty streets" creates a bleak, desolate atmosphere, suggesting that this puritanical life is one of isolation and austerity.

LINES 5-7

- "the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings) and / shelter your cold heart from the heat / of the world, from woman-inquisition, from the"
- Here, Mahon deepens the sense of isolation, with images of "shipyard silence" and "tied-up swings" evoking a world devoid of vitality and human connection. The speaker implies that in this puritanical life, one would seek to "shelter your cold heart" from the warmth and chaos of the world. The phrase "woman-inquisition" suggests that part of this retreat involves avoiding the emotional and social demands of relationships, particularly with women, and perhaps the challenges of intimacy.

LINES 8-11

- "bright eyes of children. Yes, you could / wear black, drink water, nourish a fierce zeal / with locusts and wild honey, and not / feel called upon to understand and forgive"
- The speaker continues to describe this life of asceticism, imagining the figure rejecting the "bright eyes of children," which symbolise innocence, warmth, and vitality. Instead, this life involves "wearing black" and "drinking water"—symbols of austerity—and nourishing a "fierce zeal" with "locusts and wild honey," which evokes the biblical image of John the Baptist. The rejection of emotional engagement is highlighted by the line "not feel called upon to understand and forgive," suggesting a life that values judgment and righteousness over compassion and empathy.

LINES 12-14

- "but only to speak with a bleak / afflatus, and love the January rains when they / darken the dark doors and sink hard"
- The word "afflatus" refers to a divine inspiration or breath, but here it is described as "bleak," suggesting that the speaker's religious fervor is cold and harsh rather than uplifting. The imagery of "January rains" adds to the poem's sombre, desolate tone, with the rains darkening "dark doors" and sinking into the land. This suggests a life spent in isolation, finding comfort in the cold and bleakness, rather than in human connection.

LINES 15-17

- "into the Antrim hills, the bog meadows, the heaped / graves of your fathers. Bury that red / bandana and stick, that banjo this is your"
- The poem shifts to the physical landscape of Northern Ireland, with references to the "Antrim hills" and "bog meadows." These images evoke a sense of heritage and rootedness in the land, but also a connection to the past, symbolised by "the heaped graves of your fathers." The speaker urges the figure to "bury that red bandana and stick, that banjo," which can be interpreted as symbols of a more joyful or rebellious spirit—perhaps the energy of youth or a more carefree, artistic identity. The call to bury these symbols suggests that this person is being asked to abandon joy, individuality, and freedom in favour of conforming to a more rigid, puritanical identity.

LINES 18-21

- "country, close one eye and be king. / Your people await you, their heavy washing / flaps for you in the housing estates - / a credulous people. God, you could do it, God"
- These lines describe a sense of responsibility or leadership. The speaker suggests that by adopting this puritanical, ascetic life, the figure could "close one eye and be king"—a metaphor for ruling or leading a credulous, unquestioning population. The "heavy washing" flapping in the "housing estates" suggests a working-class environment, and the word "credulous" implies that the people are easily led or manipulated. The speaker's tone remains ironic, suggesting that while it might be easy to adopt this role, it is ultimately hollow and devoid of genuine connection or fulfilment.

LINES 22-24

- "help you, stand on a corner stiff / with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun"
- The poem concludes with an image of the figure standing "on a corner" delivering empty, rigid rhetoric. The phrase "promising nothing under the sun" alludes to the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, which speaks of the vanity of human pursuits and the idea that "there is nothing new under the sun." In this context, the speaker suggests that this puritanical life is one of emptiness, offering no new insights or hope, only a bleak, detached existence.

KEY THEMES



RELIGIOUS AUSTERITY AND ISOLATION

- Mahon critiques the life of rigid religious austerity, suggesting that such a life leads to emotional and social isolation. The figure described in the poem is detached from the warmth and vitality of the world, seeking shelter in bleak, cold devotion. The rejection of human connection, especially with women and children, highlights the costs of this puritanical lifestyle.
- "shelter your cold heart from the heat / of the world, from woman-inquisition, from the / bright eyes of children." These lines capture the speaker's sense of the figure's emotional detachment and the self-imposed isolation from human warmth and connection.
- "Yes, you could / wear black, drink water, nourish a fierce zeal / with locusts and wild honey." This image of austere devotion evokes a life stripped of pleasure, focused solely on judgment

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP

- The poem also touches on themes of cultural identity, particularly within the context of Northern Ireland. The reference to the "Antrim hills" and "the heaped graves of your fathers" suggests a deep connection to the past and the burdens of history. The figure is called upon to lead a "credulous people," but the speaker's tone is ironic, implying that this leadership is ultimately empty and offers little hope.
- "Bury that red / bandana and stick, that banjo this is your / country, close one eye and be king." This line suggests that the figure is being asked to conform to a more rigid, traditional identity, abandoning individuality and freedom.
- "Your people await you, their heavy washing / flaps for you in the housing estates - / a credulous people." These lines suggest that the figure is expected to lead or guide the people, but the "credulous" nature of the people implies that this leadership is based on manipulation or empty promises.

THE VANITY OF RHETORIC AND EMPTY PROMISES

- The poem concludes with a critique of empty rhetoric, suggesting that the figure, in embracing this life of puritanical zeal, would ultimately offer "nothing under the sun." The allusion to Ecclesiastes reinforces the idea that such a life, while outwardly pious and rigid, is devoid of real meaning or fulfillment.
- "stand on a corner stiff / with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun." This image of delivering empty promises captures the hollowness of the puritanical life, which offers no genuine hope or insight.

MOOD OF THE POEM

- The mood of Ecclesiastes is ironic and critical, with an underlying tone of sadness. While the speaker presents the puritanical life as a possible choice, the tone suggests that this life is one of isolation, detachment, and emptiness. The imagery of bleak landscapes, cold rains, and empty rhetoric reinforces the mood of spiritual and emotional barrenness. At the same time, there is a sense of resignation, as though the figure in the poem could indeed follow this path despite its lack of fulfillment.





LITERARY DEVICES

IRONY

- The entire poem is infused with irony, particularly in the speaker's tone when addressing the figure. The suggestion that one could "grow to love" a life of puritanical zeal is presented with a sense of detachment, as though the speaker knows that such a life is ultimately hollow.

ALLUSION

- The title Ecclesiastes and the final reference to "nothing under the sun" allude to the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, which reflects on the vanity of human pursuits. This allusion reinforces the poem's themes of emptiness and the futility of rigid, austere devotion.

IMAGERY

- "January rains," "the Antrim hills," and "the heaped graves of your fathers" create a bleak, desolate landscape that reflects the emotional and spiritual isolation of the puritanical life.

SYMBOLISM

- The "red bandana and stick" and "banjo" symbolize individuality, freedom, and a more joyful, rebellious spirit. The call to "bury" these items suggests the suppression of these qualities in favour of a more rigid, traditional identity.

CONCLUSION

- Derek Mahon's Ecclesiastes critiques the rigid, puritanical life that rejects human warmth and connection in favour of austere devotion. Through vivid imagery and a tone of ironic detachment, the poem explores themes of isolation, cultural identity, and the futility of empty rhetoric. Mahon suggests that while one could embrace a life of zeal and judgment, such a life offers little in the way of genuine fulfillment or understanding. The poem ultimately serves as a reflection on the dangers of rejecting the complexity and richness of human experience in favour of rigid, ascetic ideals.