



GRANDFATHER BY DEREK MAHON - COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

CONTEXT

- Derek Mahon's *Grandfather* is a reflection on the speaker's grandfather, capturing his personality and the speaker's experience of his presence. The poem portrays the grandfather as a complex figure—both humorous and resilient, with a deep connection to his past. Mahon weaves together elements of nostalgia, loss, and admiration as he presents the grandfather's routines, quirks, and his mysterious nature. Through vivid, concise imagery and tone, the poem explores themes of memory, generational differences, and the inevitability of time. The grandfather is depicted as someone who lives on his own terms, escaping both the present and the future while maintaining a strong link to his personal history.

STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

- "They brought him in on a stretcher from the world, / Wounded but humorous; and he soon recovered."
- The poem begins with the image of the grandfather being brought in "on a stretcher from the world," suggesting that he has been through a lot in his life and is now removed from the active world, perhaps due to old age or illness. Despite being "wounded," the grandfather retains his humour, highlighting his resilience and positive attitude. The quick recovery mentioned in the second line introduces the idea that the grandfather, though weakened, is not defeated by his circumstances.

LINES 3-5

- "Boiler-rooms, row upon row of gantries rolled / Away to reveal the landscape of a childhood / Only he can recapture."
- Here, Mahon suggests that the grandfather's memories are deeply embedded in his past, particularly his childhood. The "boiler-rooms" and "gantries" evoke images of industrial labour, suggesting that the grandfather's past involved hard physical work, perhaps in a factory or similar setting. These images "roll away" to reveal the landscape of his childhood, indicating that while his memories of work are strong, the deepest connection he has is to his early life. The phrase "only he can recapture" emphasises the uniqueness of these memories and the personal world he inhabits, inaccessible to others.

LINES 6-8

- "Even on cold / Mornings he is up at six with a block of wood / Or a box of nails, discreetly up to no good"
- These lines describe the grandfather's restless energy and his habit of getting up early, even on cold mornings. The "block of wood" and "box of nails" suggest that he occupies his time with small projects or handiwork, keeping busy with simple tasks. The phrase "discreetly up to no good" adds a playful tone, implying that his actions, while harmless, are mischievous in some way, perhaps a reflection of his independent and somewhat elusive nature.

LINES 9-10

- "Or banging round the house like a four-year-old — / Never there when you call."
- These lines further highlight the grandfather's energetic nature, comparing him to a "four-year-old" who is always active and hard to pin down. His "banging round the house" suggests a noisy, disruptive presence, but the line "Never there when you call" underscores his elusive nature. Even though he is physically present, he is hard to find or reach, symbolising both his physical restlessness and perhaps a deeper emotional or psychological distance from others.

LINES 11-12

- "But after dark / You hear his great boots thumping in the hall"
- In contrast to his daytime elusiveness, the grandfather's presence becomes more pronounced at night. His "great boots thumping" in the hall evokes a sense of solidity and strength, suggesting that despite his age and possible frailty, he remains a powerful, grounded figure. The use of "after dark" adds a sense of mystery or anticipation to his movements, as though his true self only emerges in the quiet of the evening.

LINES 13-14

- "And in he comes, as cute as they come. Each night / His shrewd eyes bolt the door and set the clock"
- These lines present the grandfather as clever and perceptive ("as cute as they come"), with a ritualistic nightly routine. His "shrewd eyes" suggest that he is highly aware of his surroundings, and his act of bolting the door and setting the clock demonstrates his desire for control over his environment. The careful setting of the clock "against the future" indicates that he is trying to hold off or control time, perhaps reflecting his awareness of aging and mortality.

LINES 15-16

- "Against the future, then his light goes out. / Nothing escapes him; he escapes us all."
- The phrase "against the future" suggests the grandfather's resistance to the inevitable passage of time and the changes it brings. His "light goes out" each night, signaling the end of the day and the metaphorical closing off from others, both physically and emotionally. The final line, "Nothing escapes him; he escapes us all," encapsulates the grandfather's elusive nature. While he is highly perceptive and nothing escapes his notice, he himself remains mysterious and difficult to fully understand or connect with.

KEY THEMES

MEMORY AND THE PAST

- The poem reflects on the grandfather's strong connection to his past, particularly his childhood. His memories are unique to him, and while others may see him as a part of the present, his inner world is shaped by his past experiences. The landscape of his childhood is something only he can access, and his activities, such as working with wood and nails, seem to connect him to this past.
- "Boiler-rooms, row upon row of gantries rolled / Away to reveal the landscape of a childhood / Only he can recapture." This quote emphasizes the depth of the grandfather's memories and how they are an intrinsic part of who he is.

ELUSIVENESS AND MYSTERY

- The grandfather is portrayed as a figure who is hard to reach, both physically and emotionally. He is often described as not being there when called and is compared to a child in his restlessness. Despite his presence in the household, there is an emotional distance, and the final lines underscore the idea that he ultimately "escapes" others' understanding.
- "Never there when you call." This line reflects the grandfather's elusive nature, symbolizing how he is physically present but emotionally or mentally distant.
- "Nothing escapes him; he escapes us all." This closing line encapsulates the grandfather's ability to see and understand his surroundings while remaining an enigma to those around him.

RESISTANCE TO TIME AND MORTALITY

- The grandfather's actions—bolting the door and setting the clock—suggest his resistance to the passage of time and the changes it brings. His nightly routine of securing the house and "setting the clock against the future" implies an awareness of his mortality and a desire to hold onto the present moment, even as time inevitably moves forward.
- "Each night / His shrewd eyes bolt the door and set the clock / Against the future." This quote reveals the grandfather's awareness of time and his ritualistic attempts to control or delay its effects.

MOOD OF THE POEM

- The mood of Grandfather is one of quiet reflection, admiration, and a sense of melancholy. Mahon captures the grandfather's personality with humour and warmth, but there is also an undercurrent of sadness as the poem acknowledges the inevitable passage of time and the distance between generations. The mood is a blend of nostalgia, affection, and a recognition of the mystery that surrounds the grandfather's life and character.

LITERARY DEVICES

METAPHOR

- "They brought him in on a stretcher from the world." This metaphor suggests the grandfather's detachment from the active world, as if he has been brought back from a place of exhaustion or suffering.

ALLITERATION

- "Boiler-rooms, row upon row of gantries rolled." The repetition of the "r" sound in this line creates a rhythmic quality that mirrors the industrial setting being described.

SIMILE

- "Banging round the house like a four-year-old." This simile compares the grandfather's restlessness to that of a young child, highlighting his energy and unpredictability.

IRONY

- "Nothing escapes him; he escapes us all." The ironic twist in this line emphasizes the grandfather's perceptive nature, yet his own inner life remains a mystery to those around him.

CONCLUSION

- Derek Mahon's *Grandfather* is a poignant reflection on the life of a grandfather who is both physically present and emotionally elusive. Through vivid imagery and affectionate descriptions, Mahon captures the complexity of the grandfather's character—his resilience, humour, and connection to the past, as well as his restlessness and distance from others. The poem explores themes of memory, time, and the inevitability of mortality, ultimately presenting the grandfather as a figure who escapes full understanding, even as he continues to observe the world around him with sharp, shrewd eyes.

