The concept of Mahon’s poetry which I engaged with and enjoyed most is his exploration and obvious interest in people and places. He expresses himself in his own personal and unique style, which allows him to explore the subject matter in his poems with a language that is rich and memorable.

“Grandfather” is a poem which offers an insight into the background and personality of Mahon’s own grandfather. I enjoyed the lively description of the old man “up at six, with a block of wood or a box of nails, discreetly up to no good, or banging round the house like a four year old”. I found the language that Mahon uses in his description of his grandfather as “cute” and “shrewd” to be endearing, and it is clear from lines such as “wounded but humourous” that Mahon has great affection and high respect for this man. It is not in Mahon’s style to write a poem without a setting, and even this one, which is clearly focused on his grandfather as a person, gives us a setting of “row upon row of gantries.” The “landscape” of this man’s childhood is given in order for us to appreciate the hard, physical nature of the work he did in the Belfast shipyards.

Mahon seems particularly drawn to people from history, as is evident in “Antarctica” and “After the Titanic”. In these poems, unlike “Grandfather”, Mahon is not the observer, but enters into the mind of the characters, and presents what he imagines their thoughts and feelings to have been. Mahon uses repetition to great effect in “Antarctica”, with regard to the lines, “I’m just going outside and may be some time” and “At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.” This constant repetition echoes the final words of Lawrence Oates before he sacrificed his own life to help speed up the return of his fellow explorers. Mahon shows great interest in what the reaction of his companions may have been (“the others nod, pretending not to know”). By describing this event as both “ridiculous” and “sublime” Mahon conveys his incredulity at the selflessness and courageousness of Oate’s decision to give his life for the sake of his companions, the trait which probably attracted Mahon to this character. In “After the Titanic”, the speaking voice is that of Bruce Ismay, a character who contrasts strikingly with the courageous Oates. In this poem, Mahon explores the outcome of the remainder of Ismay’s life after he fled from the sinking Titanic. This poem is full of memorable imagery, from the metaphorical image, “I sank that night as far as any / Hero”, to that of a man who “takes his cocaine and will see no-one”. The final line of the poem, “Include me in your lamentations” invites us to contemplate on whether or not Ismay really diserves to be treated with disdain, or whether he has paid the price for his selfishness.

Like Mahon, I have an interest in Ireland, which contributed to my enjoyment and appreciation of the poems “Kinsale” and “Rathlin”. Mahon uses contrast between past and present in both of these poems, to convey the difference between the oppression and suffering linked with Ireland’s past and the peace and prosperity we enjoy today. Again, these issues are made all the more interesting by the distinctive style in which Mahon writes about them. He makes use ofalliteration in “Kinsale” when he speaks of the rain of the past – “deep-delving, dark, deliberate”. This thudding “d” sound resounds in our minds, echoing the dark depression and suffering of Ireland throughout her past. I found the image of the “sky-blue slates, steaming in the sun” to be a clever link with the previous image, in that the rain that pervaded the past is now evaporating away in the sun. “Rathlin” is a poem in which Mahon uses sound to great effect to compare past and present. He contrasts the “screams of the Rathlin women” to the present day “cry of the shearwater” and “roar of the outboard motor”. It is clear that Rathlin has been free of war and bloodshed for some time, but the line “bombs doze in the housing estates” suggests that Mahon is contemplating whether or not his hometown of Belfast will ever experience a similar peace.

Mahon’s cultural frame of reference does not simply stop at Ireland. The poem, “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” refers to places worldwide where “a thought might grow”. He speaks of abandoned, forgotten people and places such as “Peruvian mines”, “Indian compounds” and “lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii.” The metaphor of the mushrooms left to rot in a shed in Co. Wexford is a representation of all the victims of tragedies who are soon forgotten by the world, as it “waltzes in its bowl of cloud”. Mahon is clearly deeply affected by the injustice in the world and expresses this in a distinctive and memorable way at the end of the poem when he pleads on their behalf “let the god not abandon us/ we too had our lives to live/ you with your light meter and relaxed itinerary/ let not our naïve labours have been in vain!” Mahon’s clear regard for humanity is shown as he gives these people a speaking voice, the reference to “the god” emphasising the universality of what Mahon is speaking about.

Mahon’s treatment of people and places in a style which is so unique and creative is the most outstanding feature of his poetry, and the one which, for me, made the study of poetry all the more enjoyable.