



Exploring Senior Cycle Texts *Antarctica* by Derek Mahon

Please note: *Antarctica* by Derek Mahon is a poem included as part of the Prescribed Material for the Leaving Certificate English Examination in 2025. It may be used to explore poetry at Ordinary Level or Higher Level.

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons or as part of a unit of learning
- Students may wish to complete some tasks individually or in pairs/groups
- Tasks might be completed orally and/or in written format
- Students may also wish to engage in a think, pair, share activity for some tasks.



Image courtesy of The Irish Times

Pre-reading discussion:



1. In pairs discuss the title of the poem. What does it infer? Does it remind you of something?
2. In pairs discuss your expectations of Antarctica the place. Describe what it would be like in your opinion.
3. In pairs, identify what you think are the most impactful techniques in poetry and explain why?

Note taking



As a class discuss the different ways to take down notes. You might like to discuss and explore some of the following;

- Stop and jot
- Cornell Note Taking
- Sketch Notes



While reading the poem *Antarctica* focus on;

- Understanding the main message of the poem.
- Identifying the techniques utilised by the poet and their affect on the reader. (The following page will support students to further this)



Antarctica

'I am just going outside and may be some time.'
The others nod, pretending not to know.
the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

He leaves them reading and begins to climb,
Goading his ghost into the howling snow;
He is just going outside and may be some time.

The tent recedes beneath its crust of rime
And frostbite is replaced by vertigo:
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

Need we consider it some sort of crime,
This numb self-sacrifice of the weakest? No,
He is just going outside and may be some time

In fact, for ever. Solitary enzyme,
Though the night yield no glimmer there will glow,
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

He takes leave of the earthly pantomime
Quietly, knowing it is time to go.
"I am just going outside and may be some time."
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

Derek Mahon



Read the poem, *Antarctica* by
Derek Mahon below.
Some common conventions of
poetry have been identified.



Antarctica

The poem follows a structured **form** known as a villanelle. A villanelle consists of 19 lines with a specific rhyme scheme and repetition of lines.

'I am just going outside and may be some time.'

The others nod, pretending not to know.
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

In this poem, the first and third lines of the opening stanza are repeated throughout the poem, alternately appearing as the last line of subsequent stanzas.

He leaves them reading and begins to climb,
Goading his ghost into the howling snow;
He is just going outside and may be some time.

The tent recedes beneath its crust of rime
And frostbite is replaced by vertigo:
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

Vivid images such as "the howling snow," and "frostbite is replaced by vertigo" evoke a sense of solitude, and danger, contributing to the overall atmosphere of the poem.

The **theme** of sacrifice is explored through the line "This numb self-sacrifice of the weakest."

Need we consider it some sort of crime,
This numb self-sacrifice of the weakest? No,
He is just going outside and may be some time

His departure is depicted as a solitary and potentially dangerous endeavour,

In fact, for ever. Solitary enzyme,
Though the night yield no glimmer there will glow,
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

The **rhyme scheme** of the villanelle is ABA ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA.

In this poem, the first and third lines of each tercet (three-line stanza) rhyme with each other, and the last line of the quatrain (four-line stanza) also rhymes with them.

He takes leave of the earthly pantomime
Quietly, knowing it is time to go.
'I am just going outside and may be some time.'
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

Derek Mahon

Alliteration: The use of repeated **consonant sounds**, such as in "heart of the ridiculous, the sublime" adds a musical quality to the lines and creates a sense of harmony.

Assonance: The repetition of **vowel sounds**, such as in "pretending not to know" adds a lyrical and melodic element to the poem.

The **tone** carries a sense of quiet resolve and determination. His decision to venture outside, despite potential dangers and isolation, is presented with a calm and resolute attitude.



Group Work Activities

The following activities can be used with any group work strategy for example Rally Coach. Emphasis is placed on the oral aspect of discussing and understanding a text prior to writing.

1. Mahon paints vivid images of the Antarctic landscape, contrasting the solitary figure against the white snow and the howling blizzard outside the tent. Can you create a visual representation of the poem.
2. Mahon cleverly uses assonance (repetition of vowel sounds) and alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds) to create musicality and emphasize certain words or phrases. Discuss how these techniques enhance the overall tone and mood.
3. The poem follows the structure of a villanelle, a style often associated with reflections on death. Discuss how the form contributes to the poem's impact.
4. The use of the word "enzyme" symbolizes Captain Oates's unchanging resolve, even as others change due to frostbite. It represents his unwavering loyalty and self-sacrifice. Discuss other symbols in literature and ask students to find symbols in their own lives or experiences.
5. Based on your understanding of the poem, in pairs summarise the poem in no more than six words. Remember the importance of word choice when doing so.

Listening Activities



Listen to the following extract from RTE's Doc on One *The Lost Mountaineers*. As you are listening take note of the settings described.



Click on image above to access extract from podcast

1. In pairs, using the *Rally Coach* strategy create a setting based on the extract you just engaged with. Remember to discuss and compare thoughts before
2. Compare and contrast the setting described in the podcast *The Lost Mountaineers* and the poem *Antarctica*.



Oral Activity



It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves, because it's there. If you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself, upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go.

The Lost Mountaineers (DOC ON ONE)

As long as man has been on the earth there has always been the need to push beyond the boundaries of possibility. However, the youth of today chose convenience over challenge.

Debate the above statement in pairs, triads or small groups.

[Click here to access the full episode of *The Lost Mountaineers*](#)

Written Activity



1. *As long as man has been on the earth there has always been the need to push beyond the boundaries of possibility. The youth of today chose convenience over challenge.*

Write a debate based on the above statement. Remember to include points from oral activity above and to revise the structure of a debate before writing.

2. Imagine you are an explorer on one of these expeditions over a hundred years ago.

Describe a number of experiences you have had that you believe would fascinate the youth of today, reflect on both the positive and negative insights you have gained into human nature. Consider some of the ways you believe your experience in this environment has altered you as a person.