

The Poetry of Derek Mahon

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2023 – List of Prescribed Poems

Derek Mahon

- Grandfather
- Day Trip to Donegal
- As It Should Be
- After the Titanic
- Ecclesiastes
- A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford
- The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush
- Rathlin
- Antarctica
- Kinsale



Theme – History: Often Linked to a Sense of Place

After the
Titanic

Antarctica

Rathlin

Kinsale

As it Should
Be

Day Trip to
Donegal

A Disused
Shed in Co.
Wexford

The Chinese
Restaurant in
Portrush

Compassion Humanity Understanding of People

After the *Titanic*

Rathlin

Grandfather

Antarctica

As it Should Be

Day Trip to Donegal

A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford



Nature

After the
Titanic

Kinsale

Rathlin

Antarctica

Day Trip to
Donegal

A Disused
Shed in Co.
Wexford

Ecclesiastes

The Chinese
Restaurant in
Portrush

Isolation

Antarctica

After the *Titanic*

Day Trip to Donegal

As it Should Be



What Might You be Asked?

2008 SEC: “Derek Mahon explores people and places in his own distinctive style.” Write your response to this statement supporting your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems you have studied.

2013 SEC: “Mahon uses language and imagery to transform personal observations into universal reflections.” Write your response to this statement with reference to the poems by Derek Mahon on your course.

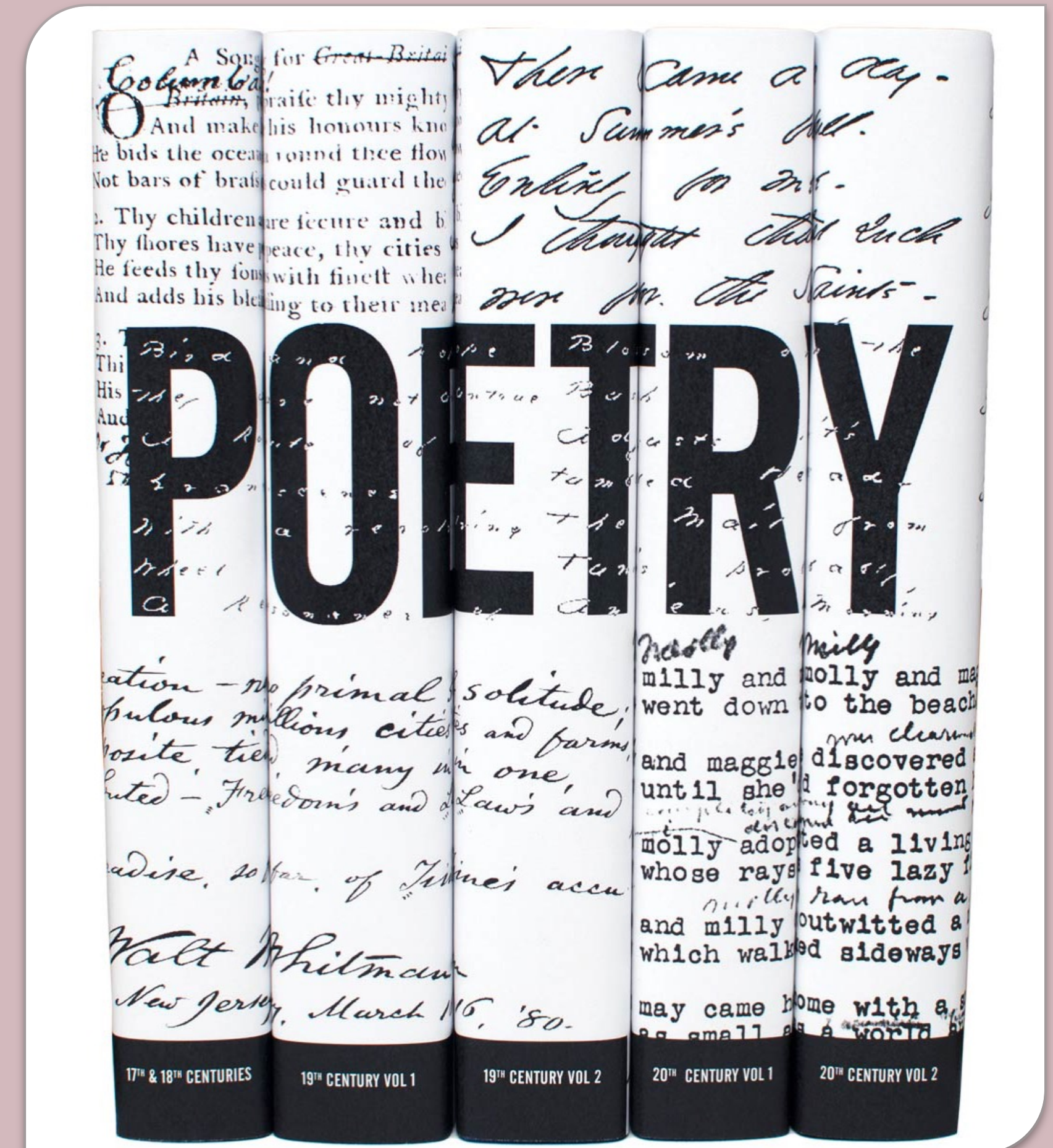
2013 DEB: “Mahon’s dark vision of life is conveyed in poems that are both interesting and atmospheric.” To what extent do you agree with this statement? In your answer, you should refer to both style and subject matter. Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Derek Mahon on your course.

Note

The line breaks in these notes are not always where they are in the original poems because of slide size limits.

You should refer to your poetry book for the correct line breaks.

Suggested quotes are highlighted. You may wish to learn different quotes, of course.



“I said he is a poet of the perimeter,
meditating on the centre, with a mixture
of amusement and pain. He is not, or he is
very rarely, at the centre of his poems.”

Brendan Kennelly, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', in *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*,
ed. Terence Brown & Nicholas Grene, Macmillan 1989

Grandfather

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Grandfather

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What do you understand by the term 'second childhood'?
- Do you think all old people are more or less the same?
- How might someone feel when they retire after a lifetime of work and have raised their family?

Background

Derek Mahon's maternal grandfather worked in the Harland and Wolff shipbuilding yard and was part of the team that built the *Titanic*. He is the likely source of inspiration for this poem.



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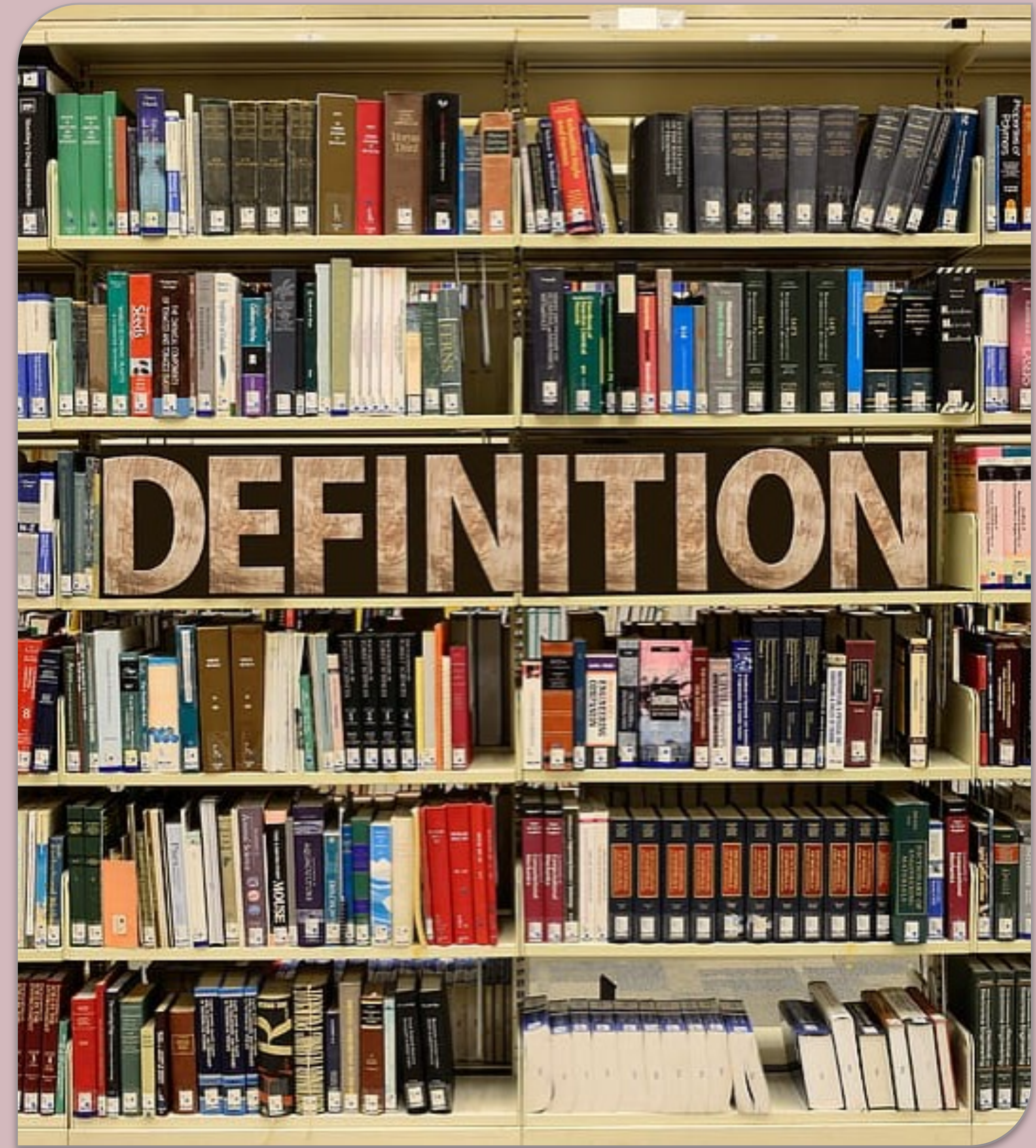
Vocabulary

Boiler-rooms: ships' engine rooms

gantries: platforms for a crane

cute: shrewd

shrewd: astute, sharp powers of judgement





Lines 1-5

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They brought him in on a stretcher from the world,

Wounded but humorous; and he soon recovered.

Boiler-rooms, row upon row of gantries rolled

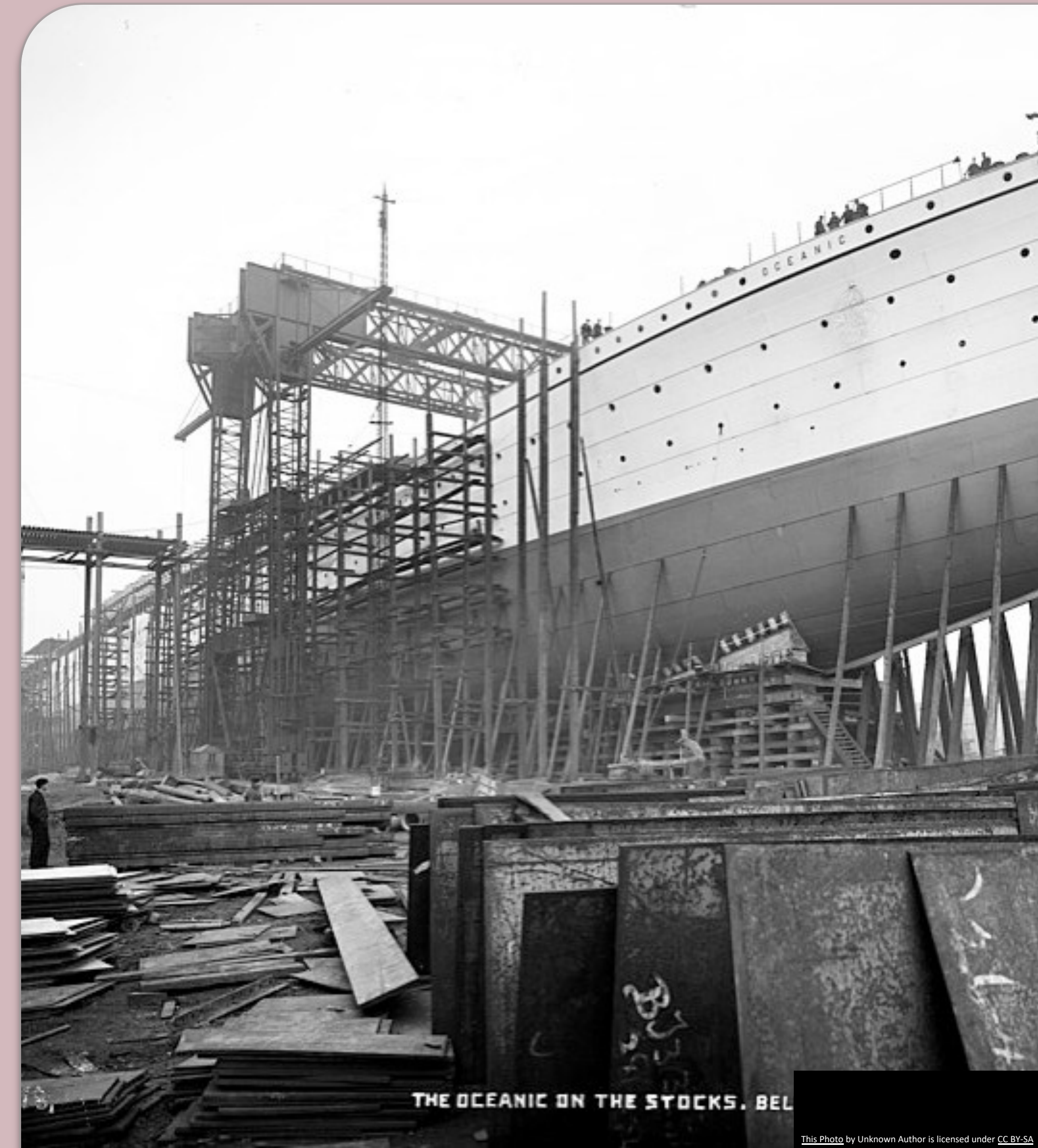
Away to reveal the landscape of a childhood

Only he can recapture.

- The grandfather is enigmatic from the start. He was brought in 'from the world' which suggests that he is now leaving the outside world and retreating into his own world. It also leaves the issue of the nature of his injury and the accident that caused it open to question. This fits in with his mysterious nature.
- Contradictory words 'Wounded but humorous' are linked by assonance. The 'ooh' sound is reminiscent of a gasp of pain.
- The grandfather is a contradictory, secretive figure.
- The confinement of the shipyard is captured in the repetitive 'row upon row of gantries'. This restrictive environment is 'rolled / Away' to reveal a wide expanse: that of childhood. No longer confined and tethered to the responsibilities of a job, the poet's grandfather is free to be who he wants.
- Again, there is a sense of the mysterious. 'Only he can recapture' his memories.
- There is a darker reading of these lines, of course. Perhaps the grandfather's injuries rendered him childlike and incapable. He may be losing his grasp on reality.

Lines 5-8

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Even on cold

Mornings he is 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-

- Habits of a lifetime: still rises early but now he lacks purpose.
- Randomness of 'block of wood' and 'box of nails' suggests lack of focus but is also reminiscent of a child playing at being an adult.
- Alliteration: Repeated 'b' sounds in 'block', 'box', 'banging' reinforce the noisy disturbance caused by the grandfather's behaviour.
- Contrast between 'discreetly' and the noise caused by the grandfather's actions
- Conversational tone brings the grandfather to life

Lines 9-14

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Never there when you call. But after dark
You hear his great boots thumping in the hall
And in he comes, as cute as they come. Each night
His shrewd eyes bolt the door and set the clock
Against the future, then his light goes out.
Nothing escapes him; he escapes us all.

- Although this is a fourteen-line sonnet, conventions are not strictly observed. This is fitting for a portrait of a man who eludes those who attempt to control or pigeon-hole him. Enjambment links octet and sestet.
- Contrast between noisy presence of previous lines and elusive figure who is 'Never there when you call'.
- Despite his mysterious nature, the grandfather takes no care to enter quietly.
- He is 'as cute as they come' and 'shrewd'. Contrast between this image and idea of the grandfather being childlike. However, the word 'cute' has a double meaning: it can be used to describe an appealing child. The colloquial language – 'as cute as they come' – links the grandfather to Belfast. This is his place.
- The grandfather locks the door and sets the clock 'Against the future'. Is the grandfather trying to ward off the inevitable future? Aural appeal: onomatopoeic 'bolt',
- The grandfather's 'light goes out' as he falls asleep. His shrewd nature is referred to once again: 'Nothing escapes him'. The grandfather escapes those who seek to understand him or exert any kind of control over him in his later years. He is enigmatic, elusive, mysterious and independent to the end.

Themes and Exam Focus

The poet reflects on the nature of old age and its effect on the individual. Although there is much about his grandfather that is common to all elderly men, he still retains a sense of mystery and individualism. This reminds us that we are all unique, even when we may appear superficially similar to others.

There is affection and admiration in the poet's description of his grandfather. There is nothing patronising in the tone; rather the poet speaks of the old man with respect for his humanity.



Key Terms

Affectionate
portrait

Conversational
tone

Colloquialism

Nostalgic

Sonnet

Non-
conformist

Confinement

Enigmatic

Mysterious

Second
childhood

Individuality

Eccentric

Unique

Linked Tasks

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- Comp A – 2021: TIME PIECES - Text 1 is based on edited extracts from *Time Pieces – A Dublin Memoir* by John Banville. In this text the writer reflects on some childhood memories and shares his thoughts on the past.
- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Comp B – 2015 - Write the introduction for a collection of writing (e.g. poem, stories and articles) by young people about older people. In it you should discuss the importance of older people, such as grandparents, in the live of young people today and the contribution made by older people to society in general.
- Composing – 2015 - Write a personal essay about your response to an ending, or endings, in your life that you consider significant.
- Unseen Poem – 2015 – Peter Street by Peter Sirr
- Composition – 2011 – Write a short story in which two unusual or eccentric characters meet for the first time
- Unseen Poem – 2009 – Father's Old Blue Cardigan by Anne Carson

Day Trip to Donegal

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“Light plays a crucial part in the imaginative world of Derek Mahon’s poetry. He is, in fact, a markedly visual poet, one who attends patiently, even contemplatively, to the look of things and especially to the way light falls on them. ... He is moved too by the moment when light breaks in darkness, when shadow suddenly releases its hold on the mind. Dawn is his prime time, particularly in the washed light after the storm at sea as a northern coast awakens to a transfigured world.”

Terence Brown, 'Derek Mahon: The Poet and Painting'

Day Trip to Donegal

Pre-Reading Tasks

- This poem was published in 1965. Would a Protestant from Belfast visiting Donegal have been entirely straightforward, do you think?
- Why might our dreams be affected by seemingly unimportant events in our lives?

Vocabulary

enclave: a portion of territory surrounded by a larger territory whose inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct

receding: retreating, moving back

marbling: colouring or staining to resemble marble

landfall: collapse of land, landslide

Forethought: preparation

Overture: approaches, proposals

vindictive: seeking vengeance



Lines 1-6

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We reached the sea in early afternoon,
Climbed stiffly out, there were things to be
done,
Clothes to be picked up, friends to be seen.
As ever, the nearby hills were a deeper green
Than anywhere in the world, and the grave
Grey of the sea the grimmer in that enclave.

- The poet and some unnamed friends or family members drove for a long time to reach the sea
- Practical note: 'things to be done / Clothes to be picked up friends to be seen.'
- Although the description of the Donegal hills being a 'deeper green / Thank anywhere in the world' sounds pleasant, there is an ominous note in the final lines of this stanza. The euphony of 'deeper green' is replaced by the cacophony of 'grave', 'Grey' and 'grimmer'.
- The word 'grave' hints at death.
- An 'enclave' is a portion of territory surrounded by a larger territory whose inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct. We are reminded of the communities in Northern Ireland living uneasily side-by-side at the time. A visit to Donegal by Belfast Protestants could be problematic.

Lines 7-12

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Down at the pier the boats gave up their catch,
A writhing glimmer of fish; they fetch
Ten times as much in the city as here,
And still the fish come in year after year –
Herring and mackerel, flopping about on the
deck
In attitudes of agony and heartbreak.

- The poet's sympathy for the fish dying on the decks of the boats is clear in this stanza.
- Evocative imagery, the fish are a 'writhing glimmer'
- Keen awareness that the fish die to provide food for city-dwellers like the poet. They determine the fishes' worth and their desire drives up the price.
- Helpless innocence of the fish is highlighted: they come back to this place 'year after year' and meet the same fate.
- 'Agony and heartbreak' are human emotions: Mahon empathises with the fish to the extent that he attributes human qualities to the herring and mackerel
- The fish are out of their element and cannot survive in our environment any more than we can survive long in theirs.
- This poem works well with 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'.



Lines 13-18

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We left at eight, drove back the way we came,
The sea receding down each muddy lane.

Around midnight, we changed-down into
suburbs

Sunk in a sleep no gale-force wind disturbs.

The time of year had left its mark

On frosty pavements glistening in the dark.

- Return journey - the sea is left behind
- They change down gears as they enter the built-up suburbs but there is also a hint of a mental gear shift. The suburbs are safe, a place 'no gale-force wind disturbs' and the only sign of the power of nature is the frost on pavements 'glistening in the dark'.
- The suburbs are 'Sunk' in sleep: the word 'Sunk' reminding us of the sea and of death.



Lines 19-24

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Give me a ring, goodnight, and so to bed ...

That night the slow sea washed against my head,

Performing its immeasurable erosions -

Spilling into the skull, marbling the stones

That spine the very harbour wall,

Muttering its threat to villages of landfall.

- Practical, down-to-earth ending to the day as those who went on the trip go their separate ways
- 'and so to bed' is a commonly used phrase meant to signify the end of the day. It was often used by the famous 17th century diarist, Samuel Pepys as a way of winding up his account of the day.
- The day may seem to end in routine manner, but there is more to come.
- Poem becomes introspective: poet expresses deep disquiet
- The poet dreams of the sea and it washes at his subconscious as it washes away the rocks and shore.
- The word 'skull' is used rather than 'head', suggesting death and decay and linking this line to the 'grave/Grey of the sea' mentioned in the first stanza.
- The rocks on the harbour wall are like a 'spine' - linking the stones to a human body
- The sea threatens to wash away at the land until villages collapse into the water. Personification of the 'muttering' sea adds to the sense of unreality.
- Sibilance mirrors the sound of the sea washing against the shore

Lines 34-40

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At dawn I was alone far out to sea

Without skill or reassurance - nobody

To show me how, no promise of rescue –

Cursing my constant failure to take due

Forethought for this; contriving vain

Overtures to the vindictive wind and rain.

- To be 'at sea' is an idiom meaning to be confused or puzzled – unable to tackle a problem
- The poet feels isolated and bewildered: he is out of his element just as the fish were when they flopped about on the decks of the boats
- Dawn brings light, but not relief
- The poet reflects on his 'constant failure' to prepare for overwhelmingly negative emotions, doubts and fears.
- The dream-world has left the poet deeply unsettled. He has imagined being adrift in a storm, unprepared, unable to cope and asking in vain for the vengeful wind and rain to give him mercy. This now seems to be a reflection of his own mental state. He may feel overwhelmed by a world that cannot be controlled or appeased.

Themes and Exam Focus

- Dramatic monologue
- New point of view on historic event
- Compassionate and moving picture of a broken man.
- Still a sense that Ismay is trying to justify his role in the disaster. He refers to those who blamed him as 'They', implying that he may not agree with their assessment. At the same time, there is honesty in his description of the grief and shame he feels when he says 'I tell you / I sank as far that night as any / Hero.'



Key Terms

Practical

Empathy

Evocative
imagery

Ominous tone

Euphony
versus
cacophony

Introspective

Deep disquiet

Unsettled

Overwhelmed

Linked Tasks

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- Composition – 2021 - In TEXT 2, Doireann Ní Ghríofa celebrates the colours in her garden, the sounds of the past and the “purring” of bees. Write an article, for publication in a popular magazine, about the many and varied colours and sounds that punctuate and surround our daily lives and the impact they have on us.
- Comp B – 2021 - An assertion that other creatures’ lives are somehow lesser than human life has prompted extensive debate on social media. In order to join in this online debate, write an open letter to be shared on social media, in which you: state your position in relation to animal rights, explore some of the issues associated with our current engagement with animals and outline what you see as the major challenges we face as we share the planet with animals in the future.
- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Composing – 2015 – Write a personal essay about one or more moments of uncertainty you have experienced.
- Unseen Poem – 2014 – Seamus Heaney’s *The Peninsula*

After the Titanic

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“Mahon identifies with the unreconciled and the damned, and often there is a quality of still anguish in the bitter clarity and detachment of his work.”

Tom Paulin, 'A Terminal Ironist', in *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Bloodaxe 1984)

After the Titanic

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Do you agree with the idea that women and children should be given priority in lifeboats? What would you think of a man who took a place in a lifeboat when there were women and children left on a sinking ship?
- Short, 15 minute video about Bruce Ismay and the sinking of the Titanic.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOEeRXhMHyE>
- <https://www.npr.org/2011/10/15/141328305/how-to-survive-the-titanic-and-sink-your-name?t=1647276939519>
- Read this article about the effect the sinking of the Titanic had on Bruce Ismay.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-17694824>

Bruce Ismay

Mahon adopts the persona of Bruce Ismay, managing director of the White Star Line, the company that owned the Titanic. Ismay faced a great deal of criticism for taking a place in a lifeboat. He was one of the few men who survived. Ismay claims there was nobody nearby when he took the last empty spot in a lifeboat, but there were around 1,500 people left on the ship.

Ismay was vilified for surviving. The inquiry and public loathing took a huge toll on him. He withdrew from the world and spent most of his time in his house, Costello Lodge in Connemara.

Mahon's father and grandfathers worked in the Harland and Wolff shipyard where the Titanic was built.



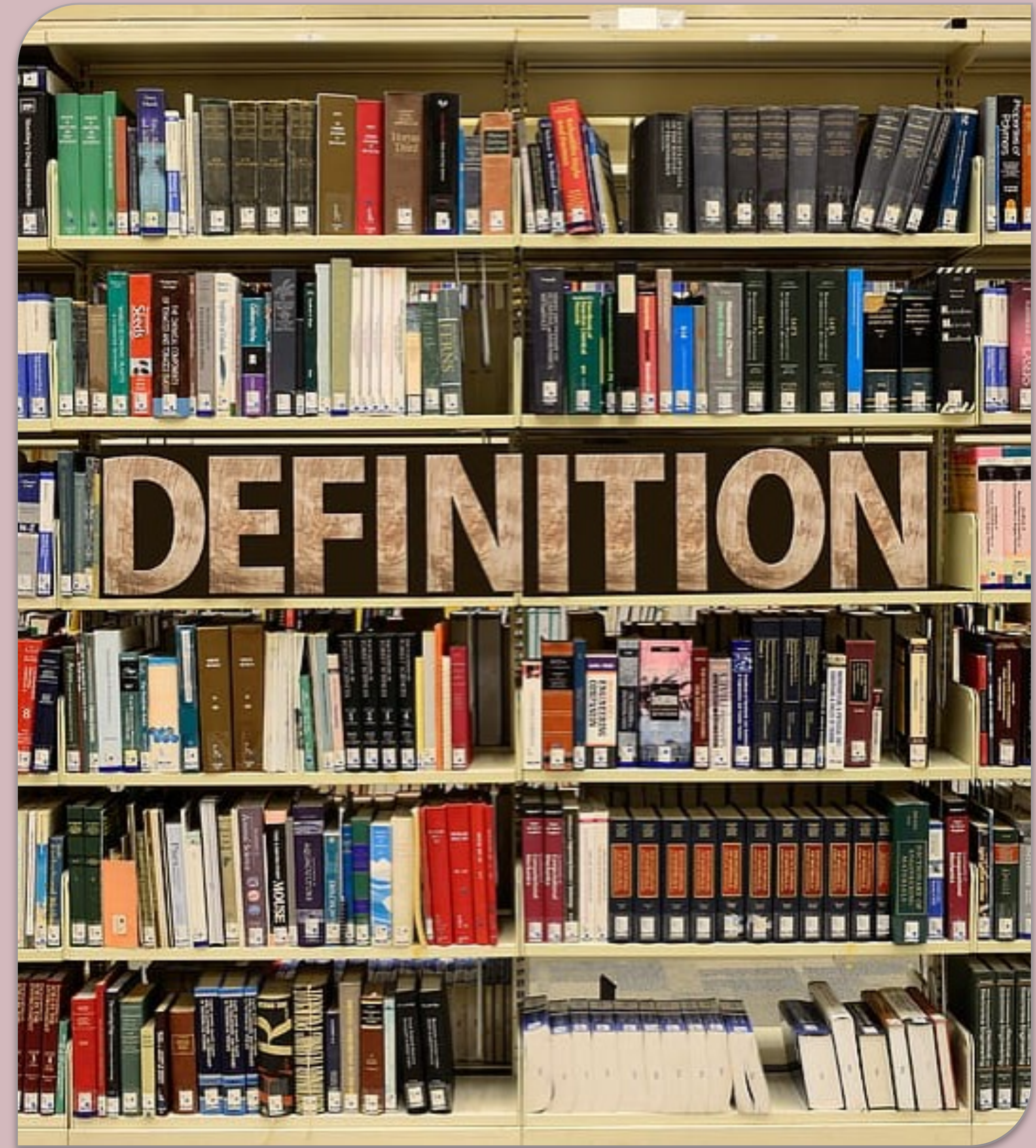
Vocabulary

pandemonium: uproar, chaotic noise

winches: machines for hauling or pulling

ragtime: early Jazz music

lamentations: expressions of sorrow or regret





Lines 1-8

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They said I got away in a boat
And humbled me at the inquiry. I tell you
I sank as far that night as any
Hero. As I sat shivering on the dark water,
I turned to ice to hear my costly
Life go thundering down in a pandemonium of
Prams, pianos, sideboards, winches,
Boilers bursting and shredded ragtime.

- Ismay defends himself, saying he 'sank as far that night as any / Hero'. His claim to heroism is contradicted by fact. True heroes such as all of the ships engineers, perished because they did all they could to keep the ship afloat or to help others escape.
- Irony in 'I turned to ice'. Ismay was safe in a lifeboat while people froze in the water.
- Ismay's life froze at that point, however. He never recovered from the disaster.
- Lack of clarity: do we feel sorry for Ismay? Tone is self-absorbed: 'my costly life' and does not mention those who died.
- Focus is on items, but they have symbolic value. Prams remind us of the babies and children who drowned.
- Alliterative and assonant 'pandemonium', Prams, pianos' suggest an element of order but that vanishes with the introduction of the random 'sideboards, winches' and 'Boilers bursting'. The 'b' sounds in 'Boilers bursting' captures the explosive nature of the event. The musicians played on - 'shredded ragtime' – as the ship sank.
- Is it significant that all the imagery is aural rather than visual? Can he not bear to describe the sights?

Lines 8-16

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Now I hide

In a lonely house behind the sea
Where the tide leaves broken toys and hat-boxes
Silently at my door. The showers of
April, flowers of May mean nothing to me,
nor the
Late light of June, when my gardener
Describes to strangers how the old man stays in bed
On seaward mornings after nights of
Wind, takes his cocaine and will see no one.

- The scene shifts to the present. Ismay hides away 'In a lonely house behind the sea'.
- There is no escape because the sea washes up reminders of lives lost. The 'hat-boxes' and 'broken toys' bring to mind the women and children who died on the Titanic.
- Nature offers no consolation, neither the 'showers of April' nor the 'flowers of May' can heal his soul. The rhyming of 'showers' and 'flowers' suggests the peaceful, beautiful harmony of the place in which Ismay lives but it cannot help him.
- Tormented by his memories, Ismay again hides, this time using the stupor of drugs to dull his senses and ease his pain.

A photograph of a shipwreck's metal structure, heavily rusted and covered in marine life. The structure consists of several curved metal beams and a vertical support, all showing significant corrosion and encrustation with various sea organisms. The background is dark, suggesting an underwater environment. The text "Lines 16-21" is overlaid in white, centered on the image.

Lines 16-21

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Then it is

I drown again with all those dim

Lost faces I never understood, my poor soul

Screams out in the starlight, heart

Breaks loose and rolls down like a stone.

Include me in your lamentations.

- Ismay's tone is somewhat self-serving. Although he is shattered by the sinking and the subsequent inquiry, the phrase 'I drown again' suggests he feels his plight is as terrible as those who died. He did not drown that night, and although he may be repeatedly reliving the events, it is hard to feel sympathy for him.
- The repeated first person pronouns in the poem hint at selfishness.
- Frank admission that he 'never understood' the people – mainly third class passengers – who died. Were there lives less important than his 'costly' one?
- Self pity in 'my poor soul'
- Powerful verbs suggest Ismay's emotional pain: 'Screams', 'Breaks', 'rolls'. And yet we remember that he did not scream or sink like a stone on the night of the disaster. Does his heartbreak now, although vividly described, compensate for his actions on the night?

Themes and Exam Focus

Isolation: Ismay is a broken man, haunted by his actions on that night. He is despised and vilified and hides away from the world and will see no-one. Compare his isolation to that of the heroic Oates in 'Antarctica'. Ismay is also isolated from the realities of life: he admits he 'never understood' most of the passengers on the ship.

Compassion: Mahon gives a voice to Ismay and presents him without judgement. We are allowed to form our own conclusions.



Key Terms

Adopts the
persona

Isolation

Self-
absorption

Self-serving

Repeated first-
person
pronouns

Shift from past
to present

Vivid aural
imagery

Linked Tasks

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- Question B: 2021 - You have been invited to write a feature article, entitled *Monumental Matters – The Story of Statues*, to appear in the magazine supplement of a weekend newspaper. In your article you should: reflect on the long-established tradition of erecting statues to celebrate or memorialise people, explore some of the reasons why commemorative statues may be controversial, and give your views on continuing this tradition into the future.
- Composing – 2015 - Write a personal essay about your response to an ending, or endings, in your life that you consider significant.
- Composing – 2015 – Write a short story in which the central character’s status as an outsider has a direct influence on the plot.
- Comp A – 2014 THE INFLUENCE OF THE PAST – Text 3 is based on an essay by Seamus Heaney entitled *The Sense of the Past*. In it he reflects the influence of the past on our lives.

As It Should Be

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As It Should Be

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What does the phrase 'As it should be' suggest to you?
- When, if ever, it is alright to kill someone?
- What do you know about 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland?

“Mahon insists on the poet serving humanity in his own terms. He should feel, but resist, the contrary pressure that would make him in the image of the people ... Since poetry cannot be the ‘creature’ of politics, Unionist and Republican ideologies are equally off the map.”

Edna Longley, 'Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland'

Background

Mahon returned to Ireland from America in 1967. This poem is from his collection *Lives*, published in 1972 at the time violence in the North of Ireland was escalating.

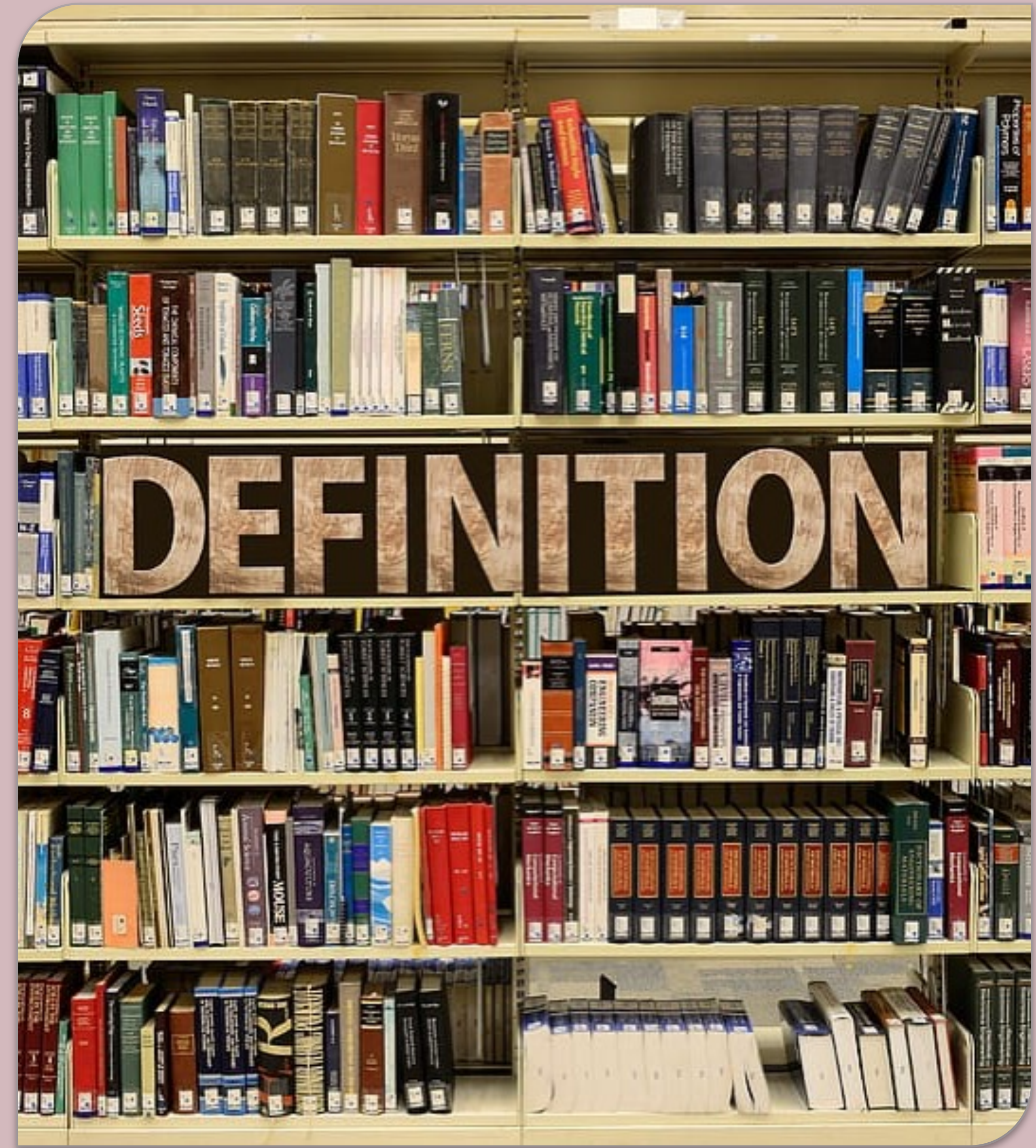
The 'Yellow River' refers to the work of the poet Ezra Pound. He translated the work of an ancient Chinese poet who, according to Pound 'died drunk' when he tried to embrace a moon / In the Yellow River'. This foolish act is seen as a metaphor for foolish ideals.

In 1931, the playwright Denis Johnston wrote *The Moon in the Yellow River*. It tells of an attempt to blow up an electricity-generating power plant. He is killed and his idealism scorned by his killer.

Vocabulary

Blind yard: an enclosed yard from which there is no second exit

The moon in the Yellow River: (See background notes.)



Lines 1-5

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We hunted the mad bastard

Through bog, moorland, rock, to the starlit west

And gunned him down in a blind yard

Between ten sleeping lorries

And an electricity generator.

- Mahon adopts the persona of a killer.
- The victim is dehumanised and his killing justified when he is referred to as a 'mad bastard'. He was 'hunted' like an animal.
- The matter-of-fact description of the terrain over which the man was hunted does not detract from the horror of the chase.
- The phrase 'starlit west' hints at idealism and romanticism, something with which the speaker in the poem will have no truck.
- The man is 'gunned down': a dreadfully short and shocking account of a brutal murder. The harsh 'd' sounds bring to mind the retort of the gunfire.
- The yard is 'blind' and the lorries 'sleeping'. This may suggest a people who turn a blind eye to what is going on, or remind us of the speaker's narrow-minded blindness to his own moral defects. He is supremely confident that he is doing the right thing.
- The mention of the generator is a nod to Johnston's play.

A landscape photograph showing a grassy hillside in the foreground, a dense forest in the middle ground, and a large body of water in the distance under a cloudy sky. The text "Lines 6-8" is overlaid in the center.

Lines 6-8

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Let us hear no idle talk

Of the moon in the Yellow River;

The air blows softer since his departure.

- The speaker is deaf to any counter-arguments that do not align with his view of the world.
- He scorns idealism in all its forms.
- The ludicrous idea that nature somehow applauds the brutal murder is horrifying. The speaker believes something evil or rotten has been purged from the world and all is better now.
- The euphemism 'departure' seems to suggest a willingness on the victim's part to leave this life. It avoids the brutal reality.

Lines 9-11

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Since his tide-burial during school hours
Our children have known no bad dreams.
Their cries echo lightly along the coast.

- The victim is secretly dumped in the sea.
- This final indignity is justified because the speaker claims the children in the area are better off now.
- The children play freely near where a man has been thrown away as if he were rubbish.



Lines 12-14

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This is as it should be.

They will thank us for it when they grow up

To a world with method in it.

- The speaker's complacency and self-righteousness are clear. He believes the younger generation will be grateful for the violence done in their name.
- There is a terrible irony in there now being 'a world with method in it'. What method? The rule of violence?
- The speaker's certainty is chilling.

Themes and Exam Focus

Analysis of violence and the way in which perpetrators justify their actions.

The self-delusion of those who believe they have the right to take the lives of others.



Key Terms

Adopts the
persona of a
killer

Victim is
dehumanised

Matter-of-fact
descriptions

Scorns
idealism

Blind to his
own moral
defects

Self-
justification

Self-righteous

Callous

Final indignity

Linked Tasks

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- Read Eavan Boland's 'Child of Our Time'. Examine the different ways the phrase 'idle talk' is used in both poems.
- Composing – 2008 – Write a speech in which you argue for or against the necessity to protect national culture and identity.
- Unseen Poetry – 2019 – *The Wound in Time* by Carol Ann Duffy, written to mark the 100th anniversary of the end of World War One.

Ecclesiastes

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Ecclesiastes

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What aspects of your upbringing shape the person you are, do you think?
- Do you understand why people might have a love hate relationship with their home place and the community in which they grew up?

“Derek Mahon’s poem is a blast of contempt for the rigid thinking of the evangelical puritan who achieves political leadership over ‘a credulous people’.”

Background

Although he was a Protestant, Derek Mahon did not see himself as a spokesman for that religious tradition.

From his obituary in the Irish Independent:

He was brought up a Protestant, and once quipped that whereas Catholics are devout, Protestants are staunch.

He became a choirboy, and although he later identified himself as an atheist, he recalled that the "hymnology invaded the mind"; the rhythms and rhymes of his work, particularly his later poems, appear to echo this.

Although he was reticent about his own political leanings, he did think of himself as a Protestant who believed in a united Ireland, albeit one that needed to tolerate different denominations. He applauded the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s but dreaded the sectarianism that was to follow.

Vocabulary

Ecclesiastes: a book in the Old Testament bible. It is concerned with having little control over life, so enjoying oneself as much as possible.

purist: a person who sticks closely or rigidly to tradition

puritan: 1. a group of Protestants who tried to rid the Church of all Catholic influences. 2. someone who believes that it is important to work hard and control yourself, and that pleasure is wrong or unnecessary

wiles: cunning ways of persuading someone to do what you want

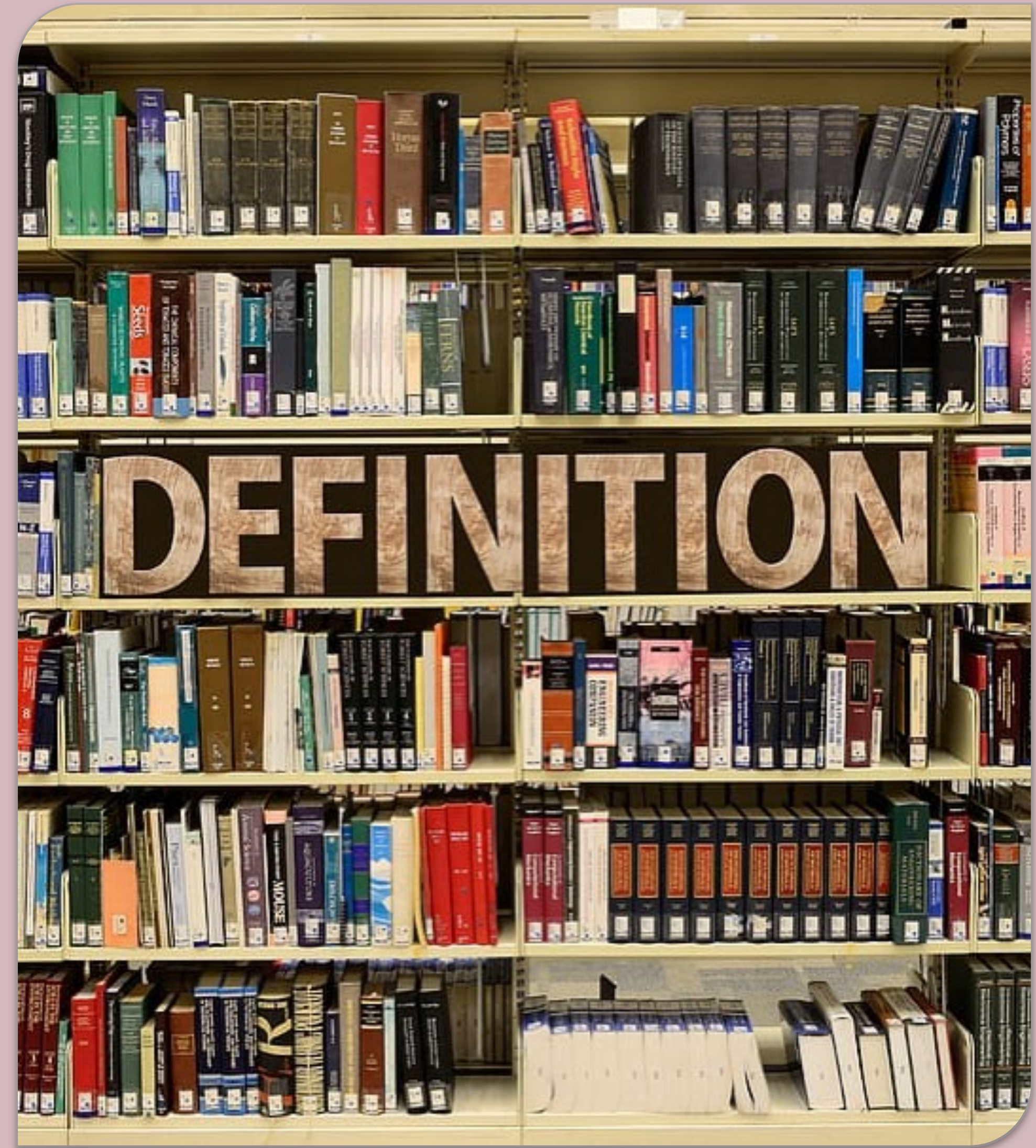
dank: unpleasantly cold and damp

zeal: great energy or enthusiasm, can be the mark of a fanatic

locusts and wild honey: food eaten by prophets in the Bible

afflatus: divine guidance or inspiration

credulous: naïve, believes everything they are told





Lines 1-8

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God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God-
chosen purist little puritan that,
for all your wiles and smiles, you are (the
dank churches, the empty streets,
the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings) and
shelter your cold heart from the heat
of the world, from woman-inquisition, from the
bright eyes of children.

- Mahon may be speaking to himself in this poem, or he may be adopting the persona of a Protestant preacher talking to himself.
- He reflects that he could almost come to love his religion with its purist, puritanical attitudes. The word 'little' takes away from any sense that purists and puritans might be impressive figures: here such people are belittled and associated with narrow-mindedness.
- Opening with the word 'God' adds emphasis and makes the tone conversational. It might also, in certain religious circles, be seen as blasphemous to take God's name in vain this way. 'God chosen' implies a pomposity and sense of superiority. A person who believed himself to be thus chosen could use it to justify any harsh judgements of others.
- Although the person addressed may try to hide behind a pleasant, cunning manner, the reality is that the puritans are repressive. Their churches are damp and unpleasantly cold; on Sundays the streets are empty, nobody works and the swings are tied up so children cannot play on this holy day.
- Women and children are, disturbingly, seen as representing the temptations of fun, love and laughter. The person addressed must shelter himself from them and keep his heart cold.

HOLY
BIBLE



Lines 8-16

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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 but only to speak with a bleak afflatus, and love the January rains when they darken the dark doors and sink hard into the Antrim hills, the bog meadows, the heaped graves of your fathers.

- The person addressed could live the strict, puritan life of a preacher: wearing black, drinking only water and eating sparsely. In the Old Testament, the prophets lived on the insects and honey provided by the desert lands. They relied on no-one.
- Such a lifestyle would mean the speaker would not need to understand or show compassionate forgiveness for others. Instead, he would speak with a 'bleak' divine inspiration and be associated with rain and darkness.
- The harsh, alliterative 'd' sounds in 'darken the dark doors', along with the jarring 'k', 'h' and 'd' sounds in 'sink hard' drive home the lack of sympathy and empathy implied in this type of religious tradition.
- 'Hills and bog meadows' represent not just the landscape of Antrim but also the obstacles and sticking places associated with rigid, puritan beliefs. It is hard to move forward when mired in such strict and unforgiving observance of scripture.
- If the person addressed were to embrace the puritan beliefs, it would be part of a long tradition, as is indicated by 'the heaped graves of your fathers'.

Lines 22-30

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Bury that red
bandana and stick, that banjo; this is your
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
help you, stand on a corner stiff
with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun.

- The red bandana, the stick used for hiking on travels and the banjo are all associated with the free, hippy culture of the 1960s.
- There is a saying, 'In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king'. If the person addressed were to follow the satirical instructions on how to live, he would be a leader among those who knew even less about life than he.
- The working class people of Belfast are 'your people', their naivety captured by the word 'credulous'. Their lives are not light or free, their 'heavy washing' on the lines are the only flags that will be waved when the preacher approaches.
- The preacher could offer nothing but empty, meaningless rhetoric.
- The poem ends with a bleak reference to Ecclesiastes: 'there is nothing new under the sun'. The preacher will not be able to offer anything original or meaningful to his 'credulous people'.

Themes and Exam Focus

The poem offers a bleak, satirical view of Protestantism in Northern Ireland.

Those who eschew fun, life and love in the service of religion are subtly mocked. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement that this is part of Mahon's heritage and cannot be denied.



Key Terms

Satirical

Puritanical

Repressive

Bleak

Narrow-minded

Empty rhetoric

Naivety

'In the land of the
blind, the one-
eyed man is king.'

Linked Tasks

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- Comp A – 2016 – Bono’s speech to graduating students in which he stresses their role in making the world a better place for future generations
- Comp A – 2016 – Text 2: Two writers talk about what has influenced them.
- Comp B – 2016 – Young people today are subject to many influences. Write the text of a talk you would deliver to your class in which you consider some of the positive and negative influences on young people’s lives today and how they respond to these influences.
- Comp B – 2018: Young people are often the recipients of unwanted advice. Write an open letter to all those who have ever offered you unwanted advice. In your letter you should identify some nuggets of unwanted advice you have received, describe your response to receiving such advice, and share your opinion on how and when advice could be appropriately offered. Your letter may be amusing or serious or both.
- Composition – 2018 – You are competing in the final of a national public speaking competition. The topic to be addressed is: *Language is a great weapon*. You are free to agree or disagree. Write the speech you would deliver.

“[A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford] could be called visionary or symbolic: it is about the need to live and be known, the need for selfhood, recognition in the eye of God and the eye of the world ... A great sense of historical cycles, of injustice and catastrophe, looms at the back of the poem’s mind.”

Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland'

A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

“In ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’, the ability of nature to take over from human habitation, to mature and die and be renewed while the world of human objects crumbles to insignificance, offers a different emphasis on the speaker’s discovery. In such a scheme, the dynamic between the mushrooms and their human observer loses metaphorical ground in favour of a more actualized account; likewise the questioning of the value of a human-orientated, mechanized life against the organic persistence of a world of nature grows in prominence.”

Lucy Collins on “A Disused Shed in Co Wexford”

Dedication

J.G. Farrell wrote the novel *Troubles* in 1970. The book tells the story of the Majestic hotel which fell into disrepair during the 1919-1921 War of Independence.



“‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ from *The Snow Party*, is one of the most famous poems of his era. In the grounds of ‘a burnt-out hotel’, recalling the setting of the dedicatee J.G. Farrell’s 1970 novel *Troubles*, mushrooms crowd towards the light in a keyhole. They are begging ‘in their wordless way’ for ‘elbow room’ and salvation, more in hope than expectation. The poet himself, who apparently referred to the piece as ‘that one’, seemed to feel that its fame was a distraction from the rest of his work.”

From Derek Mahon’s obituary – *The Guardian* Friday 9th October 2020

A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford

Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels.

~Seferis, Mythistorema

(for J.G. Farrell)

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What do you know about the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland?
- Do you think all victims of conflict are given an equal voice?

Vocabulary

asphodels: A lily-like flower associated with peace after death

Mythistorema: Poetry collection by the Greek poet George Seferis published in 1935, approaching the myth of Odysseus from a modern angle.

compounds: enclosures

firmament: the heavens or sky

querulous: complaining, demanding

foetor: a strong, unpleasant smell

interminable: seeming to have no end

expropriated: dispossessed

mycologist: a person who studies fungi, mushrooms

mildew: mould

Dominion: territory or kingdom

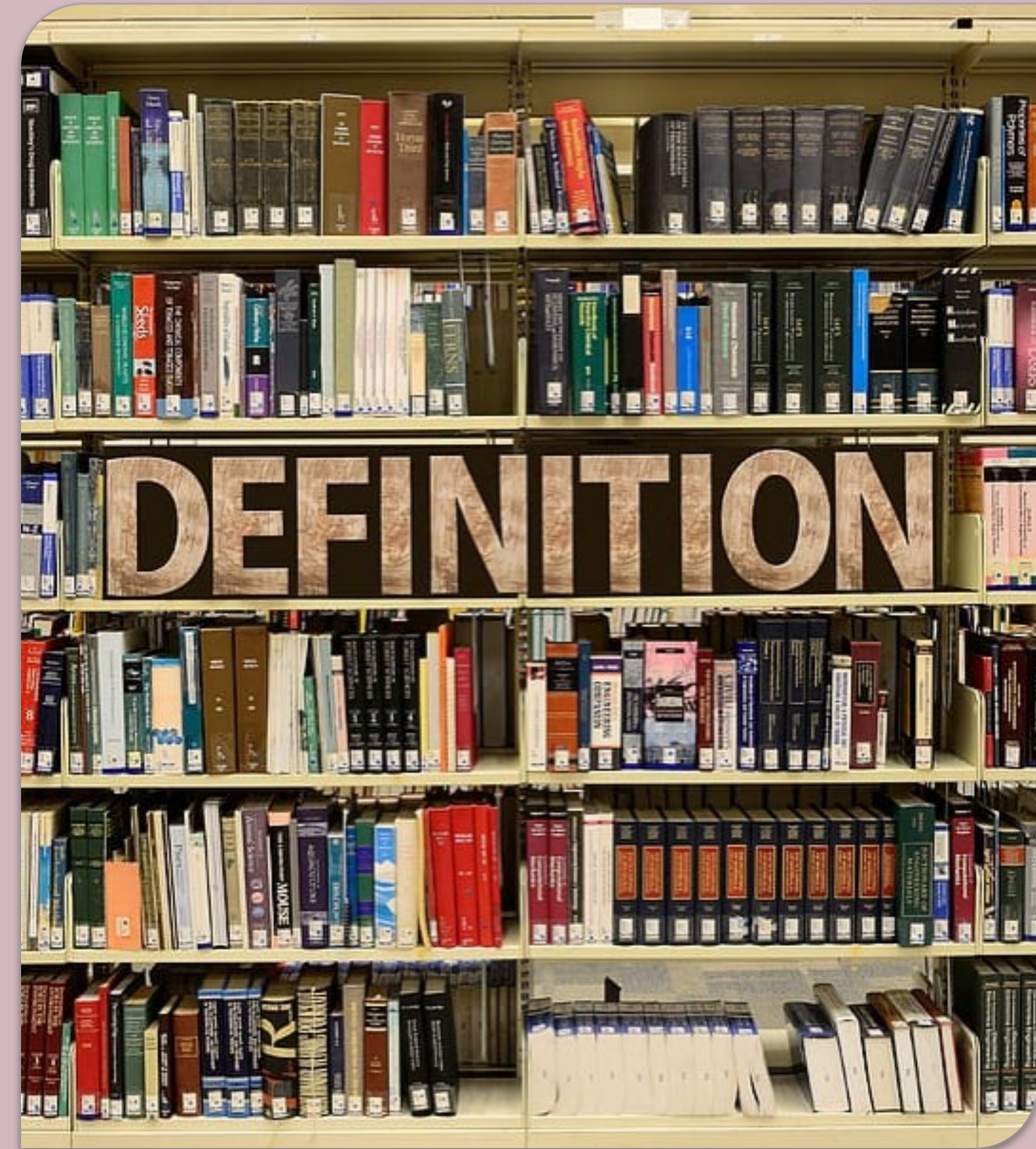
pitchers: jugs

magi: wise men

triffids: giant, predatory plants from the science fiction novel *The Day of the Triffids*, by John Wyndham

Treblinka: Nazi death camp in Poland during the Second World War

light meter: used to measure light in photography



Lines 1-10

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Even now there are places where a thought
might grow –
Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned
To a slow clock of condensation,
An echo trapped for ever, and a flutter
Of wild flowers in the lift-shaft,
Indian compounds where the wind dances
And a door bangs with diminished confidence,
Lime crevices behind rippling rain-barrels,
Dog corners for bone burials;
And in a disused shed in Co. Wexford,

- The poet reflects that even in our time, there are places that might spark contemplation or reflection. There is a tentative note here: a thought 'might' grow, but there is no guarantee. Growth, as we will see, is also associated with the mushrooms.
- Abandoned, lifeless places are explored in this first stanza.
- People once worked – and were perhaps exploited – in the Peruvian mines and in the Indian workers' compounds. Now only nature remains.
- Onomatopoeic 'clock' in the third line brings to mind the drip of water from the condensation.
- Nature measures time in places abandoned by man, and only nature moves there. The flowers flutter, wind dances and rain-water ripples in barrels.
- Sense of unhappiness and uncertainty in a door banging with 'diminished confidence'.
- In the final line of the stanza, the focus narrows to a 'disused shed in Co. Wexford'.



Lines 11-20

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Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel,
Among the bathtubs and the washbasins
A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole.
This is the one star in their firmament
Or frames a star within a star.
What should they do there but desire?
So many days beyond the rhododendrons
With the world waltzing in its bowl of cloud,
They have learnt patience and silence
Listening to the rooks querulous in the high
wood.

- The mushrooms have been growing in the abandoned shed for fifty years.
- They are personified: 'crowd to a keyhole'. They 'desire' and 'have learnt patience and silence'.
- The mushrooms are in darkness apart from the small shaft of light that shines through the keyhole. It represents life and hope to them, but it is weak and nothing has changed over the last fifty years.
- The world beyond contains life and movement. The beautiful, alliterative image of the 'world waltzing' in the clouds is in stark contrast to the mushrooms' confinement in almost total darkness.
- The poet's compassion is clear in the personification of the mushrooms: they symbolise all those who have been abandoned and forgotten. They represent the silent voices of the suffering and the dead.
- The rooks' harsh, croaking call sounds like a complaint but they have little to complain about.



Lines 21-30

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They have been waiting for us in a foetor
Of vegetable sweat since civil war days,
Since the gravel-crunching, interminable departure
Of the expropriated mycologist.
He never came back, and light since then
Is a keyhole rusting gently after rain.
Spiders have spun, flies dusted to mildew
And once a day, perhaps, they have heard something –
A trickle of masonry, a shout from the blue
Or a lorry changing gear at the end of the lane.

- The shed, in the grounds of the hotel, was abandoned as were so many large houses and buildings after Irish independence and the subsequent regime change.
- The onomatopoeic ‘crunching’ brings the scene to life and we can almost hear the man’s footsteps in the gravel as he walks away from the shed for the last time. He, who grew the mushrooms originally, has been ‘expropriated’ or dispossessed and will never return.
- Disintegration and decay follow the owner’s departure. The mushrooms live in stale, rank air as the keyhole rusts, generations of flies live and die and spiders spin their webs in the untended shed.
- There are occasional sounds but no real sense of hope. The ‘shout’ is single and random, the falling stones signal further disintegration and the lorry changes gear but does not stop.



Lines 31-40

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There have been deaths, the pale flesh flaking
Into the earth that nourished it;
And nightmares, born of these and the grim
Dominion of stale air and rank moisture.
Those nearest the door grow strong –
'Elbow room! Elbow room!'
The rest, dim in a twilight of crumbling
Utensils and broken pitchers, groaning
For their deliverance, have been so long
Expectant that there is left only the posture.

- The mushrooms' link to suffering people is intensified in this stanza. Their 'pale flesh' flakes away into the earth after death. They have 'nightmares' in this terrible place of 'stale air and rank moisture'.
- Those that grow closest to the light grow strong and appear to keep the others away: 'Elbow room! Elbow room!'
- The less fortunate barely cling to life. The onomatopoeic 'groaning' in 'groaning / For deliverance' brings to mind the suffering of forgotten and abandoned people everywhere. We are reminded that though we may not see them or even be aware of their plight, such people exist.
- The hopelessness of the mushrooms' situation is highlighted when we learn that they have been hoping for rescue for so long that all that remains now is 'the posture' of deliverance as they lean, unmoving, towards the light.



Lines 41-50

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A half century, without visitors, in the dark –
Poor preparation for the cracking lock
And creak of hinges; magi, moonmen,
Powdery prisoners of the old regime,
Web-throated, stalked like triffids, racked by
drought
And insomnia, only the ghost of a scream
At the flash-bulb firing squad we wake them
with
Shows there is life yet in their feverish forms.
Grown beyond nature now, soft food for
worms,
They lift frail heads in gravity and good faith.

- The mushrooms have been in their dark captivity for so long that rescue, even if it comes now, will be too late.
- The silence and darkness is broken by the 'cracking lock' and creaking hinges. The onomatopoeia in 'cracking' and 'creak', along with the harsh 'ck' sounds effectively capture the shocking change from fifty years of silence to an abrupt opening of the shed door. The cracking of the lock and creaking of the hinges remind us how long this place has remained untouched.
- The mushrooms have been isolated so long that they are deformed and peculiar. They resemble 'magi' or sorcerers in their pale unearthliness. The comparison to 'magi' may also mean that just like the wise men who hoped for a Messiah that would save his people, so the mushrooms believed in eventual deliverance. The mushrooms are like 'moonmen' or aliens rather than anything from this world.
- The 'old regime' refers to Ireland before independence, a place ruled and owned by those who are now gone, like the 'expropriated mycologist'.

A half century, without visitors, in the dark –
Poor preparation for the cracking lock
And creak of hinges; magi, moonmen,
Powdery prisoners of the old regime,
Web-throated, stalked like triffids, racked by
drought
And insomnia, only the ghost of a scream
At the flash-bulb firing squad we wake them
with
Shows there is life yet in their feverish forms.
Grown beyond nature now, soft food for
worms,
They lift frail heads in gravity and good faith.

- The mushrooms are like people who have been silenced or silent for so long that it is as if spiders' webs have grown in their throats.
- 'Grown beyond nature', the mushrooms are like something from science fiction, hence the reference to 'triffids'.
- Their suffering is captured in the phrase 'racked by drought / And insomnia'.
- The flashes of the camera are like a 'firing squad', reminding us again of violence and suffering. The presence of people in the shed after so long is not necessarily positive. The camera also brings to mind the media who go to war zones and record the suffering but cannot do anything concrete for the victims.
- There is no real hope for the mushrooms now. They have been abandoned for too long and have suffered too much. They are merely 'soft food for worms' but there is a sense of dignity in the lifting of 'frail heads in gravity and good faith'.

Lines 51-60

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They are begging us, you see, in their wordless
way,

To do something, to speak on their behalf
Or at least not to close the door again.

Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!

'Save us, save us,' they seem to say,

'Let the god not abandon us

Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.

We too had our lives to live.

You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary

Let not our naïve labours have been in vain!

- The mushrooms are likened to those who suffered and died in the death camps and in natural disasters.
- Now they are given a voice as they beg for salvation.
- There is a realisation that the tourists with their 'light meters and relaxed itinerary' can and will do very little for the suffering thousands but may 'at least' leave the door open to offer some relief.
- The word 'meter' in 'light meter' is a pun or play on words. It may be taken as a reference to the 'metre' in poetry and an acknowledgement that the poet can at least record what he sees and, in some way, give a voice to the voiceless.
- At the start of the poem, we were asked to consider places where 'a thought might grow'. Now we can reflect on the thought that has grown over the course of this poem. What can we do for those who have suffered and died and those who are suffering still? Does our telling their story mean that their 'naïve labours' have not been in vain?

Themes and Exam Focus

- Suffering and death: The poet reflects with compassion on those who have suffered and died. We are invited to remember 'the weak souls' who have been abandoned or deliberately exploited and abused.
- The poet gives a voice to the voiceless.



Key Terms

Places that may spark
contemplation or
reflection

Unhappiness and
uncertainty

Personification of the
mushrooms links them
to all those who have
suffered throughout
history

Giving a voice to the
voiceless

Disintegration and
decay

Hope of deliverance

Compassion

Helplessness and
hopelessness

Linked Tasks

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- Comp B – 2020 – Enlightened aliens, horrified by the injustice and inequality evident in human society, have decided to eliminate all human beings and recolonize Earth with more deserving inhabitants. You have been chosen to represent humanity and deliver a speech to the alien powers in which you try to save us from our fate, In your speech you should: acknowledge some of humanity's failings in relation to justice and inequality, point to evidence of the many admirable qualities of the human race, and explain why the aliens should believe we can be trusted to work together for a better future.
- Composition – 2019 – Write a personal essay in which you reflect on what feeds your imagination.
- Unseen poetry – 2019 – *The Wound in Time* by Carol Ann Duffy.
- Read W.B. Yeats' *Meditations in Time of Civil War: VI The Stare's Nest by My Window*

The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush

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The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush

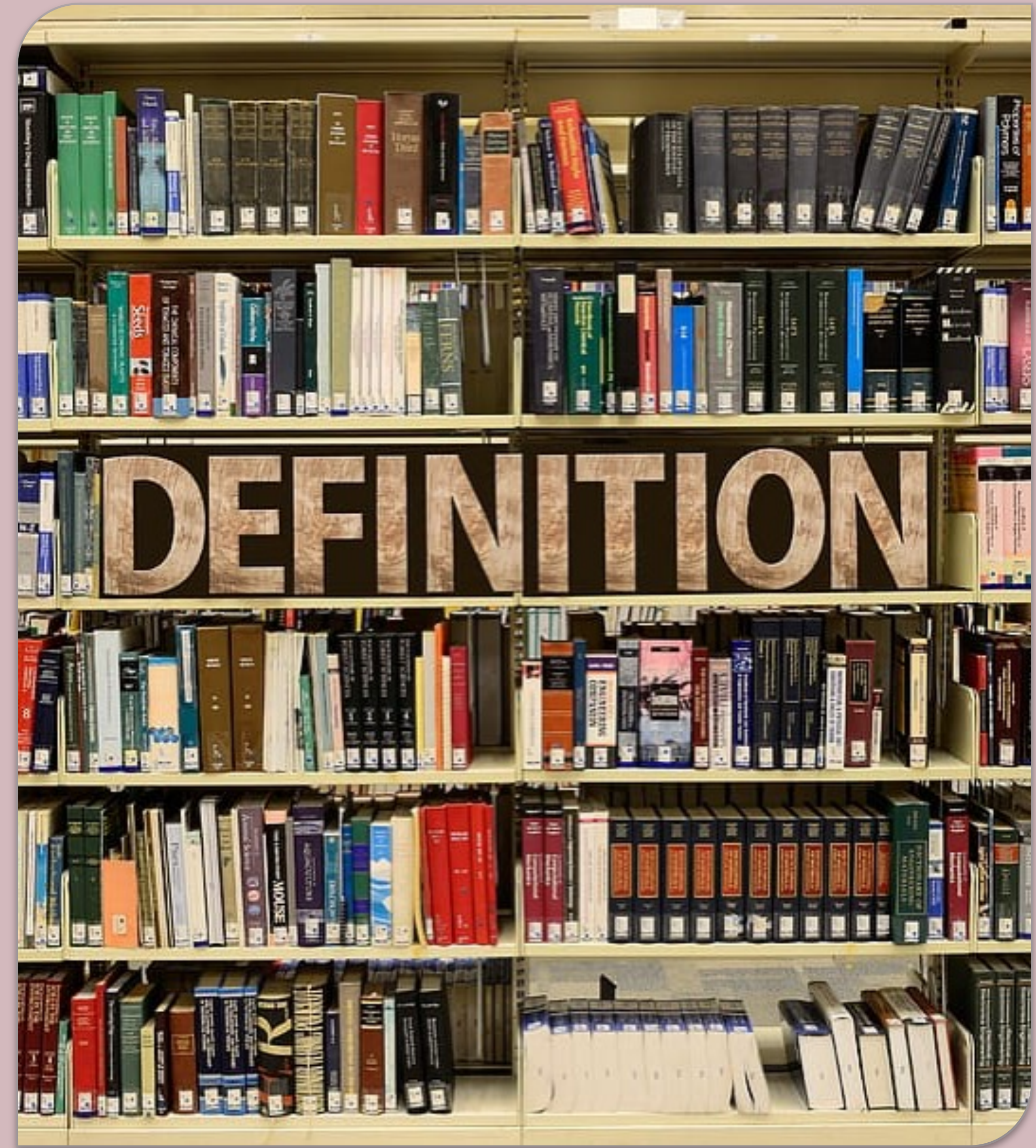
Pre-Reading Tasks

- What does the word 'home' mean to you?
- In what ways is a tourist resort different in the off-season?

Vocabulary

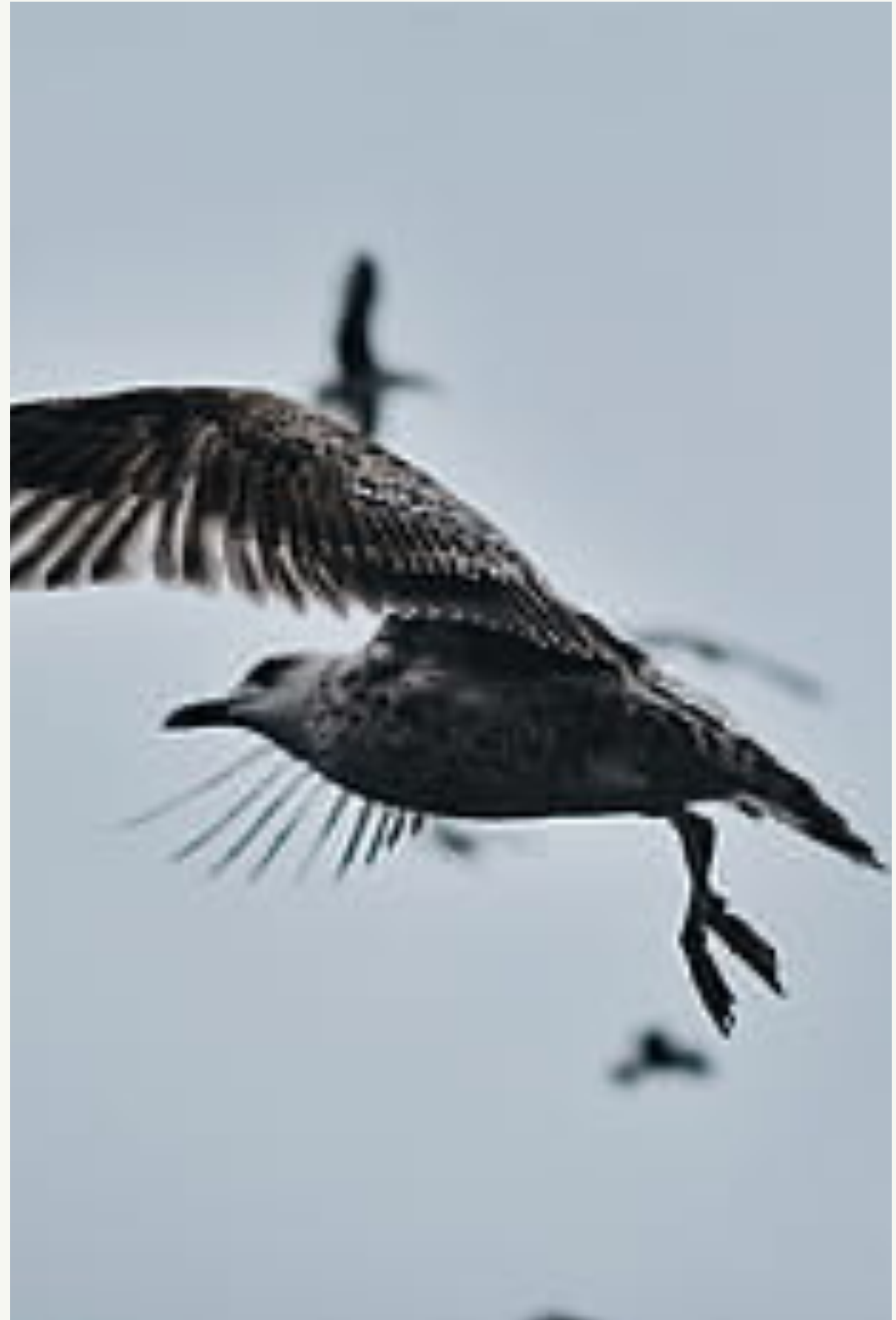
Portrush: A seaside town in Co. Antrim in Northern Ireland.

ideogram: a character symbolising the idea of a thing, as found in Chinese writing.




Lines 1-12

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Before the first visitor comes the spring
Softening the sharp air of the coast
In time for the first seasonal 'invasion.'
Today the place is as it might have been,
Gentle and almost hospitable. A girl
Strides past the Northern Counties Hotel,
Light-footed, swinging a book-bag,
And the doors that were shut all winter
Against the north wind and the sea mist
Lie open to the street, where one
By one the gulls go window-shopping
And an old wolfhound dozes in the sun.

- The poet admires the seaside town in the off-season and enjoys the peace and quiet.
- Sibilance in 'spring / Softening the sharp air' adds to the gentle, harmonious and peaceful mood of the opening lines.
- There is a contrast between the town as it is now and the way it will be after an influx of tourists. They are referred to as an 'invasion'. Although this remark is tongue-in-cheek, we are reminded of Northern Ireland's troubled history. This is a place that has known invasions and, therefore, peace is even more keenly appreciated.
- The town in its peaceful state is 'as it might have been'. Does this refer to the years of conflict in Northern Ireland that have left their mark and mean the little seaside town is marked by history?
- The town is 'almost hospitable': the qualifying word 'almost' hinting that there is not necessarily an open welcome for everyone, even the returning Mahon. Does this place not feel like home to him?
- The confident, 'Light-footed' girl signals change. Doors 'lie open' now.
- The opportunistic gulls are humorously described as 'window shopping'.
- A wolfhound – a dog associated with Irish legend and also with hunting - lies 'dozing in the sun'. As with 'almost hospitable', there is a sense of slight unease. There is no threat, but there is an undercurrent of wariness. The dog is sleeping now, but he may awake at any time.

An aerial view of the Hong Kong skyline, showing a dense cluster of skyscrapers and residential buildings. The Victoria Harbour is visible in the background, with several large ships and smaller boats. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The text "Lines 13-20" is overlaid in the center of the image.

Lines 13-20

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While I sit with my paper and prawn chow mein
Under a framed photograph of Hong Kong
The proprietor of the Chinese restaurant
Stands at the door as if the world were young,
Watching the first yacht hoist a sail
- An ideogram on sea-cloud – and the light
Of heaven upon the hills of Donegal;
And whistles a little tune, dreaming of home.

- The focus shifts now to the owner of the Chinese restaurant where the poet eats alone, reading his paper.
- The man looks at the world as if it were young. There is a sense of possibility and a reference to paradise in the Garden of Eden.
- The proprietor looks at the raised sail of a yacht and it is like an ideogram, perhaps representing travel and maybe a journey home. This place may be beautiful, but the 'framed photograph of Hong Kong' reminds us that the man may regard another place as home.
- The mood is uplifting and positive as the 'light / Of heaven' shines on the 'hills of Donegal', yet there is a note of longing in the man's 'dreaming of home'.

Themes and Exam Focus

- The poem examines belonging, home and identity. Although Mahon came from Antrim, there is a sense that the place does not necessarily welcome all visitors, be they tourists or those who are returning from other places.
- There are subtle references to unrest and conflict in Northern Ireland. The peaceful town in spring time is 'as it might have been' and there is a sense of wariness in a place that is 'almost hospitable' and a wolfhound 'dozing in the sun'.



Key Terms

Home and
belonging

Wariness

Qualified
welcome

Positive and
uplifting

Subtle references
to conflict and
violence

Linked Tasks

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- Composing – 2019 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on some of the places that have helped to shape and define you, and the significance of these places in your life.
- Comp A – 2012 – Text 1: Margaret Laurence remembers and reflects on the small prairie town where she grew up.
- Comp B – 2012 – Text 1: Write a letter to Margaret Laurence, in response to Text 1, commenting on what you find interesting in the extract, and telling her about your home place and its impact on you.
- Composing – 2015 – Write a descriptive essay about what you find beautiful or exotic in everyday life.

Rathlin

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Rathlin

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Where is Rathlin Island?
- Research and write a paragraph about the Rathlin Island massacre of 1575.



Vocabulary

shearwater: a black and white seabird

sporadic: occurring at irregular intervals

metaphysical: in this context, supernatural

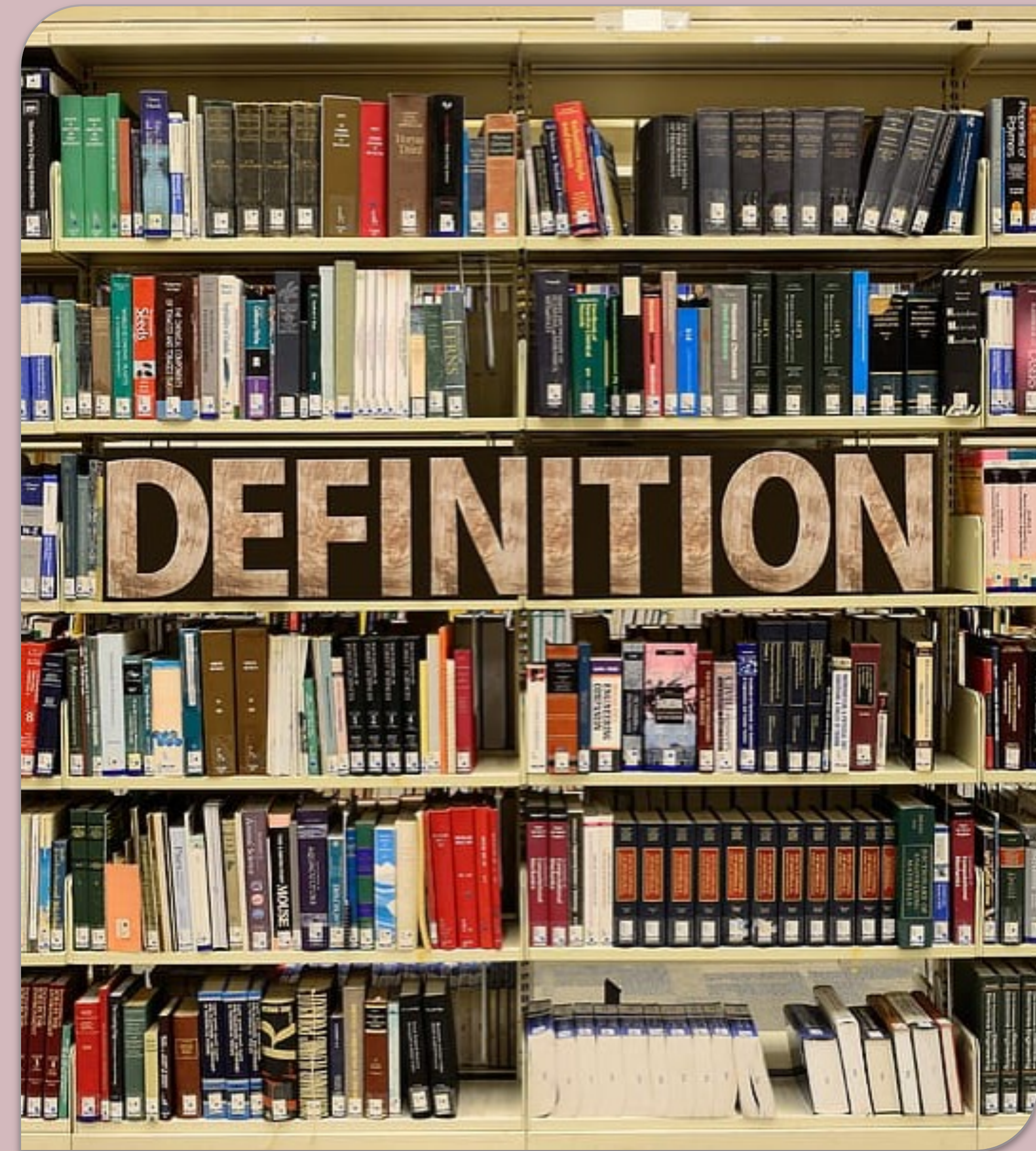
dream-time: the time of creation in the mythology of the Australian aborigines

Oneiric: relating to dreams

Cerulean: a deep blue

somnolent: sleepy

Somhairle Buí: also known as Sorley Boy, he established the MacDonnell clan in Antrim



Lines 1-10

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A long time since the last scream cut short –
Then an unnatural silence; and then
A natural silence, slowly broken
By the shearwater, by the sporadic
Conversation of crickets, the bleak
Reminder of a metaphysical wind.
Ages of this, till the report
Of an outboard motor at the pier
Shatters the dream-time and we land
As if we were the first visitors here.

- The poem opens with a terrible image: one of the massacre victims is brutally killed as they scream in agony or fear. 'The last' implies there were many screams before this final one.
- The silence that follows is unnatural because hundreds now lie dead.
- Time passes and nature slowly reclaims the island. Following 'a natural silence', there is the cry of birds and the chirp of crickets. The repetition of 'then' suggests the unhurried passage of time and the separation between the periods of unnatural silence of the dead and natural peace of an island left to its own devices.
- There is a suggestion that the howls of the wind carry the 'bleak reminder' of the cries of those who were slaughtered on the island.
- The silence is broken by the sound of the arriving boat. The tourists land as if they were the first visitors, but of course they are not. From the start of the poem, the history of the island and the fate of those who sought sanctuary there is at the forefront of our minds.
- The word 'report' is most commonly used to describe a gunshot, linking the past and the present once more. The killers arrived by boat, just as the tourists do now.
- The island had been in a 'dream-time': a state similar to creation before the arrival of man.
- The word 'Shatters', like the word 'report', brings to mind the other arrivals by boat in 1575 and the violence and horror that they brought to this place.

Lines 11-20

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The whole island a sanctuary where amazed
Oneiric species whistle and chatter,
Evacuating rock-face and cliff-top.
Cerulean distance, an oceanic haze –
Nothing but sea-smoke to the ice-cap
And the odd somnolent freighter.
Bombs doze in the housing estates
But here they are through with history –
Custodians of a lone light which repeats
One simple statement to the turbulent sea.

- The island was originally supposed to be a sanctuary for those who sheltered there in 1575, but they were killed nonetheless. Now it is a sanctuary for the seabirds that have lived there, untroubled, for hundreds of years.
- The birds evacuate or dig in the rock face and cliff top to make their nests. We are reminded of those who are evacuated from war zones in times of danger and removed to places of safety. This did not save Somhairle Buí's people, however.
- The birds are 'Oneiric' or dreamlike, linking them to the idea of the dream-time, or the creation. Now, again, man is intruding on this place of peace.
- The birds' noise is uplifting and somehow friendly; they 'whistle and chatter'. The onomatopoeic words bring the scene to life and add a musical beauty to this section of the poem.
- All is calm. The deep blue sea stretches out in a haze and there is nothing but ocean from here to the Arctic. The occasional freighter that passes is 'somnolent' or sleepy. Such large ships hardly appear to move, and they are no threat to the peace on the island as they move by at a steady pace, far in the distance.
- However, the mood of the poem shifts suddenly with the line 'Bombs doze in the housing estates'. We are reminded that violence is an ever-present threat in our society (and particularly Northern Irish society at the time the poem was written) as it was at the time of the Rathlin Island massacre. We should not be lulled into a false sense of security by periods of peace.

The whole island a sanctuary where amazed
Oneiric species whistle and chatter,
Evacuating rock-face and cliff-top.
Cerulean distance, an oceanic haze –
Nothing but sea-smoke to the ice-cap
And the odd somnolent freighter.
Bombs doze in the housing estates
But here they are through with history –
Custodians of a lone light which repeats
One simple statement to the turbulent sea.

- Rathlin, unlike the mainland, is 'through with history'. This is an interesting phrase, particularly when contrasted with the 'Bombs ... in housing estates'. The island is inhabited now but has a tiny population. Where people live densely, as in the housing estates, the threat of violence is greater. Although Mahon does not explicitly point out the human propensity for violence, the contrast between the natural world and the world of man is clear.
- We have to wonder who the 'they' are. Are they the massacre victims, whose voices are echoed in the wind?
- The lighthouse keeper on Rathlin sends out a simple, repeated message of warning to keep ships safe. Those who sail by now are protected by the lighthouse, but the sense of threat is never far away, as we see in the reference to the 'turbulent sea'. This, along with the reference to the bombs dozing in housing estates, reminds us not to take peace for granted.
- The 'lone light' might also link back to the 'final scream' mentioned in the first stanza. The victims of Rathlin must not be forgotten and the light on the island may be a message of hope. The people are gone but a light shines on.



Lines 21-30

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A long time since the unspeakable violence –
Since Somhairle Buí, powerless on the mainland,
Heard the screams of the Rathlin women
Borne to him, seconds later, upon the wind.
Only the cry of the shearwater
And the roar of the outboard motor
Disturb the singular peace. Spray-blind,
We leave here the infancy of the race,
Unsure among the pitching surfaces
Whether the future lies before us or behind.

- The poem began with the words 'A long time' and once again those words are used as the poem revisits the events of that time.
- The poet imagines the terrible violence that took place on the island and can imagine how powerless Somhairle Buí must have felt.
- Now there is only the 'cry' of the seabirds and the 'roar' of the outboard motor. The words 'cry' and 'roar' bring to mind the screams of the dying and the savage yells of the killers.
- The phrase 'infancy of the race' reminds us of the 'dream-time' in the first stanza. The island has moved past the horrors of the massacre and life has sprung up there once more, untainted by human violence and destruction.
- The metaphor of the turbulent seas which leave the travellers 'Spray-blind' indicates that the poet is uncertain what the future holds for Northern Ireland. Will it be a return to the barbarous violence of the past or will it be a brighter future?

Themes and Exam Focus

- Compassion for those who have suffered
- The link between the past and presence: mankind is associated with violence and disturbance. The poem ends on a note of uncertainty: perhaps the bombs that are presently dozing in the housing estates will be used for a modern-day massacre. After all, 'doze' suggests a light, short sleep from which one can be easily woken.



Linked Tasks

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- Comp A – 2016 – Text 2: two writers talk about what has influenced them.
- Comp B – 2016 – Young people today are subject to many influences. Write the text of a talk you would deliver to your class in which you consider some of the positive and negative influences on young people's lives today and how they respond to these influences.
- Comp B – 2018: Young people are often the recipients of unwanted advice. Write an open letter to all those who have ever offered you unwanted advice. In your letter you should identify some nuggets of unwanted advice you have received, describe your response to receiving such advice, and share your opinion on how and when advice could be appropriately offered. Your letter may be amusing or serious or both.
- Comp B – 2018 – Based on your experience of second level education, write an opinion piece, suitable for publication in a national newspaper, in which you acknowledge what you see as the strengths of the education you have received, criticise what you see as its weaknesses and make suggestions for its improvement.
- Composition – 2018 – You are competing in the final of a national public speaking competition. The topic to be addressed is: *Language is a great weapon*. You are free to agree or disagree. Write the speech you would deliver.
- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Unseen poem – 2016 – And Yet the Books

Antarctica

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

Antarctica

(for Richard Ryan)

Background - Antarctic mission: Who was Captain Lawrence Oates?

By Dhruvi Shah

"I am just going outside and may be some time." With these words, Antarctic explorer Capt Lawrence Oates set out to meet his death 100 years ago, aged 31, and entered the history books. He was one of five men who died as they tried to return home from Robert Falcon Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole in 1912. Capt Oates is remembered because of his act of self-sacrifice, committed because he believed he was slowing the others down. The men began their difficult journey back but the freezing conditions led to Capt Oates's big toe turning black and his body turning an unhealthy yellow colour. Maj Gen Cordingley said: "His feet had been giving him trouble for two months but he had hidden his problem from the others. Now this was no longer possible." Capt Scott wrote in his diary: "If we were all fit I should have hopes of getting through, but the poor soldier has become a terrible hindrance, thought he does his utmost and suffers much I fear."

Explorers knew the risks, that there would be no evacuation in cases of serious illness or injury. As team member Apsley Cherry-Garrard wrote in his account of the expedition: "There is no chance of a 'cushy' wound. If you break your leg on the Beardmore (glacier), you must consider the most expedient way of committing suicide, both for your own sake and that of your companions."

On 15 March, Captain Oates suggested that the remaining explorers should leave him in his sleeping bag, but they refused. But the man they affectionately called "the soldier" knew the end was near and, it seemed, had had enough. He awoke on 16 March 1912 and, leaving his shoes behind, walked out into the storm blowing outside.

"He went into the blizzard and we have not seen him since," Capt Scott recorded in his diary the next day. Maj Gen Cordingley said: "His final words are typical. It was his way of saying goodbye but without drawing too much attention to what he was actually doing. He died so they could have a chance of living."

Vocabulary

Sublime: Magnificent, noble, excellent

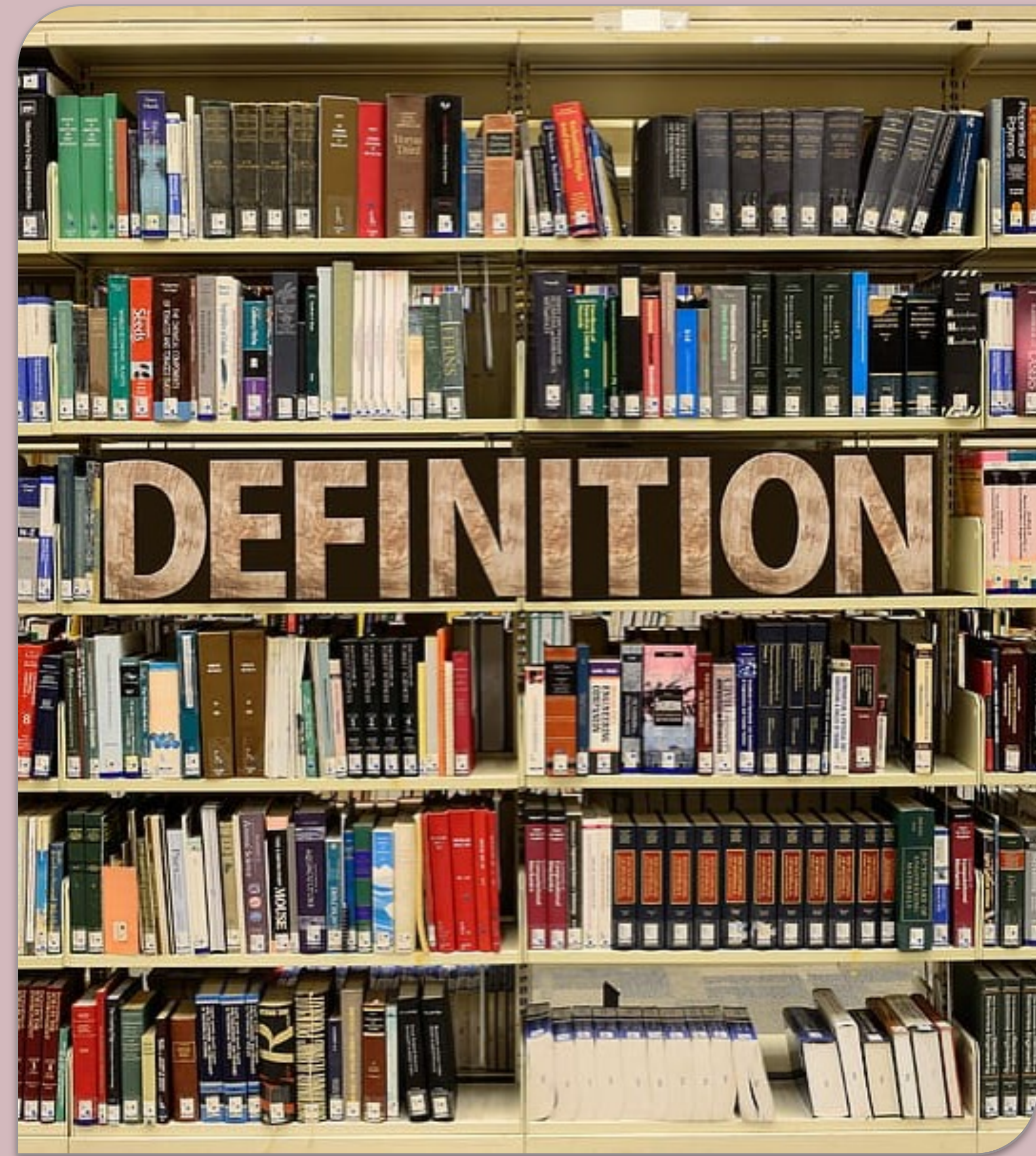
Goad: Forcing, urging

Vertigo: Dizziness, loss of balance

Rime: frost formed on cold objects by the rapid freezing of water vapour in cloud or fog.

Enzyme: a protein that speeds up a chemical reaction in a cell but is not changed itself

Earthly pantomime: the world



Lines 1-6

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Form

This poem is written in the form of a villanelle. A villanelle is a formal, ordered poem which consists of nineteen lines divided into five tercets (three-line stanzas) and a quatrain (four-line stanza). There are only two rhymes throughout, and two refrains. The two refrains are used as the first and third lines of the first stanza, and thereafter alternately repeated as the final line of the remaining tercets. The refrains come together again as the final two lines of the quatrain. (This sounds quite complicated until you look at the poem and see how straightforward it actually is.) Villanelles are associated with thoughts of death and grief.

'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.

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.

- Mahon adopts the persona of Captain Lawrence Oates. Oates' famous words 'I am just going outside and may be some time', open the poem and this line is one of the refrains used throughout.
- Oates' words are an understatement. Both he and the others in the tent know quite well that he will not be coming back.
- Neither Oates nor his teammates display any emotion. The others nod and pretend they don't know what Oates really means. This sort of unemotional behaviour would have been considered manly and dignified at a time when the British in particular prided themselves on their 'stiff upper lip'. It contrasts strongly with the current fashion for public expressions of emotion. Mahon recognises that Oates' words and the other men's pretence may seem ridiculous as they are ignoring the reality, but he says that at the heart of such a seemingly absurd statement there is something 'sublime' or noble and awe-inspiring in it.

'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.

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 extent of Oates' sacrifice and his courage is seen in the second and third stanzas. He leaves the tent while the other men affect not to see anything particularly important in this moment. They continue reading, and he walks out to his death.
- The difficulty in walking across such inhospitable terrain is effectively captured in these stanzas. The image of Oates 'Goading his ghost' is a particularly powerful one. The harsh 'g' sounds in this alliterative phrase reflect the harshness of the landscape and the repetition of the sound brings to mind Oates' slow steps as he struggles against the elements. The long 'o' sounds in this section of the poem add a mournful tone: 'Goading his ghost in the howling snow'.
- The onomatopoeic 'howling' emphasises the danger posed by the conditions and makes it seem as if Oates is walking into the jaws of a savage, predatory animal. This underscores his bravery as he walks slowly towards his lonely end. The slow movement of the lines suggest Oates' slow movement away from the tent.

Lines 7-12

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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 –

- Oates' suffering is shown in the words 'frostbite' and 'vertigo'. His death is not quick, and his determination and endurance are highlighted by his carrying on in the face of such pain.
- In the fourth stanza, Mahon addresses the reader directly and asks if we would now consider Oates' behaviour to be 'some sort of crime' rather than a noble act of self-sacrifice. After all, Oates is effectively choosing to end his life. This question makes us reflect on the morality of Oates' decision. However, Mahon does not leave the question unanswered, but very clearly and definitely says that such an action was not a crime but was instead heroic and noble.
- At the time Oates died, his self-sacrifice and stoicism would have been viewed with unqualified admiration. Nowadays, such an attitude might be questioned, but Mahon supports the older viewpoint.

Lines 13-19

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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.

- The fifth and sixth stanzas deal with Oates' legacy. He knew, as did the others in the tent, that 'some time' meant forever, but he walked out nonetheless. His bravery and his heroism will shine brightly in a place that may be otherwise dark.
- Like an enzyme which brings about change while remaining unchanged itself, Oates' sacrifice will influence others but will be merely a result of his natural courage and his action was not something which required him to change in any way. It fitted in with his noble nature. He is immortalised by his bravery and his name lives on decades after his death.
- Oates knows that his time has come. He regards this life as an 'earthly pantomime' and realises that his role has ended. He is in charge of his own life and his own death. Life may be ridiculous, but he has managed to make it 'sublime'. He is an inspiring and admirable figure.

Themes and Exam Focus

- This poem focuses on the nobility, selflessness and heroism of people such as Captain Oates. Unlike Bruce Ismay in *After the Titanic*, Oates is willing to sacrifice himself if that will mean that his comrades may have a better chance of survival.
- There is a sense in which the poet acknowledges the ridiculousness of the men pretending that they do not know what Oates intends to do. Their pretence and their ignoring of the meaning of his final words is mocked, but not harshly. After all, they are not the sort of men to show a great deal of emotion, even at a time like this. The line 'At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime' is ironic.
- The poet's admiration for Oates' sacrifice is clear. He shows this by presenting Oates in a dignified way. Oates has taken a certain amount of control of a situation in which neither he nor the others have any real hope of survival.



Key Terms

Villanelle

Understatement

Seemingly
absurd
statement

Noble and awe-
inspiring

Inhospitable
terrain

Stoic,
courageous
sacrifice

Determination
and endurance

Immortalised by
his bravery

Linked Tasks

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- Comp A – 2007 OL – Text 1: The Rescue – based on the story of Tom Crean
- Comp B – 2007 OL – Text 1: Imagine that you are Lashly. Write **two** diary entries describing your thoughts as you wait to be rescued.
- Comp B – 2012 – Write a proposal, to be submitted to the relevant authority (e.g. local council or national body), suggesting one event or person you believe should be commemorated. Explain why you feel this person or event should be commemorated and suggest what form this commemoration might take.

Kinsale

Aoife O'Driscoll – www.aoifesnotes.com

Kinsale

Pre-Reading Tasks

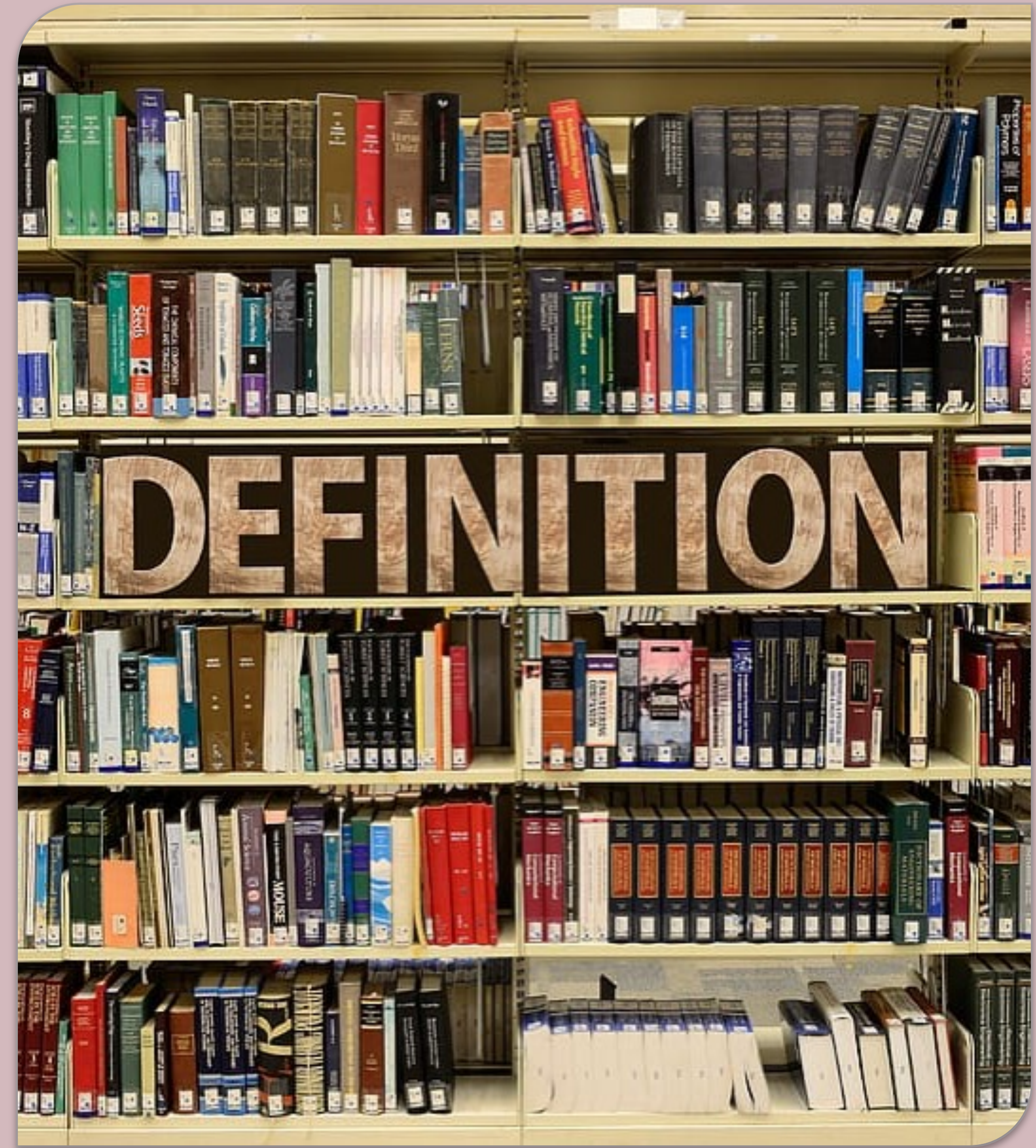
- What do you know about the town of Kinsale in Co. Cork?
- Research the Battle of Kinsale.
- Do you think that we should be optimistic about Ireland's future? In what ways is it better than in the 1980s, say?

Vocabulary

delving: digging, excavating

contemplate: think deeply and at length

spire: pointed, conical structure at the top of a church tower



Lines 1-7

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Note

Derek Mahon selected 'Rathlin' and 'Kinsale' for inclusion on the Leaving Certificate English course, replacing two others chosen by the committee.

"Kinsale for Mahon has been a place of huge importance. In some ways it was a reminder of the coastal village, Cushendun in Northern Ireland, where he spent some happy summers in his youth, while it was also an escape from the city life he lived in Belfast, Dublin, London, and elsewhere. The first time [he lived] in Kinsale was a wild couple of years in thrall to the 'mad chiefs' and the drinking culture of that era. Now, however, both poet and town have sobered up and are content to while away the days enjoying the company of friends and letting the wider world take care of itself."

The Right Place: Derek Mahon in Kinsale
By Matthew Geden for *The Time Traveller Magazine*



The kind of rain we knew is a thing of the past – deep-delving, dark, deliberate you would say, browsing on spire and bogland; but today our sky-blue slates are steaming in the sun, our yachts tinkling and dancing in the bay like racehorses. We contemplate at last shining windows, a future forbidden to no one.

- This is a brief, celebratory poem
- The past is a time of darkness, gloom and depression
- Mahon may be acknowledging Kinsale's history – the English forces defeated the Irish and Spanish forces in the Battle of Kinsale in 1601.
- The alliteration in 'deep-delving, dark, deliberate' reinforces the idea that the past was a time of bleak oppression and deprivation.
- Conversational tone: 'you would say' draws the reader in.
- The rain, or dark times, lingered over church spire and bogland, reminding us of the importance of religion and land in Irish history, and the suffering and loss often associated with both.

The kind of rain we knew is a thing of the past – deep-delving, dark, deliberate you would say, browsing on spire and bogland; but today our sky-blue slates are steaming in the sun, our yachts tinkling and dancing in the bay like racehorses. We contemplate at last shining windows, a future forbidden to no one.

- The word 'but' in the third line signals a change. Rain is replaced by sun, dark by light, slow deliberation by speed and enthusiasm.
- The alliteration in 'sky-blue slates steaming in the sun' creates a sense of peace and contentment. The sibilance brings to mind the gentle hissing of the steam as it, along with the past, evaporates and fades to nothing.
- The enjambment and lack of punctuation move the poem along at a fast clip. The dynamic 'tinkling' and 'dancing' contrast with the 'deep-delving' and 'browsing' dreariness of the opening lines.
- There is a sense of pent-up energy and excitement in the simile which likens the yachts to racehorses.
- Both yachts and racehorses are associated with an affluent, fun-loving lifestyle and, again, there is a contrast between this and the 'spire and bogland' of the third line.
- The words 'our' and 'We' include all in the poem and invite us to share in the uplifting optimism of 'a future forbidden to no one'. The word 'forbidden' hints at an oppressive, repressive past.

Themes and Exam Focus

Keen sense of place: historically and in present times.

Contrast between past and present, past and future, light and dark, rain and sunshine, stagnation and movement, oppression and freedom, gloom and optimism.



Key Terms

Slow
deliberation

Oppressive,
repressive
past

Peace and
contentment

Speed and
enthusiasm

Dynamic verbs

Pent-up
energy

Uplifting
optimism

Key Terms

Slow deliberation

Oppressive, repressive past

Dynamic verbs

Speed and enthusiasm

Peace and contentment

Pent-up energy

Uplifting optimism

Linked Tasks

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- Composing – 2019 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on some of the places that have helped to shape and define you, and the significance of these places in your life.
- Comp A – 2012 – Text 1: Margaret Laurence remembers and reflects on the small prairie town where she grew up.
- Comp B – 2012 – Text 1: Write a letter to Margaret Laurence, in response to Text 1, commenting on what you find interesting in the extract, and telling her about your home place and its impact on you.
- Composing – 2015 – Write a descriptive essay about what you find beautiful or exotic in everyday life.

The question

- No matter how the questions are phrased, they are all basically asking you to do the same thing – talk about the poet's themes and style.
- Each question also requires you to prove that you have engaged with the works of the selected poet.



Varying your vocabulary



Identify **key words** and think of **synonyms** if possible. This will help to ensure that your language is varied while still focusing on the terms of the question.



Ask yourself what the coding for the question might be. Make sure that each and every point in your plan could be coded by the examiner. This will ensure that you are remaining focused on the question.

Tip

- Each of the poets you have studied has a signature style.
- They also deal with a limited number of themes.
- Work these out, and you will be prepared for any question.



Choosing your poems

Choose four to five poems which are relevant to the question.

You are making a case in your essay, so you must have a thesis.

The examiner is not interested in reading a re-hash of your poetry notes.

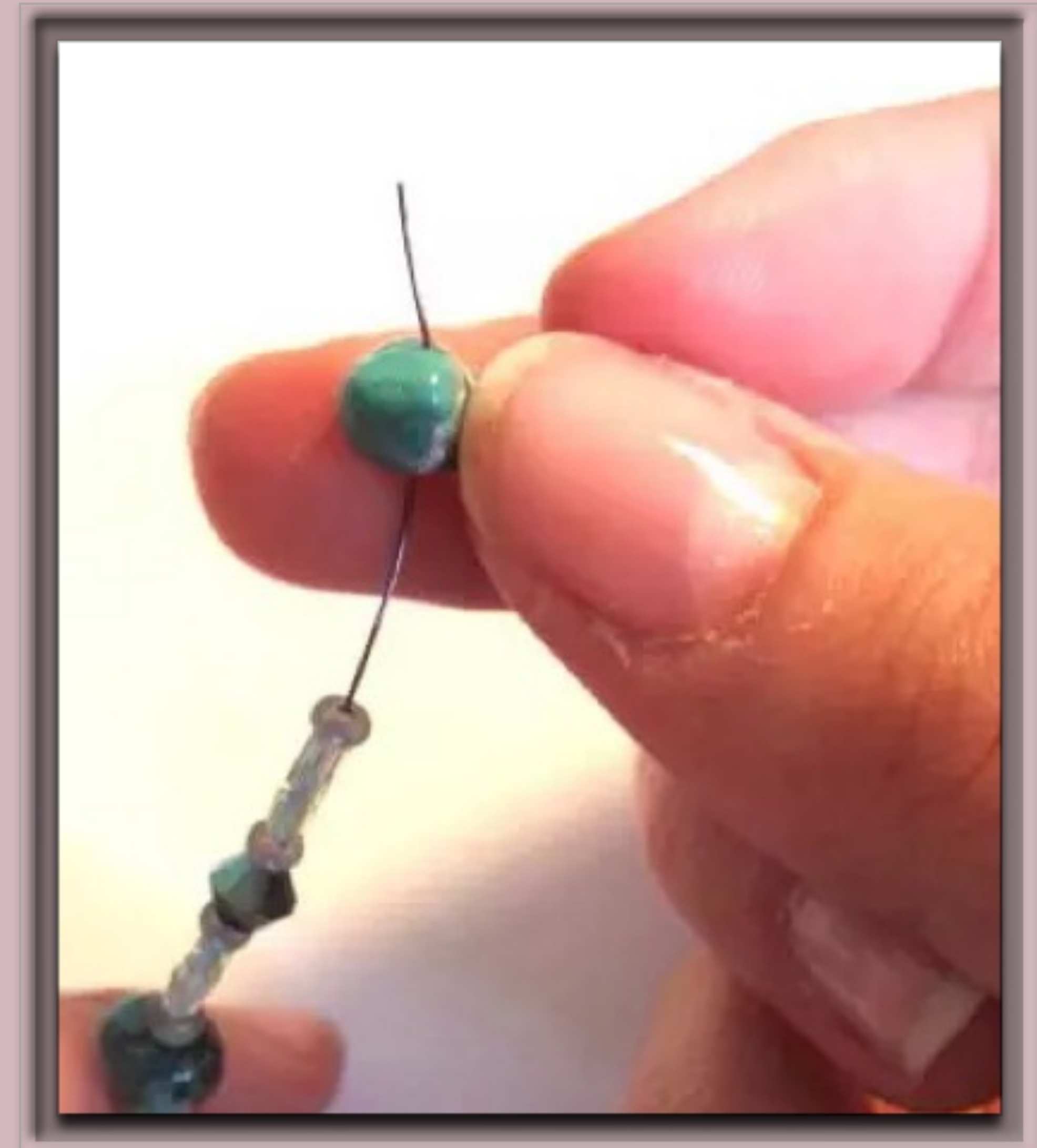
Organisation

HAVE A REASON FOR PUTTING THE POEMS IN A CERTAIN ORDER



Order

YOUR THESIS SHOULD BE THE
THREAD HOLDING YOUR ESSAY
TOGETHER



Structure

There is no hard and fast rule here; use whatever structure has worked for you in the past.

Introduction: Refer to the question and outline your approach.

Two paragraphs on each poem.

Link sentences at the start of each new poem.

Conclusion: If possible, end on a quote. It may be from the poet's own work, or from a critical essay about the poet.



Some suggestions

Move from poems written about the poet's childhood to poems written about middle age or old age.

Move from poems written when the poet was young to poems written when he / she was an older person.

Move from positive to negative or vice versa.

Move from personal to public or vice versa.

Planning - continued

If you cannot make a link at the planning stage, forget that poem and move on to another one. This is the benefit of plans. If you just launch into your essay without a clear idea of where each poem is taking you, you will get a low grade

A poem-by-poem approach can make a daunting essay title seem quite manageable. Remember, you are aiming to write two strong paragraphs on each poem, as well as an introduction and conclusion.

You should aim to write on four to five poems in your exam answer.

What poems would you
use next?

Think of the ORDER in which you
would place your poems, and the
links between them.



Introduction



You can - and should - work the terms of the question into your opening paragraph



Avoid the temptation to include too many points in your introduction. You must only mention themes / aspects of style that you intend to explore fully in the rest of the essay. Be wary of phrases like 'a multitude of themes' or 'many interesting ways'. Those are big claims. Can you back them all up? A focused thesis is a better idea.

Pitfalls

'I agree with the above statement'. This is a weak opening, particularly as the 'above statement' is rarely above your answer!

Mentioning topics in your introduction but failing to deal with them in the answer

Writing an unbalanced answer in which you deal with one or two poems in great detail and skip quickly over others

Body of the Essay

Each paragraph should advance your argument

The topic sentence in each paragraph should answer the question

Each paragraph should be linked to those before and after it

Use link words or phrases to connect your paragraphs: however; it is not only; we can also see; it becomes increasingly clear; as the poem progresses...

LINK PHRASES TO CONNECT EVIDENCE AND/OR QUOTATION

This idea is reinforced by / when...

This is cemented by / when...

X adds to the sense of...

This is further driven home by / when...

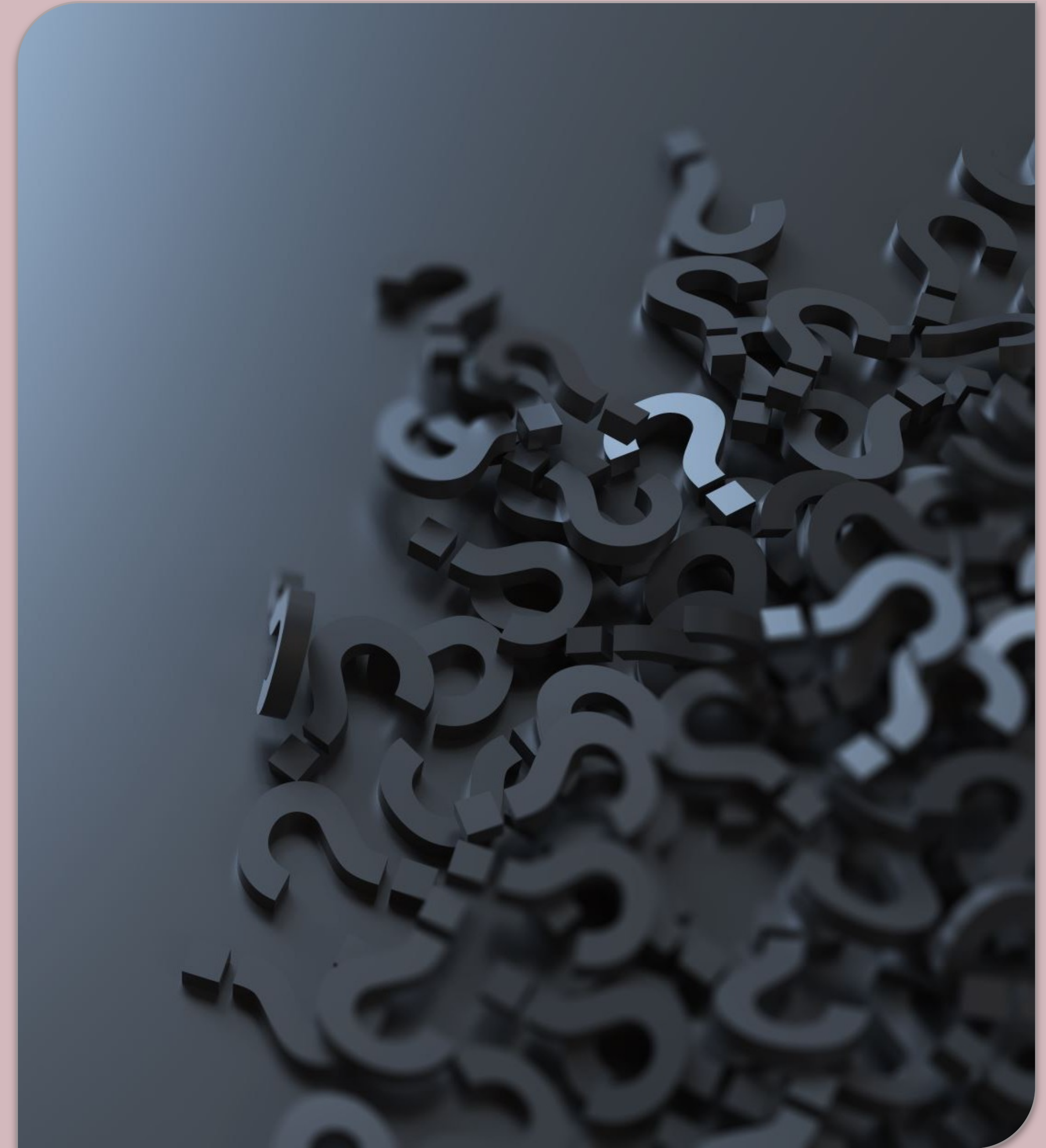
This message is even more powerfully
expressed by / when...

We see this same idea...

In much the same way...

Furthermore...

In addition...



STRUCTURING EACH PARAGRAPH –
THERE IS NO 'RIGHT' WAY, BUT THIS
IS ONE OPTION

Sentence One: Topic sentence which addresses the question

Sentence Two: Explain your point in a little more depth (this may take more than one sentence)

Sentence Three: Use evidence, including quotations, to support your point

Sentence Four: Comment on the evidence / quote and explain how it proves the point you made in your topic sentence

Sentence Five: Use a link phrase to introduce your second piece of evidence / quotation (see next slide for link phrases) and give your second piece of evidence

Sentence Six: Comment on the evidence etc.

Conclusion



Your conclusion should tie up your ideas and be a very brief rewording of your thesis/introduction.



There is no need to say, 'As I have shown in this essay'. Let your points speak for themselves.



Make sure not to raise any new points in your conclusion.



If you have an apt quote by or about the poet, this is a good time to use it.

Derek Mahon – Essay Plan

Obviously, you will have to respond to the wording of the question in the exam, but for now we will work on a personal response based on **Mahon's compassion for the victims of history** and his ability to make us see important events from a different perspective. He **speaks through and for others**, but even though he does not express his own feelings, we are aware of his **empathy for those who have suffered**. He does not shirk from presenting us with the darker side of human nature, but he does succeed in showing us both the rationale behind the decisions people make and the ways in which they cope with the resulting outcomes.

It is a good idea to mention and quote from one poem in your introduction. Some people like to list all the poems they will cover in their essay, but there is no need to do that. If you wish to abbreviate the names of the poems, you can do so by putting the abbreviation in brackets after the first mention of the title. This need not be in the introduction.

In this essay, it would be appropriate to quote from 'Antarctica'.
'From the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime' shows Mahon's understanding of both the frailties of human nature (the ridiculous pretence that Oates is simply going outside for a short time) and the nobility of which some people are capable in moments of extreme stress.

Main Body of the Essay

After the Titanic

- New point of view on historic event
- Focuses on an individual who may not have had our sympathy in the past
- We see the suffering he endured, and how his life was effectively ended by the sinking of the ship.
- We would always have seen the disaster from the point of view of those innocent victims who lost their lives, but now we see that even the man who was held to be the villain of the piece also suffered greatly.
- We cannot condone Bruce Ismay's actions, but we can perhaps understand the man a little better.
- This is a compassionate and moving picture of a broken man.

Link to 'As It Should Be'

- As in 'After the Titanic', we can feel a certain amount of sympathy for both sides. Did this man believe he was protecting his family?
- In his mind, was he creating a better world by killing another man?
- Unlike Bruce Ismay, the man in this poem not haunted by the memory of death
- This man knew what he was doing, and thought it was the right decision
- That this should be viewed as the best way to cope with the situation is chilling, to say the least.
- Our sympathy for the victim is evoked by the descriptions of him being hunted down like an animal, cornered and shot.
- The speaker shows no compassion for the man he has murdered. He speaks of disposing of his body as if it were a piece of rubbish.
- Mahon's skill in this short, disturbing poem is evident. We see how a person can come to believe that murder is justifiable in the pursuit of the greater good.
- Although we may not agree with the speaker, we do see the rationale behind his actions.

Link to 'Antarctica'

- As in 'As it Should Be' and 'After the *Titanic*' we are presented with a view of a figure from history trapped in an extreme situation.
- Difficult decision must be made.
- In this poem, the central figure sacrifices himself. He possesses a nobility lacking in the other characters.
- He believes what he is doing is for the greater good. This is similar to the speaker in 'As it Should Be'. However, Oates does not take anyone else's life.
- That the decision is not an easy one is shown in the way Oates has to push himself to walk further and further from the tent.
- Mahon's compassion and admiration for Oates is clear. The description of Oates 'goaded his ghost' shows that Mahon empathises with the physical and psychological torment he endured in his last moments.

Link to 'Rathlin'

- Again, we are presented with psychological torment and an historical event is graphically and disturbingly brought to life for us.
- The powerlessness of Somhairle Bui is dramatically depicted as he stands on the mainland, grief-stricken and helpless to do anything for the women and children of his tribe as they are slaughtered. Their anguished cries are carried to him on the wind.
- Mahon's compassion for the victims of this terrible massacre is clear. The island may be silent now, but he has given a voice to the voiceless and ensured they will not be forgotten

Conclusion

Derek Mahon's power as a poet is in his ability to turn dry, historical narratives into the stories of real people with whom we can empathise. They may not be perfect, but they are no less worthy of our consideration for that. Mahon's humanity and his compassion are evident throughout, and his unusual perspective on events from the distant and more recent past gives us food for thought. We are reminded of our frailties, and of our capacity for both compassion, self-sacrifice and – on the other hand – violence and cruelty. (What quotes would you use here?)

Other Sources

Here is a link to a sample Derek Mahon essay from St. Killian's Community School English website: <https://pclm.weebly.com/sample-essay4.html>

E-xamit Sample Essay from 2008: <https://www.e-xamit.ie/tutorial.php?id=14357>