

*Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World*  
Comprehension Questions and Writing Prompts

Note: This collection of questions and writing prompts could be used during in class reading, in between chapters as small assessments, or in an end of unit test.

**Chapter 1 – The Imperial Transatlantic Expedition**

1. Why was Shackleton famous before the *Endurance* expedition?
  
2. The first explorer to reach the Antarctic was:
  - A. Shackleton
  - B. Fitzgerald
  - C. Scott
  - D. Amundsen
  
3. Antarctica has a \_\_\_\_\_ climate:
  - A. frozen desert
  - B. deciduous
  - C. arid
  - D. tropical
  
4. Shackleton's new goal was to be the first to:
  - A. reach Antarctica
  - B. sail all around the edges of Antarctica
  - C. cross Antarctica from one side to the other
  - D. live in Antarctica for a long period of time
  
5. What were some of the ways that Shackleton raised money for the trip?
  
6. What features did the *Endurance* have to help it withstand polar waters?
  
7. Why were the Bovril sledging rations so important?

8. What was the plan for Shackleton's crew after they crossed the continent?
9. Why did Cheetham feel that Shackleton was a capable leader?
- A. He worked each man to the bone.
  - B. He always went first in dangerous situations.
  - C. He was easy on the men.
  - D. He did most of the work.
10. What items did Queen Alexandra present to Shackleton and his crew before they left?

## Chapter 2 – The Growlers

1. Why were Shackleton and his crew reluctant to leave for Antarctica?
2. What does Shackleton's confrontation with the stowaway show us about his personality?
3. What made Shackleton a good leader? Use examples from this chapter.
4. The Endurance's first stop after leaving Britain was:
  - A. South Georgia Island
  - B. Antarctica
  - C. Argentina
  - D. France
5. Read the following sentence.

*The whaling station was a rough spot, with the whaling carcasses of blue and humpback whales **putrefying** in the midnight sun (. . .)*

Based on context clues, the word **putrefying** most likely means:

- A. drying
  - B. glistening
  - C. soaking
  - D. rotting
6. What did the Norwegian whalers report about the current Antarctic ice conditions?
  7. What are *growlers*?

## Chapter 3 – The Fist of the Antarctic

1. Why did the crew move at different speeds on different days?

2. Read the following sentence.

*“What we were encountering was fairly dense pack of a very obstinate nature.”*

Based on context clues, the word obstinate most likely means:

- A. weak
- B. stubborn
- C. rocky
- D. enormous

3. Why did the mirages make traveling dangerous?

4. Read the following sentence.

*When fog and ice made progress impossible, Shackleton ordered the ship moored to a large iceberg or floe.*

Based on context clues, the word moored most likely means:

- A. rammed
- B. steered
- C. anchored
- D. detached

5. Read the following sentence.

*“Those beasts have a habit of locating by looking over the edge of a floe, and then striking through the ice from below in search of a meal; they would not distinguish between a seal and a man.”*

Based on context clues, the word distinguish most likely means:

- A. to choose
- B. to tell the difference
- C. to avoid
- D. to attack

#### **Chapter 4 – Winter on the Pack**

1. Why did Shackleton order “the fires to be burned down?”

2. How was the *Endurance* still moving, even though it was stuck in the ice pack?

3. List four of the ways the men avoided cabin fever:

4. Why did Shackleton feel that daily routines were essential?

#### **Chapter 5 – Pressure**

1. What was the biggest problem that the now “broken and fractured” plain presented to the crew?

2. Draw and label a timeline that describes how the pressing ice affected the *Endurance*. Include dates and a description of each event.
3. This chapter is packed with very specific “action verbs.” Locate and write down fifteen of them.
4. Why do you think that Shackleton felt that the banjo was an important item?
5. The author describes the crushing ice and the *Endurance* in a very vivid and detailed manner, almost making them characters in the story. You’re going to take this a step further – rewrite the scene of the *Endurance*’s destruction from the point of view of the ship or the crushing ice, giving them thoughts and feelings. (Making an animal or object humanlike is called *personification*.)
6. How do you think Shackleton was feeling at this point (the end of this chapter.) Use examples from this chapter that explain your answer.

### **Chapter 6 – The Face of the Deep is Frozen**

1. How do icebergs enrich the Southern Ocean?
2. Why is polar sea ice drinkable when most sea water isn’t?
3. Read the following quote from Shackleton, which he wrote soon after the crushing ice forced the crew to abandon ship:

*“Though we have been compelled to abandon the ship, which is crushed beyond all hope of ever being righted, we are alive and well, and we have stores and equipment for the task that lies before us. The task is to reach land with all of the members of the expedition.”*

What does this quote tell us about Shackleton’s personality? What words would you use to describe him based on this quote and other parts of the story?

4. The *Endurance* crew made many sacrifices in order to survive. What sort of sacrifices would you be willing to make in a situation like this? What sort of sacrifices would you not be willing to make?
5. Scavenger Hunt! Where did the title of this chapter come from? Locate and write down the page number and how it appears.
6. Shackleton rips a certain page out of the Bible. Why do you think he kept that particular page?
6. List three reasons why the journey to Paulet Island was bound to be so treacherous.

7. Why was Shackleton so desperate to keep his crew members together?

8. Why was blubber an important part of the crew's diet?

### **Chapter 7 – Ocean Camp**

1. Why did Shackleton and Hurley smash most of the photographic plates?

2. Why did the dirty conditions of the Ocean camp not really matter to the men when it would have before?

3. Why did the final sinking of the *Endurance* sadden the crew?

4. In what direction was their ice floe moving, how did Shackleton and his advisors react to the movement, and why?

### **Chapter 8 - Mutiny**

1. Why couldn't the crew leave the lifeboats behind? What difficulties did they face in dragging them across the ice?

2. Why did McNeish refuse to go farther?

3. How was Shackleton able to convince McNeish to carry on?

4. Write a short one to two page story describing what would have happened if Shackleton had not been able to convince McNeish to rejoin the crew. Use dialogue and specific verbs.

5. Why did the men feel that they gained little by leaving the Ocean Camp?

### **Chapter 9 – Patience, Patience, Patience**

1. Why did the crew kill most of the dogs?

2. What physical problems affected the men during their stay in Patience camp?

3. How did Shackleton use his nightmares to his advantage?
4. Why was it important for Shackleton to always appear calm?
5. Why were routines so important? How would life in the camp be without them?
6. Where did the title of this chapter come from? Write down the page number and describe the situation.
7. Besides that it reminded them of home, why else did the scent of the burning twig stir up so much emotion in the crew?

#### **Chapter 10 – Into the Boats**

1. Briefly list the tools and methods navigators use to map their location.
2. Why are timekeepers so important to navigators?
3. How did the leopard seal's appearance help the crew?
4. Why were the men able to eat the last of the sled dogs without feeling remorse?
5. List the three signs that the crew observed that indicated they were approaching the open ocean.
6. How did the crew know that the Arctic winter was approaching?

#### **Chapter 11 – Escape from the Ice**

1. Why couldn't the men "row fast enough to keep warm?"
2. After all of the danger they faced (nearly losing Holness and Shackleton), why were the men happier than the previous days?

3. Why, at the end of this chapter, did the crew return to the ice?

### **Chapter 12—Passage to Elephant Island**

1. List two reasons why Armstrong says the southern ocean is “the worst ocean in the world.”

2. Where did the crew temporarily take shelter from the southern ocean?

3. Which boat was the slowest? Why?

4. How far had the crew traveled when Worsley first took a sighting of the sun?

5. Research: What is a sextant?

6. Which boat split from the other two? Why?

7. Writing prompt: Why do you think Shackleton chose Blackborrow to be the first man on Elephant Island? What does this say about him as a leader? Who were the first three crew members on the island?

### **Chapter 13—Dry Land**

1. What animals live on Elephant Island?

2. Why is it impressive that Worsley brought the boats to Elephant Island?

3. What does Elephant Island look like?

4. Why did the men have to leave their first camp on Elephant Island?

5. Writing prompt: Why did Shackleton have such a hard time leaving his men to go for help? Why did he choose Worsley, Crean, McNeish, McCarthy, and Vincent to crew the *James Caird*?

### **Chapter 14—The Open Boat Journey: The First Ten Days**

1. Describe the route the *James Caird* took.

2. Why did the *Caird* not sail straight to South Georgia Island?

3. Describe the physical layout of the boat.

4. What did the men eat on the boat?

5. List at least three challenges the men on the *Caird* faced as they traveled from Elephant Island to South Georgia Island.

6. Connection: The albatross is a symbol in a poem called “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In it an albatross flies over a ship in the southern ocean, but the ship is cursed when the captain shoots it. How do the men in the *James Caird* react to the albatross? Why?

### **Chapter 15—The End of the Open Boat Journey**

1. Writing prompt: Several dangers in the story are called “the worst.” Which do you think was the worst danger the crew faced? Why?

2. Why do you think Shackleton and his five men survived the hurricane in the open boat while the steamer from Argentina sank?

3. Writing prompt: When the men landed on South Georgia Island, they “lapped up the sweet water like dogs.” Have you ever wanted anything as much as those men wanted water? Describe the situation.

### **Chapter 16—The Cave**

1. Why did Shackleton take Worsley and Crean across the island?

### **Chapter 17—The Alps of the Southern Ocean**

1. Describe the three men's route across the mountains.

2. Why do you think Shackleton asks twice, “Can we stay where we are?”

3. Shackleton lies to Worsley and Crean about the time they slept on the mountain. Why did he lie? Why do the men believe they have slept half an hour?

4. Writing prompt: How do you interpret the “fourth presence” with the men?

5. Explain how the men's appearance changed during their ordeal.

6. What happened to the *Aurora*?

### **Chapter 18—Camp Wild**

1. How did the men construct shelter on Elephant Island?

2. How was the winter on Elephant Island similar to the winter on the ship? How was it different?

3. List two jobs the men had on the island.

4. How long was the crew stranded on Elephant Island?

5. Writing prompt: What do you think is Shackleton's greatest success? What do you think makes him a great leader?

### **Epilogue:**

1. How did the crew's experience in Antarctica prepare them for World War I?

2. What is ironic about the crew's experience in World War I?

3. Why did Shackleton choose Worsley, Hussey, and Macklin to accompany him to Russia?

4. What was the goal of Shackleton's final journey to Antarctica?

5. Writing prompt: Why could Shackleton not give up the Antarctic? What is there that you could not give up, and why not?

6. Writing prompt: Why do you think the song fragment at the end is one of Shackleton's favorites? How does the song compare with his experiences?