

Scottish Poetry Library

HOTEL ROOM, 12TH FLOOR by Norman MacCaig

This resource is an extract from *Higher English: The Textbook* by Jane Cooper and published with permission of Hodder Gibson. The book is available here:

<https://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/subjects/english/products/16-18/higher-english-for-cfe-the-textbook>

Getting In

Before you read the poem, think about these questions:

1. Have you ever stayed in a hotel? If so, what did you like about it? What did you dislike?
2. How many buildings or landmarks in New York can you name?
3. Have you ever visited New York?
 - a. If you have, what did you like and dislike about the city?
 - b. If you haven't been there, would you like to? Why, or why not?

Meeting The Text

You are about to read a Norman MacCaig poem set in New York. As you read it for the first time, work out the answers to these questions.

1. Which two different times of day are referred to?
2. How does the speaker feel about being in New York?

Hotel Room, 12th Floor

*This morning I watched from here
a helicopter skirting like a damaged insect
the Empire State Building, that
jumbo size dentist's drill, and landing
on the roof of the PanAm skyscraper.
But now midnight has come in
from foreign places. Its uncivilised darkness
is shot at by a million lit windows, all
ups and acrosses*

5

*But midnight is not
so easily defeated. I lie in bed, between
a radio and a television set, and hear
the wildest of warwhoops continually ululating through
the glittering canyons and gulches -
police cars and ambulances racing
to the broken bones, the harsh screaming
from coldwater flats, the blood
glazed on sidewalks.*

10

15

*The frontier is never
somewhere else. And no stockades
can keep the midnight out.*

20

Let's Get To Work

As we study this poem, we'll look especially at how MacCaig's techniques create a picture of the city, and how he uses that picture to explore ideas about human nature. We'll work through the poem step by step, with teaching and commentary. **Key techniques** will be picked out in **bold** and there will be short questions for you to answer.

The Title

The title has a lot to tell us.

The **word choice** of "*Hotel Room*" lets us know the speaker is away from home, and that he is transient, just passing through - nobody settles for long in a hotel. "*12th Floor*" puts him high up. At the time of writing, in 1966, this would also have been a clue

about how very far from home the speaker must be - no British hotel building would then have been so tall, and readers would have imagined an American skyscraper even before the poem name-checked two of these.

This high position means MacCaig is disconnected from other people. It gives him a vantage point, a place from which to make judgements about us, and our human nature.

Stanza One - lines 1 to 5

The poem's first words are "*This morning.*" The **word choice** here tells us that what he saw had a powerful impact on him, as if he had to write about it almost immediately. But, it's something he only saw, he "*watched*" rather than taking part. So, the idea of disconnection that we already found in the title is here too.

The poet describes a helicopter "*skirting*" the Empire State Building.

Q1 How does this **word choice** make the helicopter similar to the speaker?

Think about what kind of aircraft that is. Ordinary people don't fly around in helicopters. A helicopter might be used by the rich to fly above the poor; or by the authorities to watch over the people; or by the military to control or attack. Helicopters suggest power, status and wealth; and the speaker, shut in his hotel room, is cut off from all of this.

MacCaig says the helicopter is "*Like a damaged insect*".

Q2 What figure of speech is this?

Think about the connotations of "*insect*". Most of us don't like insects. Many of us find them creepy or scary. You might encounter them on unhygienic, dead, decaying things. And the helicopter is even worse than this, because it's like a "*damaged*" insect: something nasty made even more grotesque.

MacCaig isn't saying the helicopter itself is damaged: it wouldn't be flying around the New York skyline if it was. He's saying that even a functional helicopter is like a damaged, unpleasant beastie. There is something wrong with our modern technology, and there's something wrong with us if we are impressed by it.

It's a good idea at this point if you can find, and look at, an image of the Empire State Building, so that you can see how well MacCaig describes it.

Q3 What **metaphor** does MacCaig use to describe the Empire State Building?

Q4 Looking at the photograph to help you, explain why this is a suitable metaphor.

Q5 What are the connotations of "*jumbo*"?

Q6 What are the connotations of "*dentist's drill*"?

The "PanAm skyscraper" was built for one of America's most successful airlines. We've already considered how ordinary people don't use helicopters, but in 1966, when the

poem was written, most ordinary people would not have been able to afford a flight by plane either.

These two buildings therefore **symbolise** qualities like wealth and status, but in the poem an insect, which might be found on a dung heap, flies around one to land on the other. MacCaig may be criticising us for spending money on big-name, iconic, projects like these, but ignoring the needs of the poor.

Both images we've seen so far, the insect and the dentist's drill, are disagreeable, repulsive. The poet seems unimpressed by human economic power or technical achievement.

(By the way, if it feels like we have analysed every single word of the poem so far, that tells you what a brilliant writer MacCaig was. Everything here has a purpose; nothing is wasted.)

Stanza One - lines 6 to 10

This poem, not so far a riot of laughs, becomes **literally and metaphorically** darker. The use of "*But*" signals a **turning point** from light to dark. It is "*now*" midnight. In poetry, light is nearly always a metaphor for something good, but the daylight of "*this morning*" does not even survive to the end of the first stanza. The darkness is stronger.

MacCaig uses this change from daylight to "*darkness*" to examine what happens when our modern accomplishments are removed, and the darker, "*uncivilised*" side of human nature comes out. As readers, we are stuck in that midnight moment with MacCaig: his use of "*now*" creates **immediacy**, and makes us experience it with him.

Q7 What are the connotations of "*midnight*"?

We are told that midnight "*has come in,*" as if it has turned up uninvited.

Q8 What technique does MacCaig deploy by using this verb?

Q9 What are the connotations of "*foreign*"?

Q10 What are the connotations of "*shot*"?

Despite what that use of "*shot*" here suggests, it is at least the light from the windows - remember that light is always a positive idea in poetry - shooting at the darkness. We could argue therefore that stanza 1 ends on a hopeful note: there are "*a million*" of those lit-up windows, which sounds like a lot to fight against the darkness.

Stanza Two

However, the light doesn't win. MacCaig tells us that "*midnight is not/ so easily defeated,*" and the **placement** of "*not*" at the end of the line emphasises the negativity here, and the fact that darkness has won this conflict.

MacCaig tells us he is lying “*in bed, between/ a radio and a television set*”. His use of “*between*” suggests he is somehow trapped or constricted. This is a poem about visiting New York, one of the most vibrant cities on Earth, and yet he never seems to leave his hotel room, where he is surrounded by lifeless objects. A “*radio and a television set*” might imply communication, but the speaker is alone, and is in contact with no-one.

His use of “*hear*” in line 12 reminds us of “*watched*” in line 1. Now that it’s dark, he can’t see what’s outside. Things are always more frightening, and noises more scary, in the dark, when we can’t see what is actually happening.

MacCaig uses a sound effect to draw our attention to what he can hear.

Q11 Which **sound effect technique** does he use in line 13?

Q12 Which three real and actual noises does he hear in the rest of this verse?

Q13 Use a dictionary to find out what “*ululating*” in this line means.

The writer is using this word as a **metaphor** for the sound of emergency sirens. It’s also the first step in an **extended metaphor** that runs through the rest of the poem.

At this point we need a reminder that the poem was written in 1966, when attitudes and ideas were very different to what they are today. MacCaig is drawing on his readers’ ideas of what was then called “the wild west” and of images that they would know from “western” movies.

We know that people lived in what is now the USA long before settlers began arriving from Europe in the 17th century. We would call these “native peoples” or “native Americans.” MacCaig’s readers would have called them “Red Indians” and regarded them as war-whooping savages. In the 1960s, readers would have looked back a hundred years or so to a period when settlers were moving west across North America, taking control of land and driving away or killing the native peoples. Though we’d now see this as brutality that led to human death and displacement, as well as to the killing of millions of animals and the destruction of natural environments, to MacCaig’s readers, and especially to 1960s Americans, this was “when the west was won.”

Now that we understand that mindset, we can unpick the extended metaphor.

Q14 What real feature of New York city life is described here as ululating “*warwhoops*”?

Q15 What real feature of New York city life is described here as “*canyons and gulches*”? **HINT:** There’s a clue in “*glittering*”.

Movie goers, used to watching westerns, would think of these “*canyons and gulches*” as narrow, dangerous, places where settlers’ wagon trains might be ambushed on their way across the west.

This extended metaphor of the historic wild west allows MacCaig to say something about the present. He’s writing in present tense, so readers can’t look back and say that violence is a thing of the past. In fact, this reference to a violent past is used to say that America’s supposedly civilised present isn’t that wonderful. Twentieth century American riches and success were built upon that violent history. Human nature, says MacCaig, is violent and evil to the core, and that doesn’t change.

We see him **list** the results of that violent nature at the end of the stanza.

Q16 What three results of violence does the poet list?

He **repeats** the word “*the*”. As this is an impersonal word, it implies that anyone can be a victim. He also describes the screaming as “*harsh*”. A scream can’t be anything but harsh, so this is an example of **tautology**, saying the same thing twice in different ways, and it therefore emphasises the unpleasant sound.

“*Coldwater*” simply means what it says, that in a city where the rich can live in skyscrapers and fly around in helicopters, some people are so poor that they live in flats that don’t even have hot running water. MacCaig is definitely showing us the stark contrast between the rich and poor who live side by side in New York. By using this word in the part of the poem that deals with violence, he may also be saying that if you treat people brutally, they are more likely to behave like brutes and descend into violence. The result is nasty: if blood is “*glazed*” on [the] *sidewalks*” then there’s so much of it that the pavement looks positively slick and shiny, like a piece of glazed pottery.

Stanza Three

In the final, very brief, stanza, MacCaig returns to the **extended metaphor** of the wild west. The “*frontier*” was the edge of the supposedly civilised world, which kept moving further and further west during the 19th century as more of America was settled by European immigrants. To New York’s 19th century residents looking west, or to its 20th century residents looking back in time, the frontier would have been a frightening prospect, something they were glad to be far away from. MacCaig does not allow them this comfort, telling them the frontier “*is never/ somewhere else*”.

Q17 You already saw one example of MacCaig’s use of **placement** in line 11. Explain how he now makes a similar use of **placement** in the quotation above.

There is no solution to the problem of human nature, because “*no stockades/ can keep the midnight out.*”

Q18 Use a dictionary to find the meaning of “*stockades*”. How does this add to the extended metaphor the poet has been using?

The use of negative word choice in “*never*” and “*no*” emphasises that bleakness. We can’t “*keep the midnight out*”, or the “*frontier*” back, because these things aren’t somewhere else far away; they are inside each of us, and are part of our very nature. The conclusion, and therefore the poet’s message, is bleak.

Technique revision

Now that you’ve worked your way through all the work on ‘Hotel Room, 12th Floor’ you should know the poem very well. It’s time to revise your knowledge of MacCaig’s techniques.

Take a large piece of paper. Mark it up into a grid like the one below. For every technique, fill in a quotation from the poem, and explain the effect it has on the reader. Some boxes have been filled in for you as examples.

Point - a technique	Evidence - quotation	Explanation of effect
word choice	<i>Hotel Room</i>	Suggests away from home, transient, just passing through
word choice	<i>12th Floor</i>	<p>Suggests high up.</p> <p>At time of writing, in 1966, would suggest an American skyscraper</p> <p>This high position means MacCaig is disconnected from other people. It gives him a vantage point, a place from which to make judgements about us, and our human nature.</p> <p><i>Continue on your own...</i></p>

You can carry on the rest of the table yourself. You'll need a whole sheet of paper, maybe two, as you need to add the following techniques:

Give **each** of these examples of word choice a separate row on your table: *this morning; watched; skirting; helicopter; insect; damaged; jumbo; dentist's drill; midnight; foreign; shot; between; a radio and a television set; hear; canyons and gulches; coldwater; glazed; never + no*

Deal separately with the placement of *not* and of *never*

Deal separately with **two** metaphors: *dentist's drill* and *ululating*

something both literal and metaphorical

simile

symbol

immediacy

personification

turning point

alliteration

extended metaphor

list

repetition

negative word choice

tautology