

Norman MacCaig Knowledge Organiser

<u>Aunt Julia</u>	<u>Visiting Hour</u>	<u>Hotel Room, 12th Floor</u>
<p>Context Norman MacCaig's Aunt Julia lived on Scalpay, a small island off the coast of Harris in the Outer Hebrides. Aunt Julia lived a traditional, hardworking life on a croft and she spoke only her native Gaelic language.</p> <p>She speaks Scottish Gaelic (Scots Gaelic) – a Celtic language native to the Gaels of Scotland. By the mid-14th century what eventually came to be called Scots emerged as the official language of government and law. Due to this, Gaelic is no longer the language of Scotland, and has been marginalised ever since.</p> <p>Summary This is an autobiographical poem, about the relationship between MacCaig and his Aunt Julia. Throughout, he discusses the language barrier between them – she spoke Gaelic and he did not.</p> <p>Despite this inability to communicate, we get the sense that the two shared a strong relationship despite of this. At the end of the poem, MacCaig states that Julia has died, and emphasises his regret at not being able to converse with her.</p> <p>Key Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers of communication • Isolation (felt by speaker & Aunt Julia) • Spirituality • Strength of relationships • Fragility of Scottish heritage, language & culture • Loss/Mortality • History/tradition • Nature 	<p>Summary The speaker talks about his visit to an ill relative in hospital. In the poem, he fights his emotions and is determined to maintain his composure, in order to prevent transmitting his worry and fear to his friend.</p> <p>This attempt to switch off his emotions, however, is ultimately unsuccessful and in the end he is forced to confront the reality of both his own and his friend's mortality. He is overcome by his grief and anguish, and leaves the visit feeling as though it has been pointless.</p> <p>Key Themes</p> <p><u>Inevitability of death/Mortality</u> – faces his own mortality as well as that of his friend. Understands cannot escape death.</p> <p><u>Isolation</u> – specifically the isolation caused by illness and/or death, as he is separated from his friend due to this.</p> <p><u>Spirituality</u> – reference to afterlife suggests a belief in a greater being/plain.</p> <p><u>Fear</u> – unable to control his emotions and is evidently scared about what is coming.</p>	<p>Summary This is an autobiographical poem, written in 1966, which documents a personal experience of MacCaig's (similar to 'Aunt Julia' and 'Basking Shark').</p> <p>The poem depicts MacCaig looking out at New York city, and describing the violence he sees throughout its streets. He makes consistent reference to the technological advances and achievements of modern-day America, such as the Empire State Building and the PanAm skyscraper. However, he also considers the violent past of America (the Wild West), and compares this past aggression to the aggression felt in the country at present.</p> <p>By tracing the thread of violence throughout American history to the present MacCaig suggests that technological progress has not resulted in good society.</p> <p>Form/Structure The poem is written in free-verse (poetry that doesn't have a regular rhyme/rhythm). This enables MacCaig to explore themes without a restrictive, defined structure.</p> <p>Key Themes</p> <p><u>Fear</u> A fear of violence being a part of everyone, or of being unable to get rid of it.</p> <p><u>Technology</u> As a destructive force. However it is also used as a stockade of sorts when MacCaig tries to block out the violence – it too is not strong enough to keep the midnight (the violence) out.</p> <p><u>Light vs Dark</u> The light represents the good in humanity, whereas the darkness represents the violence and aggression felt by the country.</p> <p><u>Humanity</u> Humanity/society is failing itself in allowing itself to be overcome by violence.</p> <p><u>Violence</u> Considers the violent past of America (the Wild West), and compares this past aggression to the aggression felt in the country at present. MacCaig perceives violence as an unescapable part of human nature.</p>

Self-Testing

Use the questions below to aid you in studying your knowledge organiser.

You are expected to be able to answer each of the questions below.

Aunt Julia

Context

1. Where did Aunt Julia live?
2. What was her occupation (job)?
3. What language did she speak?
4. What happened in the 14th Century?
5. What is now the national language of Scotland?

Summary

1. What type of poem is this?
2. Who are the main characters?
3. What difficulty do they face?
4. What is their relationship like?
5. Why does MacCaig feel regret at the end?

Visiting Hour

Summary

1. What is the speaker doing in the poem?
2. What does he fight with throughout?
3. Why does he fight this?
4. Is he successful or unsuccessful in doing this?
5. How does he feel at the end and why?

Hotel Room, 12th Floor

Summary

1. What type of poem is this?
2. When was the poem written?
3. Which city does MacCaig look out onto?
4. What does he refer to throughout the poem?
5. How does he compare the violence of the past to the violence of the present?
6. What does he think about the relationship between technology and society?

Form/Structure

1. What structure does MacCaig write in?
2. Why does he write in this way?