

Brooklyn Cop

Norman MacCaig

Why are we doing this?

Learning Intentions

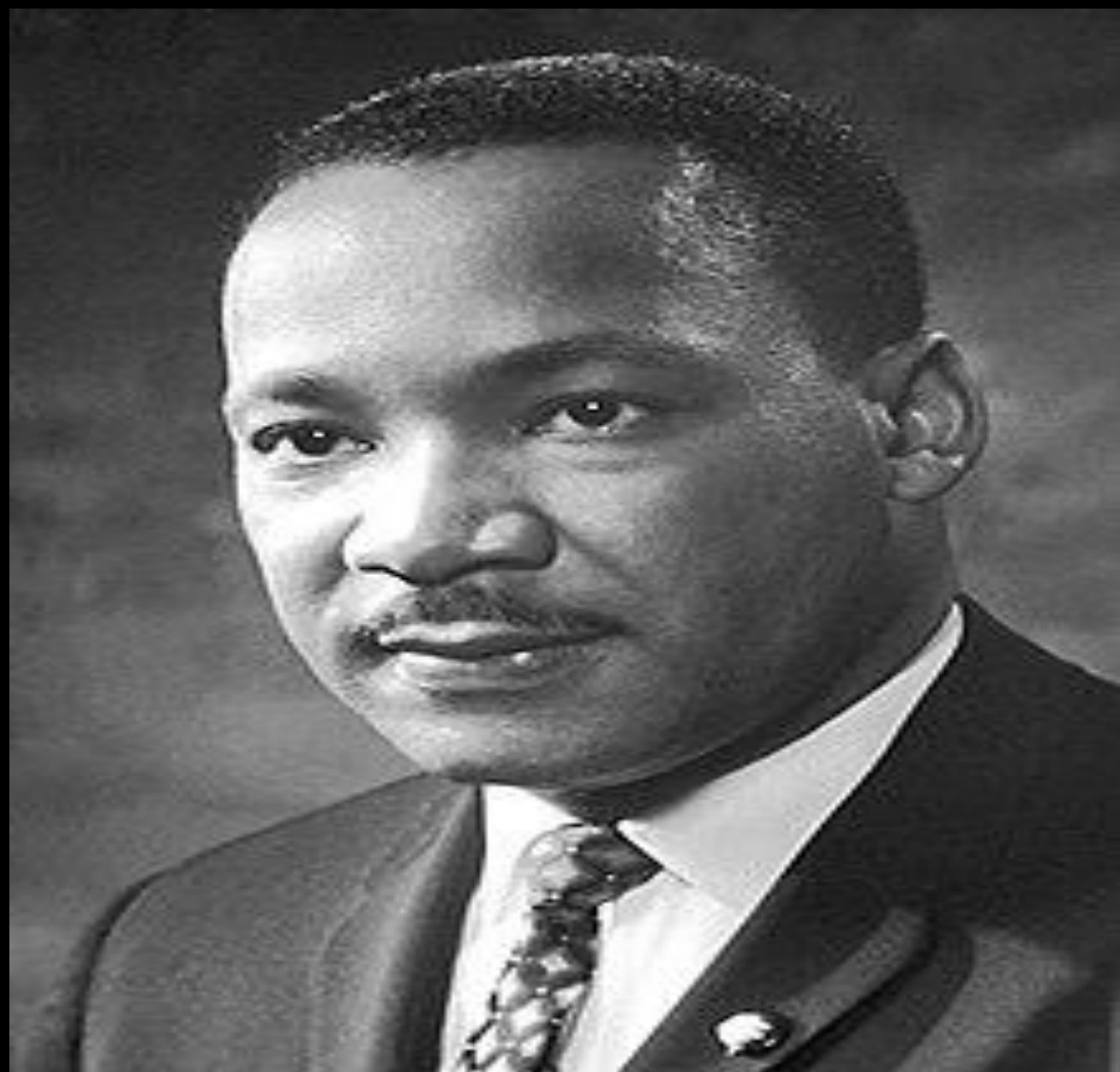
- I am gaining a further understanding of MacCaig's poetry.
- I can gain a further understanding of poetic techniques.

Success Criteria

- I can successfully identify and comment on poetic techniques present throughout the poem.

Norman MacCaig (1910-1996)

- Norman Alexander MacCaig was born in Edinburgh in November 1910.
- He won the Cholmondeley Medal in 1975, and was awarded the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1985. He was made an OBE in 1979.
- He made his living as a primary teacher.
- He was a pacifist and during World War II served a term in prison for his beliefs. It is thought this also affected his career advancement.



Martin Luther King Jr.

- Martin Luther King Jr. (January 15, 1929 - April 4, 1968) was an American Baptist minister and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the civil rights movement from 1954 until his death in 1968. Born in Atlanta, King is best known for advancing civil rights through non violence and civil disobedience, tactics his Christian beliefs and the nonviolent activism of Mahatma Gandhi helped inspire.
- In 1968, King was planning a national occupation of Washington, D.C., to be called the Poor People's Campaign, when he was assassinated on April 4 in Memphis, Tennessee. His death was followed by riots in many U.S. cities.









Context of the poem

- The poem was written in 1968 by Norman MacCaig. It was part of a collection of poems called "*Rings on a Tree*".
- This poem, similar to "Hotel Room, 12th Floor", is inspired by a trip to New York.
- New York City is made up of five boroughs. Of these, Brooklyn has the largest population. At the time it was considered a tough and dangerous place.

- At the time the poem was written, the behaviour of the police in the USA had been called into question. Images of brutal and violent behaviour from the police in response to civil rights protests and demonstrations had been shown around the world.
- The poem focuses on one particular character, an unnamed Brooklyn police officer. The policeman is imposing and strong, even threatening, but we also see him as being vulnerable and human. His exchanges with his wife underline the severity of the dangers he faces each day.
- However, this poem is not just about the policeman. It concerns the dangerous and violent world that policemen in New York, or anywhere in the world can face.

Poem's Main Idea

By portraying the cop as both threatening animal and as a vulnerable human being, MacCaig questions how civilised modern society is and suggests the dehumanising nature of violence.

Brooklyn New York, 1968

Students protesting against racism, violence and the Vietnam War.



What happens in the poem?

- The physical appearance of a character from an urban environment is described.
- The character's psychological profile is described.
- The character's urban environment is described.
- He writes about the character's dangerous existence and the violent situations he finds himself in.
- He also suggests the character is just as dangerous as the criminal.

Emotions in the poem

- Policeman's emotions created by the danger and tension of his job.
- He is a frightening character but he has to be able to survive the terrors of city life.
- Is sympathy felt for both the policeman and his victims?
- How does MacCaig feel about the use of violence to prevent violence and uphold the law? Irony?

Things you need to know...

- Brooklyn is a rough district in New York City, America.
- Hieroglyphics are sacred symbols used in Egyptian picture writing, but these are now sometimes referred to as things which are difficult to read.
- "Nightstick" is an American Policeman's truncheon.



Things you need to know...

Reflective Nature of the poem

In the interview 'A Metaphorical Way of Seeing Things', MacCaig maintained that poetry is a 'psychological Optrex, it clears your eyes and you see things'.

Like many of MacCaig's poems, 'Brooklyn Cop' moves from description to reflection. This experience leads the poet to reflect on the nature of policemen and who the reader should feel sympathy for - the victims or the policeman.

Structure of the poem

- The poem is written in **Free Verse** and is made up of **four stanzas**. The stanzas do not follow a regular length but are **irregular**.
- At the beginning of the poem the cop is presented as stereotypical- strong/brutal/violent - but hints at a more tender side.
- The poem changes to show how quickly the cop could be thrust from safety into chaos. Violence is always present.
- The poem finally moves to a more reflective tone - showing the impact of violence.

Extended Metaphor

What is an Extended Metaphor?

- ✓ An **Extended Metaphor** refers to a direct comparison between two things (similar to a metaphor) which continues on throughout a series of sentences in a paragraph or lines in a poem. It is often made up of more than one sentence, sometimes consists of a full paragraph or can be present throughout an entire poem.

Overview of the Stanzas

- **Stanza One** - Physical description of policeman. Shows contrast between his cop persona and his real life
- **Stanza Two** - Focus on the violence underlying the society the man polices
- **Stanza Three** - Reveals the vulnerability of the policeman and asks who would do such a job
- **Stanza Four** - Rhetorical, ambiguous question. Forces the reader to think about who is the victim and who we should feel sympathy for.

As the poem progresses the stanzas get shorter and more condensed - reveals poets fragmented thinking

Themes

- **Reflection on the nature of violence and the impact it has on people.** The policeman has been changed by the nature of his job and his fear that he may not return home to his wife.
- **The poem shows the vulnerability of humanity.** The cop may sacrifice innocent lives to do his job and reveals the true impact of living in a violent city. Although he is trained to cope with situations it will ultimately have an impact on him mentally and emotionally as he is a human being.

Stanza One

In the first stanza, MacCaig creates an almost cartoon-like image of an American police officer. The physical description and the phrases he uses suggest a stereotype from a film or TV drama. But MacCaig also hints at the human being behind this image.

Simile- compares the policeman to an animal which is known for its physical strength. This demonstrates the policeman's physical potential and hints at the violence and menace he presents.

Gives the impression of the policeman as a formidable, imposing presence. The idea of the animal suggests the giant ape, King Kong.

Built like a gorilla but **less timid**,
thick-fleshed, steak-coloured,

Suggests he is hard-working and tough on the inside too. Word Choice- flesh and steak compare the man to a piece of meat, something raw and uncompromising, with connotations of blood and violence.

Word Choice- suggests that he is brave but brutal. While gorilla's can be timid they are generally violent and threatening. Humorous tone- MacCaig is joking implying the policeman is even less timid than a not very timid gorilla.

Contrast- hard and tough. Literal description of his daily work.

Metaphor- presents his eyes as symbols which are hard to read. Instead his eyes show inner emotion they only mean one thing- trouble. May also suggest his face is carved in stone meaning his expression is weathered and his eyes give an insight into previous hard experiences.

with two hieroglyphs in his face that mean trouble, he walks the sidewalk and the thin tissue over violence.

Metaphor- violence is never far away in the streets the man patrols. Like tissue, peace is fragile, delicate and can shatter at any moment.

The "thin tissue" creates a strong contrast to "thick flesh". This suggests that importance of the cop in preventing the thin tissue of civilisation from ripping open into disorder.

Additionally, this could also suggest that he has scars on his face which would highlight the previous violent experiences which he has had.

Clichéd language- uses a worn out and meaningless phrase to address his wife. Almost thoughtless, like something from a film or TV series.

Shows another side to the cop by revealing his personal life and personal relationships. Highlights his vulnerability that his role in society brings.

This morning,
when he said, "See you, babe" to his wife,
he hoped it, he truly hoped it.

To the policeman, saying 'see you' to his wife isn't just a meaningless comment but a genuine wish, and 'truly' adds authenticity to this.

Repetition- emphasises his fear and vulnerability. Stresses the danger he faces when in his working environment which hints at desperation. Contrasts with the casual language used to address his wife.

Metaphor- MacCaig ends the stanza by comparing the policeman to the gorilla once more. He changes the imagery from a simile, used at the beginning, to a metaphor, in order to make the comparison stronger. This metaphor highlights his savage and animalistic nature.

He is a gorilla
to whom "Hiya, honey" is no cliché.

This is not an example of clichéd language for the policeman. This is a genuine loving greeting to his wife. He is truly grateful for the peace and quiet which can be found at home.

Stanza Two

- Stanza two shows how easily and quickly the cop could be caught up in violent chaos. MacCaig suggests that it would take little for society to break down and that violence is a constant threat.
- MacCaig continues with the image of the tissue reflecting peace and considers the impact it may have should it break.

- The language which MacCaig uses throughout the stanza helps to root the poem in New York. The word "Whamburger" has American connotations and in American speech it is fairly common to refer to a building as someone's place, like we see here. These are not glamorous locations- they sound cheap and dodgy. These could be where criminals spend a lot of their time. "Whamburger" implies violence: "Wham" is a word that could suggest the sound of a punch landing, like on a comic strip.

Repetition- highlights the uncertainty of living in the city. The violence he could face is unknown. Also, demonstrates the severity of the violence he has to face- it is almost impressive.

The long sentences reflects the range of possibilities and challenges the policeman may face at any given moment.

Should the tissue tear, should he plunge through into violence, what clubbings, what gunshots

Alliteration- creates a quick phrase which suggests a sudden act. Shows the threat of violence is always present.

List- shows challenges and danger the policeman can face. Highlights escalating violence and how dangerous the city is.

Word Choice- implies that violence can be abrupt and uncontrollable. The policeman is on the verge of violence.

between Phoebe's Whamburger
and Louie's Place.

Word Choice- has American
connotations. Mafia hangouts,
disreputable places in the city.
Suggests violence and
aggression.

Stanza Three

- In the third stanza the tone of the poem changes. It is no longer simply descriptive but becomes reflective.
- MacCaig encourages the reader to put themselves in the place of the cop and the people he comes into contact with.

Questions who would do this job or want to become this inhuman violent person.

Word Choice- reinforces the violent nature of the policeman and suggests he is animalistic.

Rhetorical Question- the undesirable challenges the policeman faces are captured. Designed to challenge the reader and making them consider if they would be able to do his job.

Who would be him, gorilla with a nightstick, whose home is a place he might, this time, never get back to?

A fear that every time he goes to his job he is always vulnerable. The stress of his job is always on his mind.

Word Choice- 'home' highlights his sense of self and the fear he may lose this through his job. The violence will one day change him so much.

Emphasises the fear at the heart of the cop- he may be killed and not return to his home and wife.

Stanza Four

- In this stanza, MacCaig considers two points: what kind of people would mess with the policeman and what would they have to do for him to turn to violence. This suggests that even though he is often faced with violence, it might be a last resort for the policeman.

Syntax (unusual word order)-
makes the reader pause and
reflect on his meaning.

Ambiguous: open
to interpretation
or can have more
than one
meaning.

And who **would be who have to be**
his victims?

Rhetorical Question- ambiguous
question. Innocent lives may be
sacrificed for the policeman to
do his job- but is this right? Can
create sympathy for those who
come into contact with the cop.

Word Choice- interesting word
choice, MacCaig is suggesting that
someone who gets on the wrong side
of this policeman will be a victim. It
isn't just the cop who is at risk of
violence. The policeman himself can
act violently.

Themes- Linking with other Poems

- In **Basking Shark**, MacCaig separates the animal, which suggests something violent but isn't, with the human, where the real threat of violence may lie. In **Brooklyn Cop**, MacCaig combines the animal and the human in one figure.
- Despite being compared to an animal, the policeman has human hopes and fears. He is aware of the dangers that surround him but is relatively powerless in doing anything about it; he is left to hope each day that he will be able to return home.
- **Brooklyn Cop** shares its setting with **Hotel Room, 12th Floor** and both poems suggest that this modern city is full of the threat of violence and uncivilised human nature.
- Typically of MacCaig, the poem ends with a pertinent point that makes the reader think. Considering the backdrop of danger that both the policeman (and the people he comes into contact with) face in the environments that they are in, he wonders what kind of human would be able to cope with such circumstances.