

Hotel Room, 12th Floor

Norman MacCaig

Why are we doing this?

Learning Intentions

- I am gaining a further understanding of MacCaig's poetry.
- I am gaining a further understanding of poetic techniques.
- I am gaining a further understanding of the main ideas present in poetry.

Success Criteria

- I can successfully identify and comment on poetic techniques present throughout the poem.
- I can confidently comment on the main ideas present in the poem.









Overview of the poem

- In the mid 1960s, MacCaig made several visits to New York. MacCaig attended many conferences and poetry readings throughout his time there. Also, he had many personal experiences while in New York, some of them strange.
- These strange experiences would go on to influence his poetry particularly, Hotel Room, 12th Floor and Brooklyn Cop.
- The poem begins with light-hearted imagery however, the mood gradually changes becoming sombre and reflective finally ending with an ominous conclusion.
- 'Ominous'- giving the impression something bad is going to happen.

Context of the poem

- The poem considers the balance between light and dark, good and evil and humanity's role in a developing urban society.
- MacCaig refers to the technological advances and achievements of modern day America, such as New York's skyscrapers. However, he also considers the violent past of America, particularly the Wild West, and compares this aggression to the country's present.

Main Idea of the Poem

MacCaig traces the thread of violence throughout American history to the present day. He suggests that technological progress has not resulted in a civilised society. Therefore, this is a bleak poem that predicts that evil will always exist as part of human life.

Form and Structure

- Hotel Room, 12th Floor is written in free verse, this allows MacCaig to explore various themes without being restricted by a defined structure.
- The poem is made up of three stanzas of varying length which does not limit MacCaig in his exploration of important themes and ideas.
- The poem is also written in first person as it documents a personal experience had by MacCaig. Similar to Basking Shark and Aunt Julia, the poems concerns are not limited to MacCaig, he uses the poem and his own experiences to pose broader questions about humanity.

Stanza Outline

- **Stanza One-** reflects how the city looks in the morning and focuses on the bright, modern appearance of the city. MacCaig moves to night at the close of the stanza to suggest a darker, more dangerous city.
- **Stanza Two-** explores the threatening night world in more detail and links to the Wild West.
- **Stanza Three-** is an effective summary of the poem's themes, bringing together societal concerns. By giving the stanza only two sentences, MacCaig makes significance in their content.

Extended Metaphor

Throughout the poem there is an extended metaphor present where MacCaig compares modern society to the American Frontier or Wild West, this shows the uncivilised nature of violence on the streets.

Extended Metaphor

A metaphor which continues throughout more than one paragraph, stanza or indeed the entire poem.

Stanza One

- MacCaig opens the poem at a specific time, just as the title puts us in a specific place. Together with the use of real landmarks, this makes the poem feel like a genuine, real experience. This creates a sense of immediacy that is consolidated later in the opening stanza with "But now."
- With these two quotes, he suggests that the themes of the poem need to be discussed and are relevant to the time of writing.

Establishes the setting and gives a sense of time.
Word Choice- suggests light and hopefulness for the day ahead.

Word Choice- shows that he is a spectator and is not involved in what he sees. He is passive to what is around him.

This morning I watched from here
a helicopter skirting like a damaged insect

A helicopter is usually associated with wealth however, MacCaig is making a social comment- it is society that is damaged by the increasing pursuit of technological and material wealth.
MacCaig questions the worth of technological achievements.

Simile- compares the building to an insect, suggesting that it insignificant and is small among the buildings. Insect suggests something that buzzes around and is annoying, not only is it annoying but it is damaged, like a fly having a broken wing. The modern invention is an inferior copy of nature.

Was New York's tallest building of the time.
Ostentatious symbol of wealth and power.

Metaphor- compares the building to a dentist drill. This is a humorous image as it makes the reader question why a dentist would have a drill of this size? MacCaig suggests the building is pointless- criticising the American view that 'bigger is better'. On an aesthetic level MacCaig shows his dislike towards the appearance of the building.

the Empire State Building, that jumbo size dentist's drill, and landing on the roof of the PanAm skyscraper.

Emphasises height- ignores harsh reality "on the ground".

America's airline- the country's connection to the rest of the world. Highlights the wealth and focus on the country.

"Dentist's drill"- connotations of pain and suffering. Makes a deeper point regarding the inequality of society and the suffering of groups of people who are left behind by progress. A bright modern image which is surrounded by darkness.

Word Choice- acts as an obvious turning point in the poem. Time shifts from morning to the middle of the night. The mood of the poem changes to something more solemn.

Word Choice- literally refers to a time, it also metaphorically introduces the idea of darkness and the unknown and consequently fear.

But now **midnight** has come in from **foreign places**. Its **uncivilised darkness** is **shot at by a million lit windows**, all ups and acrosses.

Word Choice- what can't be seen is feared.

Word Choice- has connotations of being unfamiliar and strange. The idea of fear and conflict is reinforced.

Word Choice- 'shot' has connotations of violence and crime. 'Million lit windows' provides contrast and shows the huge numbers and the strength this gives against evil which surrounds the city. Good vs. evil- key theme.

Religious imagery- suggests that shots are being fired upwards just as skyscrapers point up to the sky. "Acrosses" inclusion of the word cross suggests religious connotations. Suggests Christian image of good fighting evil.

"...shot at by a million lit windows..."

Conflict is extended when MacCaig writes that 'darkness' is being 'shot at' by 'a million lit windows'. This brings to mind the USA's close relationship with guns, such as the place of guns in taming the Wild West. The image suggests the buildings of the city in battle with the surrounding darkness. Here, darkness, with its associations of evil and the unknown, is in battle with artificial light, alongside its connotations of life, knowledge and progress. This raises questions about humanity's ability to use its own inventions (electric light in man-made buildings), combat the inevitable return of night and darkness, and possibly humankind's most instinctive, perhaps destructive, desires.

Stanza Two

- The stanza begins with a pessimistic tone. The repeat of "But" at the start of the sentence links back to and emphasises the "but" used as a turning point in Stanza One.
- In this stanza the image of good and evil continues, with the extended MacCaig portrays the violence of the city as a fight in the Wild West.
- Throughout the stanza MacCaig suggests people are surrounded by technology in an intimidating way.
- The stanza also suggests MacCaig is trying to use technology to drown out the violence of the city below his hotel room.

Need to know...

Enjambment

The continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line, couplet, or stanza.

Superlative

An adjective describing the best of something e.g. greatest, marvellous.

Ululate

howl or wail as an expression of strong emotion, typically grief.

Gulches

A 'V' shaped valley usually with a small stream in the middle.

Synecdoche

A figure of speech is used to represent a whole body or person. E.g. the England lost the game. Meaning the England football team.

Word Choice- 'but' shows this is a turning point in the poem. Signals that light is good however, is losing the battle.

Enjambment- emphasises the negativity at this point as darkness and badness are taking over.

But midnight is not
so easily defeated. I lie in bed,

Struggle is futile as darkness will happen anyway. There is no point trying to fight against it as it is the dominant force in the city.

Caesura- pause before the next stage in the poem, shows he is moving on.

Word Choice- shows he is removed from what is below. He is a passive spectator. He is struggling to sleep as he knows there is commotion below.

Symbolism- symbols of technology. He is using them to distract himself from violence but it doesn't work. Suggests they are surrounded in an intimidating way by technology.

Changes the focus of the poem- no longer what he sees but also what he hears- his senses are being invaded.

a radio and a television set, and
hear
the wildest of warwhoops
continually ululating through

Word choice- superlative word choice of 'wildest' has connotations of being uncivilised and brutal. Highlighting the presence of Native America and the violent culture associated with it.

Onomatopoeia- suggests the repeated sound associated with Native Americans in films. It compares these howls and wails to the constant sirens on the street below. Intensifies the feeling something bad is happening.

Alliteration- 'warwhoops' highlights the brutal culture and war cries associated with Native Americans. Shows the chaos and aggression taking place on the ground below the hotel room.

Contrast- describes the setting of these historic battles. Contrasts of the natural landscape and the affluent city. Word Choice- 'glittering' suggests the canyons have wealth and natural beauty not present in the city.

Highlights the violence present in the city. Suggests danger and people being hurt in the city below.

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.

Word Choice- 'racing' shows the speed of movement. Intensifies the feeling of emergency and chaos.

Synecdoche - reduces people to body parts, noises and spilled fluids. Suggests the place of humans in this society has been lost. Bones represent the people, the people have been lost it is just the violence which is seen.

Literally refers to the more primitive, less luxurious flats. Shows the poverty and people living the violent lives. Some people have been left behind in poverty.

Stanza Three

- MacCaig closes the poem in a stanza comprised of two sentences. Each make a negative statement and they leave us with a pessimistic tone.
- MacCaig takes the pessimistic view that humanity, despite its advances (represented in this poem by the skyscrapers), will always be impacted by uncivilised, basic human instincts.

Enjambment- focuses on the negativity of 'never'.

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

MacCaig is suggesting that uncivilised acts are intrinsically linked to all human societies. By saying the frontier is never somewhere else, MacCaig suggests that what is seen as 'uncivilised' is always with us and always a part of us. 'Somewhere else'- evil is around us and within us, we cannot get away from it.

Word Choice- 'stockade' is a constructed barrier, designed to protect. 'Midnight' he repeats this reference to metaphorical danger and distress that it can bring- symbolic of evil. MacCaig is pessimistic that evil cannot be prevented and kept away from human society. Darkness will always be around.

Themes

- Like *Basking Shark*, MacCaig explores the theme of the human condition in *Hotel Room, 12th Floor*. Whereas New York may appear to be the centre of modern western civilisation with its skyscrapers and prosperity, MacCaig wonders just how civilised society actually is, and how far the country has come from its bloody past.
- *Hotel Room, 12th Floor* is a pessimistic poem that questions humanity's ability to defeat primitive impulses. MacCaig concludes the poem by suggesting that, despite our advances, humanity cannot completely eradicate the evil that has plagued societies for generations.

- MacCaig also explores the moral value of our materialistic society. It is possible he feels that our rush for progress has left some behind. MacCaig may be suggesting that a material obsessed society harms the poor the most.
- Like *Brooklyn Cop*, this poem explores the thin line between modern society and basic human instincts of violence and destruction, and the dangers of urban society.