



Higher Still Notes

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Higher English

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Visiting Hour

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Visiting Hour by Norman MacCaig

- 1 The hospital smell
- 2 combs my nostrils
- 3 as they go bobbing along
- 4 green and yellow corridors.

Sorry

Due to copyright restrictions, we are currently unable to reproduce this poem in full. Hopefully this excerpt, and the following notes, will inspire you to purchase a copy of MacCaig's works. His "Collected Poems" can be found on Amazon.co.uk

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0701160101>

You could also ask an English teacher, or a librarian, for help in finding a full copy of the poem.

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- 32 black figure in her white cave
- 33 who clumsily rises
- 34 in the round swimming waves of a bell
- 35 and dizzily goes off, growing fainter,
- 36 not smaller, leaving behind only
- 37 books that will not be read
- 38 and fruitless fruits.

The Situation

The poet is visiting a dying friend or relative in hospital, and tries to avoid his emotions on his way to the ward. When he arrives, he is overcome by grief and anguish, and leaves the visit feeling it has been pointless.

Themes

- Facing Death (either the dying person, or the relative)
- Isolation surrounding death/emotion

Visting Hour – Analysis

Imagery

1. “... nostrils/ as they go bobbing along” – Synecdoche is used, since not just his nostrils are moving along, as the image would suggest. This emphasises the overpowering nature of “the hospital smell”, since it has blocked out his other senses.
2. “white cave of forgetfulness” – Metaphor, suggesting the white curtains or sheets are cave-like (impenetrable). This conveys the isolation of the woman, and the poet’s exclusion from her.
3. “withered hand/ trembles on its stalk” – Metaphor, suggesting the woman’s body is brittle and frail, by comparing it to a dying flower. The image suggests the woman’s body has deteriorated, but contains hope for regrowth (afterlife), as well as showing the love with which the poet looks on the woman.
4. “glass fang” – Metaphor, suggesting the intravenous drip is vampire-like. The horror in this image is shocking, which shows the poet’s grief and distress at seeing the woman’s condition, and being unable to help her.
5. “black figure in her white cave” – Metaphor, referring to the universal image of Death, “figure” also suggesting the woman’s blurred vision. This emphasises the isolation of the woman, as well as her impending and unavoidable death.
6. “the round swimming waves of a bell” – Synaesthesia, as a visual image describes a sound (signalling the end of the Visiting Hour?). “swimming” could suggest the poet’s dizziness (confusion) or tears. This is from the woman’s point of view, so further shows her isolation, and the poet’s isolation from her.

Structure

1. Free verse is used throughout, which reflects the poet's confusion and suits the narrative style of the text (there is an introduction to the character and setting, followed by development, climax, and an epilogue).
2. The verses deal with the poet's progression through the visit, from his entering the hospital and making his way to the ward, up to him leaving after the visit. Also, each verse reveals more of the poet's emotions.
3. The first line of the poem is effective in grabbing the reader's attention, by referring to a very vivid and distinctive sensory image; "The hospital smell" which the reader can associate with.
4. "What seems a corpse/ is trundled into a lift and vanishes/ heavenward" – Enjambment is used here to emphasise the last words of the lines, carefully chosen to suggest a finality in death; "corpse" containing very little connotation of life, and "vanishes" further stressing the poet's view that death is absolute. "heavenward" therefore seems incongruous, although this is simply an example of MacCaig trying to avoid the seriousness of the visit by creating whimsical images.
5. "I will not feel, I will not/ feel, until/ I have to." – Repetition is used to suggest the poet is chanting under his breath in order to avoid his emotions.
6. "here and up and down and there" – the unusual syntax (word order) is another example of the poet trying to lighten the mood, while also emphasising the number of nurses he sees. It suggests MacCaig is looking all around to find a distraction from his thoughts.
7. "so much pain, so/ many deaths .../ so many farewells" – Repetition of "so" stresses the frequency of the nurses' unpleasant dealings, which supports the high esteem, perhaps envy, with which he regards the ability of the nurses to cope.
8. "Ward 7." – The abruptness of this non-sentence jolts the reader, just as we can imagine it affected MacCaig; this effect is heightened by the caesura it causes. This is the turning point of the poem, as he has now reached his relative and must face his emotions.
9. "A withered hand/ trembles on its stalk" – Use of the pronoun diminishes the humanity of the woman, suggesting the poet does not feel the relative is truly alive; her body is merely an empty shell, while she is effectively dead. There are further examples in the rest of the verse, which serve to emphasise his point.
10. "books that will not be read/ and fruitless fruits" – Enjambment causes the last line to seem like a bitter addendum, which summarises the poet's despair at the hopelessness of his situation, and the isolation both he and his relative have suffered.

Word Choice

1. “combs my nostrils” – gives a sense of the pervasive power of the smell, and his feeling of being invaded; showing his discomfort.
2. “green and yellow corridors” – colours have connotations of sickness, which further stresses the poet’s discomfort in these surroundings.
3. “corpse” – holds little relation to life, suggesting the finality of death. The harshness of the sound; with a guttural “c” and plosive “p”, shows the poet’s distress and the painful emotions he is facing.
4. “heavenward” – incongruous with the poet’s beliefs, expressed in the previous lines; simply an example of MacCaig using humour to avoid his emotions.
5. “miraculously” – suggests MacCaig’s admiration for the nurses’ abilities, while showing his own worry about the way he will cope with the emotions.
6. “farewells” – the ending of the verse on this draws attention to the word, which underlines the purpose of his visit. Defined as “good wishes on parting”, the word is suggestive of the possibility the people will meet again, and that those departing are going on some kind of journey – this perhaps shows the poet’s desire to believe in an afterlife, especially at such troubling times.
7. “white cave” – holds connotations of isolation through confusion or sensory blankness (eg “white noise”)
8. “not guzzling but giving” – the horror of the “glass fang” image is continued in the word “guzzling”, but is reversed by the positive word, “giving”. The use of the guttural “g” sound in the alliteration conveys the harshness of the poet’s interpretation; he clearly sees the process as intrusive and pointless.
9. “clumsily ... dizzily” – shows the poet is overcome by his emotions, leaving him confused and dazed.
10. “fainter” – showing the woman’s vision is blurred; she can see him getting fainter with distance. Also a pun, since the poet may be so upset he is starting to feel faint.
11. “fruitless fruits” – the final words are an oxymoron: how can a fruit be fruitless? This captures the poet’s despair at the pointlessness of the woman’s death being prolonged, and his inability to help – bringing fruit has been “fruitless”, ie pointless.