

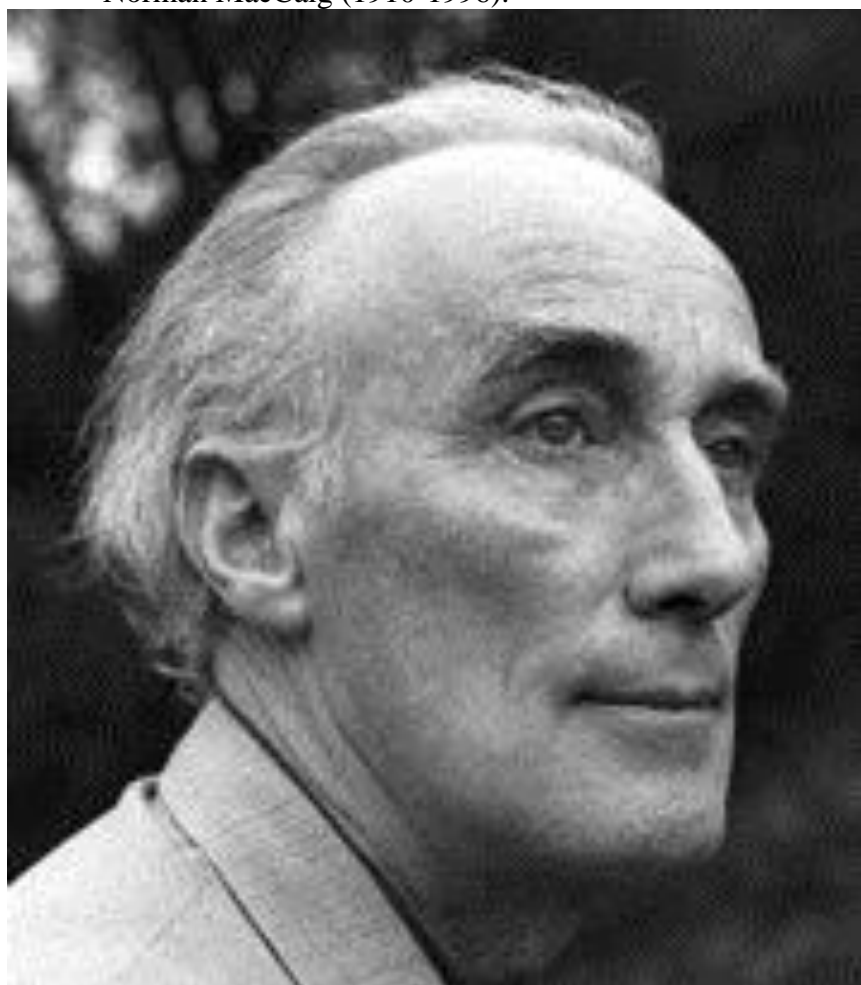
NAME

CLASS

Norman MacCaig

Poetry for National 5 and Higher Scottish Set Texts

- Norman MacCaig (1910-1996).



- Studied at Edinburgh's Royal High School and University of Edinburgh.
- Registered as a conscientious objector during WWII and spent time in prison for his beliefs.
- Worked as a primary teacher. In 1967 appointed as Fellow of Creative Writing at Edinburgh University
- In 1970 became Reader in Poetry at Stirling University.

Basking Shark

Assisi

Visiting Hour

Sounds of the Day

Memorial

Aunt Julia

Basking Shark

To stub an oar on a rock where none should be
To have it rise with a slounge out of the sea
is a thing that happened once, too often, to me.

But not too often, though enough, I count as gain
That I once met, on a sea tin-tacked with rain
that roomsized monster with a matchbox brain.

He displaced more than water, he shoggled me
Centuries back, this decadent townee
Shook on a branch of his family tree.

Swish up the dirt and, when it settles
a spring is all the clearer. I saw me in one fling,
emerging from the slime of everything.

So who's the monster? The thought made me grow pale
For twenty seconds as, sail after sail,
the tall fin slid away, and then the tail.

By Norman MacCaig

Questions on Basking Shark

Marks

1. Briefly show how the language of the opening line is used to introduce the poem.

2

“To stub an oar” – oar sets scene of a row boat.

“Stub” is an unusual term to use for an oar, you stub your toe. This suggests tripping over something, which highlights a theme of the poem, the idea that this is the shark’s territory, not the human who belongs on land.

“on a rock where non should be” – an air of mystery is introduced – no rocks suggests deep water away from the coast so there is a suggestion that the boat is in deep water away from the coast. The rock is the basking shark

2. The speaker has a mixture of feelings on encountering the shark. By close examination of lines 2-6, show what these feelings are and how they are revealed.

4

“to have it rise with a slounge out of the sea” – “rise” -this suggests an element of surprise, the poet is taken aback by the moving “rock”, which appeared out of nowhere.

Unusual sentence structure infinitive “to have” at the beginning suggests an unstoppable force.

Surprise is emphasised by the use of “slounge”, a made up word, to suggest the sound and scale of the creature rising from the depths. There is a sense of awe connoted in the term “slounge” which suggests power and majesty.

“a thing that happened once, too often, to me.” The poet reveals a humorous aside with “too often” and shows that the experience shocked him. Even once was too much. He has recreated the experience in a poem reminding us that it was an important moment on which he has reflected.

“roomsized monster” reinforces the sense of scale of the creature but this is contrasted with the tiny image of a matchbox sized brain. Here there is an element of fear, that this huge creature could damage him, perhaps even unwittingly rather than a planned attack due to the tiny brain.

3 .“That roomsized monster with a matchbox brain” (line 6).

Look in detail at the lines which follow and trace the development of the images of evolution which end in the question, “So who’s the monster?” (line 13)

4

“that roomsized monster with a matchbox brain.” – this creature is enormous and has evolved this way because it lives supported by water. Monster suggests an undefined danger, something lacking definition, underdeveloped but dangerous – and therefore low on the evolutionary scale.

“He displaced more than water, he shoggled me” – the poet was upset in his boat by the movement of the huge fish, but the shock and danger of the experience drew a link between the poet and basic survival skills – all the progress humans have made through evolution are useless against the might of this creature in its territory. The onomatopoeic “shoggled” reveals how his was disturbed physically but also mentally – his assumed arrogance as a superior being has been challenged.

“Centuries back, this decadent townee” – The poet is reduced to a powerless state, before the modern technologies that make him feel vastly superior (decadent townee) to the matchbox brain. The shock of being so close to the creature has given him a newfound sense of awe.

“Shook on a branch of his family tree.” – the accident of evolution, the branch of the family tree, means that humans consider themselves superior to other creatures according to the size of brains. WE all share the same evolutionary roots, we all climbed out of the slime.

Swish up the dirt and, when it settles – the dirt of creation

“a spring is all the clearer. I saw me in one fling,” - One fling of the creature’s tail would reduce the poet to nothing. His capacity for survival has been reduced .

“emerging from the slime of everything.” - he belongs back in the primeval mud because he lacks the evolutionary advantage to survive in deep water. He is intruding on the shark’s territory. In contrast, the shark is perfectly adapted to the deep water and sails away majestically in the final lines.

“So who's the monster? The thought made me grow pale” – he is the monster for being surprised that the creature is there – he is intruding, he doesn’t belong.

4. The personality of the speaker is clearly portrayed in the poem as a whole. By investigating any relevant word or phrase, show what you consider to be revealed. 2

“decadent townee” – connotations of arrogance and affluence. He has everything he needs, yet by referring to himself as decadent he is putting himself down – self deprecating and this is a positive aspect to the speaker’s personality suggesting a reflective nature. “Townee” shows he considers himself as urban and out of place in the sea. This contributes to the idea that he has misjudged the shark and he is the monster.

“made me grow pale” – he is reflective and responds physically to his misjudgement. This allows us to sympathise because he corrects his prejudice.

5. With close textual reference, show how the natural world is explored in the language and / or ideas of this poem and one other MacCaig poem which you have studied.

Assisi

The dwarf with his hands on backwards
sat, slumped like a half-filled sack
on tiny twisted legs from which
sawdust might run,
outside the three tiers of churches built
in honour of St Francis, brother
of the poor, talker with birds, over whom
he had the advantage
of not being dead yet.

A priest explained
how clever it was of Giotto
to make his frescoes tell stories
that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness
of God and the suffering
of His Son. I understood
the explanation and
the cleverness.

A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,
fluttered after him as he scattered
the grain of the Word. It was they who had passed
the ruined temple outside, whose eyes
wept pus, whose back was higher
than his head, whose lopsided mouth
said Grazie in a voice as sweet
as a child's when she speaks to her mother
or a bird's when it spoke
to St Francis.

1. In the opening stanza, MacCaig describes the beggar in some detail.

(a) Show how two of the examples of the poet's language in stanza one help the reader to feel sympathy for the beggar.

4

“hands on backwards” – simplistic, child-like explanation of his deformity.

“slumped like a half-filled sack” – connotations of despair – half filled – unable to prop himself up – doll like – the filling/ sawdust spilling out.

“tiny twisted legs” – alliteration draws attention to the fragility and doll-like description which is continued with the idea of sawdust leaking.

“had the advantage of not being dead yet.” – use of irony to show the only thing going for the beggar is that he is alive. (Litotes – understatement for comic effect?)

(b) How does the description of the beggar introduce the main concerns or ideas of the poem?

2

Main ideas are the contrast between rich and poor, the hypocrisy of religion,

Description of the dwarf is shocking, someone in need of Christian charity. He is slumped on the threshold of a beautiful church, yet he has nothing. St Francis “brother of the poor” gave up all his possessions. The Church is dedicated to St Francis, yet the dwarf is left outside. He is described as an oddity, unable to get inside or benefit from the spiritual guidance or the charity that should be offered to him. This shows the hypocrisy of religion clearly. The beggar is someone who St Francis would have helped.

The church is beautifully decorated, and the priest explains how the beautiful artwork tells stories that reveal the bible to poor people who cannot read. This includes “the suffering of His son” There is no hint of irony that a real person is suffering on the church steps. The description of the dwarf focuses on the physical imperfections - he is ugly. This contrasts greatly with the beauty of the church. It could be argued that the priest ignoring the beggar demonstrates ugliness of the human spirit and a lack of charity that conflicts directly with the charity of the patron saint of his church – St Francis.

The tourists reveal a superficial interest in the artwork failing to truly understand the significance of the work. – help those who are suffering/in pain/less fortunate. They rush past a real person in need after listening to a priest describe how these pictures helped illiterate people understand their religion. Buckets of irony. The poet is criticising the visitors who “appreciate” churches but do not take the opportunity to act charitably and give the dwarf some money to ease his discomfort. The dwarf is described as “a ruined temple” to emphasise this point.

2. Show how any two examples of the poet's use of language in stanza two or stanza three effectively contribute to the main ideas or concerns of the poem.

4

The poet is criticising the visitors who “appreciate” churches but do not take the opportunity to act charitably and give the dwarf some money to ease his discomfort. The dwarf is described as “a ruined temple” to emphasise this point.

“eyes wept pus” – repulsive image demonstrating the poet’s anger at this hypocrisy.

“said grazie in a voice as sweet as a child’s” – voice of a child is sweet and innocent - contrasts the inner beauty of the dwarf with his exterior and could allude to the inner ugliness of the priest contrasted with the beauty of the church.

“how clever it was of Giotto” – priest’s attitude is condescending.

“that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness

of God and the suffering

of His Son.” - priest and tourists do not understand the picture of real suffering presented by the dwarf.

“I understood

the explanation and

the cleverness.” – comment of the character in the poem which reveals his sense of irony. By emphasising that it is easy to understand the power of the church paintings, he highlights the lack of understanding of the beggar’s plight.

“ A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,

fluttered after him “ – tourists have their simple needs satisfied with a superficial tour. They do not connect their art appreciation with the message of Christian charity contained in the paintings.

“Clucked” – suggests hens, chickens, birds with tiny brains.

“he scattered

the grain of the Word” – allusion to a parable (story) told in bible. Priest is sprinkling some religious truths, but there is a hint that his “word” is unlikely to grow and thrive.

3. How effective do you find any aspect of the final stanza as a conclusion to the poem?

Your answer might deal with ideas and / or language.

2

“It was they who had passed

the ruined temple outside,” – (language and ideas) -powerful image reminding us of the criticism of the priest and the tourists. The metaphor “ruined temple” alludes to the Christian belief that God is present in everyone. The dwarf is damaged externally but still a place to be revered. The tourists have bypassed him, the temple as a place deserving of their observance, their outrage, their charity.

Dwarf objectified by the physical description of his flaws. Developing the metaphor “ruined temple”

“said Grazie in a voice as sweet

as a child's when she speaks to her mother

or a bird's when it spoke

to St Francis.” – Two similes highlight the beauty and purity of the dwarf. The sound of his voice is as innocent as a child’s or like a bird talking to the Saint the church is named after. Neither the mother nor

St Francis would ignore the plight of the creature. This conclusion draws attention once more to the hypocrisy of the priest and of religion.

4. With close textual reference, show how the ideas and / or language of this poem are similar

OR different to other poems by MacCaig which you have read.

Visiting Hour

The hospital smell
combs my nostrils
as they go bobbing along
green and yellow corridors.

What seems a corpse
is trundled into an lift and vanishes
heavenward.

I will not feel I will not
Feel, until
I have to.

Nurses walk lightly, swiftly,
here and up and down and there,
their slender waists miraculously
carrying their burden
of so much pain, so
many deaths their eyes
still clear after
so many farewells.

Ward 7. She lies
in a white cave of forgetfulness.
A withered hand
trembles on its stalk. Eyes move
behind eyelids too heavy
to raise. Into an arm wasted
of colour a glass fang is fixed,
not guzzling but giving.

And between her and me
distance shrinks till there is none left
but the distance of pain that neither she nor I
can cross

She smiles a little at this
black figure in her white cave
who clumsily rises
in the round swimming waves of a bell
and dizzily goes off, growing fainter,
not smaller, leaving behind only
books that will not be read
and fruitless fruits

Norman MacCaig

Questions on 'Visiting Hour.'

1. Stanza one establishes the unease that the poet feels in relation to his surroundings.

a) Identify and comment on one technique used to show this unease. 2

hospital smell – we associate disinfectant with anxiety of visiting people who are sick in hospital

synecdoche – separating himself from his nostrils “as they go bobbing along” almost humorous image to make himself feel better. Coping mechanism.

b) How is this sense of unease developed in stanzas two and three? 4

Comparison between a patient and a corpse makes us realise he is thinking about death

“vanishes heavenward” extends image with thoughts of an after life

“I will not feel” – repetition poet tries to convince himself not to think about death.

Faltering rhythm of third stanza is reminiscent of his faltering footsteps as he approaches the ward.

2. The second half of the poem focuses on the isolation of the patient and the barrier between the sick and the rest of us .By close examination show how the techniques used develop this idea. 4

White Cave of forgetfulness – metaphor showing she is isolated – perhaps physically by curtain around bed, but also because of illness.

“eyelids too heavy to raise” – can't see visitor so isolated – too exhausted to open eyes.

“distance of pain” – separated by pain that he cannot truly appreciate until in that situation

3. In verse five there are four main images which all indicate the woman's frailty

and the visitor's inability to do anything. Identify two of these and comment on their effect. 2

withered hand – trembles on stalk – fragility of metaphor reminded that a flower is delicate and does not last

eyelids too heavy – we don't even think about opening eyelids, yet this has become an effort

arm wasted of colour - she is fading away

Glass fang – metaphor – imagine a parasite or a vampire feeding but she is so ill the fang cannot take but is sustaining life.

4. With close textual reference, show how the ideas and/or language of this poem are similar or different to another poem by MacCaig which you have read. 8

Sounds of the Day

When a clatter came,

It was horses crossing the ford.

When the air creaked, it was

A lapwing seeing us off the premises

Of its private marsh. A snuffling puff

Ten yards from the boat was the tide blocking,

Unblocking a hole in a rock.

When the black drums rolled, it was water

Falling sixty feet into itself.

When the door

Scraped shut, it was the end

Of all the sounds there are.

You left me

Beside the quietest fire in the world.

I thought I was hurt in my pride only,

Forgetting that,

When you plunge your hand in freezing water,

You feel

A bangle of ice around your wrist

Before the whole hand goes numb.

Norman MacCaig

Questions on 'Sounds of the Day.'

1. In the opening stanza, MacCaig describes the sounds that can be heard.

a) Show how two examples of the poet's language in stanza one help the reader to hear these sounds.

4 Marks

Clatter came - alliteration - imitates sound of horses hooves evocative of country side – loud sound – disturbance – warning of a dramatic incident?

Negative connotations – warning cry to scare off intruders – sense of foreboding

Block is a harsh sound also repeated with creates sense of foreboding for later in the poem

Rolled – rolling of the “r” sounds like roar of a water fall – danger of water, stepping close to the edge

b) Show how the language used in stanza one creates an impression of nature.

2 marks

Air creaked – call of lapwing – tiny sound that you would only notice in peaceful place. Countryside

Snuffling puff – repetition of uff (assonance) draws attention to sound. Sounds like a tiny creature – only a sound you would notice if you were still and quiet.

References to horses, fords, seaside, waterfalls, marsh land and peaceful place where you can hear birdsong, water, movement

2. Show how any two examples of the poet's language in the remaining stanzas effectively contribute to the main ideas or concerns of the poem.

4 marks

“When the door

Scraped shut” – sense of loss/finality, Closing off the outside – an ending. No more sounds. Metaphor for loss loss of joy of nature, outside

“quietest fire” – metaphor for passion? Passion has gone, relationship over or energy gone. Contrast in the image you expect a fire to crackle as it consumes fuel.

“bangle of ice” – loss of feeling pain before the numbness sets in.

3. Show how the language used in the poem creates a contrast in atmosphere.

2 marks

“the end of all the sounds” – silence contrasts with the noise outside - contrast from outside to inside

“You left me” – line on its own – isolation Change from third person to first person,

“Plunge your hand” – move from listening to feeling – then the image of icy water describes a loss of feeling – numbness.

4. With close textual reference, show how the ideas and / or language of this poem are similar OR different to other poems by MacCaig which you have read.

8 marks

Memorial

Everywhere she dies. Everywhere I go she dies.

No sunrise, no city square, no lurking beautiful mountain
but has her death in it.

The silence of her dying sounds through
the carousel of language. It's a web
on which laughter stitches itself. How can my hand
clasp another's when between them
is that thick death, that intolerable distance?

She grieves for my grief. Dying, she tells me
that bird dives from the sun, that fish
leaps into it. No crocus is carved more gently
than the way her dying
shapes my mind. – But I hear, too,
the other words,
black words that make the sound
of soundlessness, that name the nowhere
she is continuously going into.

Ever since she died
she can't stop dying. She makes me
her elegy. I am a walking masterpiece,
a true fiction
of the ugliness of death.
I am her sad music.

Norman MacCaig

Questions on “Memorial”

1. In the opening stanza, the poet establishes the main concerns of the poem.

a) Identify the mood he creates in this stanza, and explain why this is the

case. 2

The mood is lamenting her death / sadness– “Everywhere she dies” – surrounded by constant reminders

“No sunrise, no city square” beautiful images, traditionally poetic remind him of death.

b) Show how two examples of the poet’s imagery in this stanza help the

reader to understand the strength of his feelings. 4

“carousel of language” – metaphor -constant reminders of death going round and round in his head. Reminder of how we may refer to death lightly but when it is close to us we notice

“It’s a web” – metaphor that her death is threaded through everything.

2. In the second stanza, identify two examples of the poet’s language which

contribute to the main ideas of the poem. 4

“grieves for my grief” – alliteration draws attention to lines. She is dealing with death but because she loves him so much she sees him suffering. He won’t be distracted from grief by the physical pain or absence of death

Bird dives from the sun – metaphor – reference to nature attempt at understanding – his plunge into grief and sorrow – Greek Myth – believed he was immortal but too proud and died. She is human and will die

Fish leaping – metaphor ref to nature – her escape from pain and suffering

3. How effectively does the language of the final stanza conclude the poem?

Choose one example. 2

Walking masterpiece – he has immortalised her in death so her memory will remain

Elegy – song or poem that lament (mourns /cries), praises and comes to term with death of someone

4. With close textual reference, show how the ideas and/or language of this

poem are similar OR different to another poem or poems by MacCaig

which you have studied. 8

Aunt Julia

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic

very loud and very fast.

I could not answer her —

I could not understand her.

She wore men's boots

when she wore any.

— I can see her strong foot,

stained with peat,

paddling with the treadle of the spinningwheel

while her right hand drew yarn

marvellously out of the air.

Hers was the only house

where I've lain at night

in a box bed, listening to

crickets being friendly.

She was buckets

and water flouncing into them.

She was winds pouring wetly

round house-ends.

She was brown eggs, black skirts

and a keeper of threepennybits

in a teapot.

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic

very loud and very fast.

By the time I had learned

a little, she lay

silenced in the absolute black

of a sandy grave

at Luskentyre.

But I hear her still, welcoming me

with a seagull's voice

across a hundred yards

of peatscapes and lazybeds

and getting angry, getting angry

with so many questions

unanswered..

Norman MacCaig

Questions on Aunt Julia

1. Many of the main ideas or concerns of the poem are established in the first two stanzas.

a) Identify TWO of these main ideas or concerns from the first two stanzas. 2

1. **Lack of communication** – loss of tradition. Gaelic spoken in Highlands and Islands but fell out of favour. As a child the poet could not understand, as an adult he regrets that he could not understand. He has tried to learn, but too late.

“By the time I had learned
a little, she lay silenced”

2. **Survival** – living in harsh conditions/ no modern facilities

“— I can see her strong foot,

stained with peat,” – Highland folk when strong, capable and independent. Poor – no shoes. No vanity – wore men’s shoes

3. **Traditions** – creativity of the people / loss of tradition due to industrialisation

b) Choose one of the ideas you have identified. Show how TWO examples

of the poet’s language in these stanzas help you to understand his meaning. 2

“Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic

very loud and very fast.” – Short statement is clear and concise. This contrasts with the idea that he cannot understand – and perhaps suggests that he feels he ought to. Character suggests that speed of

speaking adds to his sense of confusion. He needs time to interpret the words. He is overwhelmed by the sound – it is loud. Sometimes we speak loudly when people do not understand. This does not help understanding.

“I could not answer her —

I could not understand her.” His frustration at his inability to communicate. He could not reply to her questions, nor could he understand what she said. Parallel sentence structure emphasises how little they could communicate. The effect of the repetition adds to the sense of frustration.

“I can see her strong foot ,

Stained with peat,” – use of sibilants to suggest her bare feet squelching in the mud. Staining on her feet contrasts with the idea of a lost tradition. People rarely walk bare foot in peat. Tough existence – survival.

“men’s boots” – tougher, better made, not delicate. Purposeful and not for fashion. Demonstrates strength of character, determination to survive. No time for femininity or adornment. Strong work ethic.

“paddling with the treadle of the spinning wheel” – unusually long line. Rhythm of the line imitates the rhythm of working at a spinning wheel and operating the foot peddle or treadle. He is recreating his memory through his words and string up the traditional image as a work of art in his poem. (Visiting Hour and Memorial recreate) People rarely work on spinning wheels. Something that belongs in the past, traditional crafts and lost with modern industry.

“while her right hand drew yarn

marvellously out of the air.” – traditions – spinning – many of these skills have been lost or replaced by machines / foreign manufacture. Traditional hand crafted items are beautiful, rare and expensive.

“marvellously” – connotes his sense of wonder and awe at this almost magical process.

2. Show how the poet’s use of language in stanzas three and four effectively

contributes to your understanding of his Aunt’s personality or situation.

4

“in a box-bed, listening to

crickets being friendly” – use of enjambment last word is “to” which makes you linger and almost listen out for the sound. Crickets – small, country sound, aware of the peaceful nature of the setting. (Sounds of the day) Box-bed is a traditional bed. Shuts out the drafts, cosy and built in.

“She was buckets

and water flouncing into them.” Metaphor – to emphasis strength and how often he saw her carrying water. Utility we take for granted but she drew water from a pump or perhaps even a burn or well.

“Flouncing – onomatopaeic – gives the impression of the water moving and bouncing. Overflowing out of the buckets as it is carried. Sense of rhythm of Aunt Julia’s movement as she swings the buckets to help carry the weight. -Strength

“She was winds pouring wetly

Round house ends” – Metaphor – describing sense of movement - perhaps carrying water. Also sense of setting and changeable Highland climate - rain. Survival, traditions and living the simple Highland crofting lifestyle.

“She was brown eggs, black skirts

and a keeper of threepenny bits

In a teapot” – thrift, saving change. Change in teapot creates a memory/ scene – vivid. Money is respected, looked after and saved. Teapot - small sums of money, careful nature, thrifty, making the most of what she has. Brown eggs – collecting food from her livestock – traditional countryside living. Crofting – living to survive rather than the attitudes today of expansion and profit driven farming businesses.

Black skirts – long, traditional crofting clothes. Respecting of traditions – women wearing skirts

3. How effective do you find the final stanza as a conclusion to the poem?

Your answer should deal with the poet’s ideas and language.

4

Ideas – language repetition of opening lines takes you back to the beginning. He was drawn into her world and regrets his lack of understanding, limited by his inability to speak the traditional Highland Gaelic. Wishes he had understood more about her and her traditional lifestyle. She was a powerful presence in his childhood.

“By the time I had learned a little, she lay

Silenced in the absolute black” – alliteration draws attention to her lying in the ground, enjambment makes us linger on “lay” the final word of the line. We also focus on the “silenced” beginning the next line emphasising the silence of death, the absence he feels now she has died and perhaps contrasting with the “very loud” of her spoken Gaelic and the powerful sense of her presence.

Seagull’s voice – harsh, incomprehensible and loud – like Aunt Julia – effective metaphor.

“across a hundred yards

of peatscrapes and lazybeds

and getting angry, getting angry” – distance between them emphasised by language and loss of tradition. (Common idea to distance between living and dying in Visiting Hour and Memorial)

Angry repeated – character’s anger for missing and opportunity. In youth he did not respect these Highland traditions in the same way, too young to recognise the importance. Now he is perhaps storing and recording his memories of these traditions to pass on to future generations.

4. With close textual reference, show how the ideas and/or language of this poem are similar OR different to another poem or poems by MacCaig which you have read.

8

Finality of death, loss of relationships – common with several MacCaig poems

Traditions and loss of traditions – Basking Shark

Inability to communicate – Visiting Hour

Techniques connect all poems

Nature imagery – connect all poems

Unanswered questions – is this common to all his poems?