

SCOTTISH SET TEXT GUIDE

National 5 and
Higher English

Poetry of Norman MacCaig

- ▶ Understand, analyse and evaluate the poetry of Norman MacCaig
- ▶ Examine and compare the themes and techniques in the poems
- ▶ Pick up grade-boosting tips for the Critical Reading paper

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Getting the most from this guide

This guide has been written to help you study the poems of Norman MacCaig by developing your knowledge and skills in analysis to enable you to achieve your best in your exam. This guide has been written specifically with the Scottish exam system in mind, so it is all relevant to your study needs. MacCaig's poetry features in both the SQA English National 5 and Higher Critical Reading exams. Whichever exam you are sitting, this guide will provide vital help and support. It will also enable you to gain a richer understanding of the poems, so that you can enjoy them even more.

The text used in preparing these materials is *The Poems of Norman MacCaig*, edited by Ewen MacCaig (Polygon 2005, ISBN 978-1-84697-136-5). The line numbers used throughout this guide correspond to those in this text.

What is in this guide?

- a detailed review of each poem, focusing on understanding and analysis
- a section which draws together the key themes and techniques shared by the poems
- advice on how to approach the Scottish textual analysis questions, including the important final question
- advice on how to plan and write your critical essay
- key quotations and specific questions to help you direct your thinking

Watch out for the following features used throughout this guide, which will help you focus your understanding of the poems:

Glossary

This box will highlight and define key words, for example techniques used by MacCaig.

Target your thinking

This feature appears at the start of every chapter. It will help you focus on key ideas which will be important in the chapter.

Exam tip

Top tips to help you maximise your chances of success in the exam.

Key quotations

The key quotations will help you focus on important aspects of the text.

Build critical skills

You will see this feature at various points in each chapter. The questions in this box will encourage you to think deeply, and to analyse and explore the texts more fully.

REVIEW YOUR LEARNING

This feature appears at the end of each chapter. It will help you reinforce your learning by reminding you of key elements of the text and/or how to approach the exam.

1 Introduction



Studying the poems

While using this guide you may find it useful to dip into sections, and poems, as and when you need them, rather than reading it from start to finish. For example, Chapter 2: Context can be read before you read the poems themselves, since it offers information about the poet alongside an explanation of the cultural, literary and historical background to the collected works. In Chapter 2: Context you will find information about the aspects of MacCaig's life and times that influenced his writing, the particular places and people that inspired his work, and the style that made his poetry so unique.

In Chapter 3: Study and revision, each of the six poems has an analysis section dedicated to it. Each of these has a detailed line-by-line analysis that focuses on how the poet has employed different literary techniques in order to develop the central ideas or themes of the poem. You will notice that the poems themselves have not been included as part of this study guide. This is because you will have your own copies. The individual commentaries are designed to be read alongside the poems to help deepen your understanding and to help you develop your own analysis skills.

How to read and understand a poem

The analysis in this guide is not intended to be comprehensive and instead offers examples of some of the more widely taught interpretations – poetry should first and foremost be enjoyed and understood holistically. You should begin by reading the poem several times before questioning how the poem has made you feel and what issues it has made you consider further. Only once you have established this should you break down the poem to unlock the secrets of how the poet made you feel this way. Here are a few questions you should ask yourself:

- What is the poem about?
- What literary and poetic techniques have been used?
- What effect do these techniques have?

What is the poem about?

This is about more than just identifying what is happening in the poem, although this is an excellent starting point. Ask yourself what the universal ideas or concerns are that are being explored, i.e. what are the

poem's themes? This can be a difficult process and may involve reading the poem several times. Poetry, by its nature, is much more dense than other forms of writing and so there is a lot more to unpack and discover, which is why it sometimes needs a little work to unlock the meaning.

Themes to look out for in MacCaig's work include:

- death and loss
- humanity's relationship with the natural world
- violence and suffering
- isolation

Literary and poetic techniques used

The poetic devices to look out for include:

- imagery: metaphor, simile and personification
- word choice
- sound effects: onomatopoeia and assonance
- rhythm and rhyme
- enjambment and sentence structure
- contrast

There are many other techniques discussed in this guide. You will need to read the poem carefully to see what other techniques have been used. There is a glossary of literary terms at the end of the guide to help you understand the function of the different techniques.

Preparing for your exam

Introducing the Critical Reading paper

Whether you are sitting National 5 or Higher English, your Critical Reading exam will follow the same format. It is worth 40 marks (40% of your overall mark) and is made up of two sections:

- **Section 1: Scottish text:** also known as *Scottish textual analysis* or *set text*. This is marked out of 20 and is worth 20% of your total mark.
- **Section 2: Critical essay:** this is also marked out of 20 and is worth 20% of your total mark.

Section 1: Scottish text

For this section of the exam, you will study one Scottish text or writer from the SQA list. The poetry of Norman MacCaig is on the list for both National 5 and Higher levels and covers six poems: 'Hotel Room, 12th Floor', 'Brooklyn Cop', 'Basking Shark', 'Visiting Hour', 'Assisi' and 'Aunt Julia'.

Exam tip

You have 1 hour 30 mins total to complete the English Critical Reading paper:

- approximately 45 minutes to complete Section 1: Scottish text
- another 45 minutes to complete your answers for Section 2: Critical essay

One of these six poems is chosen every year to be included in the exam. In Section 1, there are a number of shorter questions on the chosen exam poem. There is also a longer final question which offers you the chance to show your wider knowledge of MacCaig's poems by referring to one or more of the other five poems. In National 5, there are a total of 12 marks for the chosen poem and 8 marks for the final question. In Higher, the division is 10 and 10.

What can you expect in the Scottish text section?

The shorter questions will ask you to focus closely on specific lines of the poem and to demonstrate your knowledge and skills in analysis by selecting examples of language or other poetic techniques and commenting on them. The final question will ask you something about the chosen poem and other(s) – it is likely to concentrate on an aspect of content such as theme or characters in the poems, or on a technique such as use of imagery or contrast. You should spend 45 minutes in total completing all of Section 1.

There will be more details on how to tackle these questions in Chapter 4.1 of this guide.

Section 2: Critical essay

The critical essay paper is divided into genre sections – MacCaig falls into the poetry genre. For each genre, the National 5 will have two essay questions, and the Higher will have three essay questions.

What can you expect in the critical essay section?

You should answer **one** question. Remember, you can choose from the poetry genre only if you have answered on a different genre in Section 1: Scottish texts. If you choose to answer on MacCaig for your essay, you should pick one of the two or three poetry questions. You will have approximately 45 minutes to write your essay.

There will be more information on how to plan and write your essay in Chapter 4.2.

Exam tip

You must not deal with the same genre in both sections of the exam.

- If you answer questions in Section 1 on the work of MacCaig, you may not write an essay on poetry in Section 2.
- If you are planning on writing an essay on one of MacCaig's poems, then you must select questions on a work of drama or prose in Section 1.



2 Context

Target your thinking

- What is meant by context?
- How did the key moments in MacCaig's life influence his work?
- What do you know about the places and people that inspired MacCaig's poetry?
- What is unique about his style of verse?

What is context?

Knowledge of context will help you understand and appreciate the poetry of MacCaig, but what exactly *is* context?

Context is the time, place, environment and surrounding events. Understanding the context of MacCaig's life and how it may have affected the poet when he produced his work is crucial. It also refers to the way that MacCaig's personal experiences and life may have influenced his poetry. While context is not specifically assessed in the National 5 or Higher exams, knowing about these things can help give us an insight into the writer's intentions and reasons for writing. Being aware of these factors can also influence the way in which we interpret the poems, their themes and their messages. MacCaig was heavily influenced by the people and the landscapes of Scotland but also wrote about New York and Italy in the 1960s. Understanding a little more about the poet, the time period in which he was writing and the people and places that inspired him will increase our background knowledge and make our study of the text more meaningful.

Norman MacCaig's life and work (1910–1996)

Norman MacCaig was born in Edinburgh in 1910. Although he spent most of his life in Scotland's capital, his **Gaelic** ancestry had a big influence on the poet and his work. MacCaig's mother was from the island of Scalpay, Harris, off the west coast of Scotland. As a boy, MacCaig would often visit his mother's family on the islands. These childhood holidays triggered a lifelong love affair with the landscape and the people of the highlands and islands and each year MacCaig would spend his summer holidays in Assynt, on the north-west coast of Scotland. In his poems, MacCaig describes this dual heritage as like being 'two men at once', 'two places I belong to as though I was born / in both of them'.

Gaelic: this refers to Scotland's indigenous language but can also be used to describe Gaelic culture – dance, history, music and traditions. Most of modern Scotland was once Gaelic-speaking, however just over 1% of people living in Scotland today speak Gaelic. The Outer Hebrides, where MacCaig's mother was from, is where the highest percentage of Gaelic speakers still live.



▲ Assynt in the north-west of Scotland looking towards Suilven and Canisp

MacCaig went to school at the Royal High School in Edinburgh, where he had his first taste of writing poetry. When asked by his teacher to submit a piece of creative writing, the young MacCaig decided to write a poem as he figured it would involve less effort than completing a full creative story. Having submitted his poem he was pleasantly surprised that his teacher was very impressed with his work and from that point on MacCaig's desire to write poetry never dampened. After high school MacCaig read Classics at Edinburgh University and then trained to become a primary school teacher, later working at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Stirling.

During the Second World War (1939–1945) MacCaig, a **conscientious objector**, refused military service. He did not do this for spiritual or political reasons but as he put it, 'I just didn't want to shoot other people.' As a result of his views MacCaig was imprisoned and forced to do land work until the end of the war.

conscientious objector:

during the Second World War there were nearly 60,000 conscientious objectors. After a brief spell in prison most were put to work in clothing and food stores, on the land or helping the war effort without engaging directly in combat.

MacCaig's first two books of poetry, *Far Cry* (1943) and *The Inward Eye* (1946), were part of the New Apocalypse Movement, an experimental, surrealist style of writing which he later disowned as he turned instead to writing very precise, accessible poems based on his observations. His first two books of poetry were so confusing and contained so many poems that were impossible to understand, that when his friend finished reading them he asked MacCaig when he was going to publish the answers.

MacCaig wrote an immense number of poems – around 3,900 during his 45 years as a mature poet, of which just under 800 were published.



3 Study and revision

3.1 'Basking Shark'

Target your thinking

- How does the speaker feel about his encounter with the shark?
- How does our impression of the shark change throughout the poem?
- What effect does the use of rhyme have on this poem?
- What do you think the message of the poem is that MacCaig is wanting us to think more deeply about?

Overview of 'Basking Shark'

Knowledge and understanding

Of all the poems we are studying here 'Basking Shark' is the one that is most concerned with nature and the environment. The poem recounts the story of a lone individual, the **speaker** or **persona**, who unexpectedly comes across a huge basking shark while out rowing their boat. Naturally the speaker's first reaction is one of shock and fear, but the experience forces him to reflect and, in his mind, hurls him back to the beginnings of **evolution** to consider humankind's relationship to the enormous animal. On a deeper level he questions whether it is the shark or the speaker – here representing the entire human race – that is the real monster. The thought remains with the speaker as the shark majestically swims away.

Glossary

persona/speaker: a character created by a writer to 'speak' the words of their work, often used in poetry. The persona uses first-person narrative, but that does not mean that he/she is the same person as the writer (even if the work is partly autobiographical).

evolution (n) (**evolutionary** (adj)): the gradual change and development of living organisms from earlier forms during the history of the earth. This happens very slowly from generation to generation by such processes as natural selection, mutation and genetic drift.

Glossary

rhyme scheme:

the pattern of 'matching' sounds at the end of lines. It is used by writers to draw ideas together by emphasising the rhythm. This in turn helps to bring out the meaning. A rhyme scheme is a way of identifying rhyme: line 1 = a, line 2 = a (because line 1 and line 2 rhyme). If not, it is called b, and so on.

free verse: poetry that does not have rhyme or regular rhythm.

Form and structure

The structure of this poem is different from the other five that we are concerned with as it has a **rhyme scheme**. The poem consists of five stanzas, each with three lines. The poet uses rhyming triplets (aaabbb...) where each line is end-rhymed with the other two lines in the stanza. It's unusual for MacCaig to employ such a tight structure to his poetry – usually he uses **free verse** where he has more control over where to end each line. Here the tight rhythm and rhyme mirror the gentle rising and falling of the waves and of the rhythmic movement of the shark. This rhyme adds a light-hearted tone to the poem, only changing to a more fearful, serious tone in the final verse when the speaker asks, 'so who's the monster?'

WHAT IS A BASKING SHARK?

Basking sharks are one of the largest members of the shark family and can grow to 10 metres in length and weigh several tonnes. While they may look terrifying due to their size, they are harmless filter feeders and therefore pose no real danger to humans. These gentle giants appear in Scotland's coastal waters during spring and summer each year and would have been a common sight around the sea lochs of Assynt. Nevertheless, it would have been an unnerving experience for the persona in their small boat.

Stanza one

Knowledge and understanding

Interestingly the title is the only place where the poet specifically refers to the creature being a basking shark. In this stanza the speaker gets a nasty shock as he accidentally hits the shark with the oar of his rowing boat. The shark surfaces in front of the small rowing boat and the speaker reveals his alarm at the incident.

Analysis

Lines 1 and 2

The poem jumps straight into the action in stanza one, creating tension and confusion as the poet begins lines 1 and 2 with **infinitive clauses**, 'To stub...To have it'. The tension and mystery increase as he suggests

Key quotation

*To stub an oar on a rock
where none should be*
(Stanza 1, line 1)



the speaker has hit a rock 'where none should be'. This is disorientating and conveys the idea that things are out of place. This confusion is further heightened when the rock rises out of the sea. We learn that the speaker has disturbed a basking shark, which is compared to a rock. The word choice of 'stub' suggests that the contact has been sudden and unexpected and has shocked the speaker. The use of **metaphor** to compare the shark to a rock is an effective one as both are bulky and immovable. Comparing it to an inanimate object also highlights the speaker's prejudice towards the creature, suggesting it has no feelings or intelligence. MacCaig goes on to **coin the word** 'slounge', a combination of slouch and lounge to suggest the way the shark slowly surfaces beside the speaker. The long vowel sound in the word 'slounge' mirrors the shark displacing the water in a lazy and ponderous manner as it emerges from the sea. This slow, deliberate movement from the shark shows that it is in control within its own environment and that the speaker is the intruder.

Line 3

The final line of stanza one shows that the speaker can't quite define their experience as they refer to it as a 'thing' that happened to them. Naturally, the speaker's initial reaction is one of fear and the

Glossary

infinitive clause: a subordinate clause (a group of words with a subject and a verb) that starts with the infinitive 'to'.

metaphor (n) (**metaphorical** (adj)): comparing two things to highlight a similar trait. Unlike a simile, instead of using 'like' or 'as' we say that one thing actually is another.

coined word: the creation or use of a new word.

Glossary

parenthesis (n)
(**parenthetical**
(adj)): additional
information
included between
dashes, commas or
brackets.

Build critical skills

How does the
poet create a link
between stanza one
and stanza two?

Glossary

alliteration: the
repetition of a
sound throughout
a line or lines to
create a range of
impacts and to link
ideas together.

onomatopoeia: a
word that sounds
like the thing it's
describing. For
example, snap,
bang, pop, sizzle.

parenthetical aside '(too often)' implies that they do not want to repeat this experience as it was so disconcerting. Although they are clearly afraid, this injection of a humorous tone shows they were scared but are trying to make light of it now.

Stanza two

Knowledge and understanding

In stanza two, there is a change in the speaker's view as he concedes that, despite the initial fright he received, it was, on balance, a positive experience. What follows is the human's-eye view of the shark, describing both its size and relatively small brain. With great realism the poet also describes the weather conditions prevalent at the time.

Analysis

Line 1

The opening line of this stanza 'But not too often – though enough' is initially puzzling. It seems to contradict what the speaker has said in stanza one but shows they are continuing to evaluate and dwell on the experience. The word 'but' helps to exemplify the speaker's change in thinking. While he concedes that the encounter was not as terrifying as he first thought, the use of the dash indicates that he is in no rush to meet the shark again. The word choice of 'gain' shows that he recognises the encounter was worthwhile and shows his thoughtfulness after the event. The remainder of the poem unpacks the reasons why, on reflection, he comes to value this experience.

Line 2

The poet now describes the incident in more genial terms as he suggests the speaker 'met' the shark. This shows that the encounter is no less of a shock and the word carries a sense of reciprocity with it, showing that the human and the shark are greeting each other on equal terms. The image 'on a sea tin-tacked with rain' is a powerful one providing visual and aural imagery. First the metaphor – a tin tack is like a drawing pin, a flat, round object with a protruding spike in the middle of it. If you imagine a drawing pin lying upside down, with the spike pointing towards the sky, this is the same image as the raindrops striking the flat water. The force of the droplets hitting the water creates a ring-shaped ripple in the water as the droplet impacts the surface. This is also a good example of **alliteration** and **onomatopoeia** – the repetition of the 't' sound captures the staccato noise of water droplets hitting the calm surface of the sea loch.



4 Approaching the Critical Reading paper

4.1 Critical Reading Section 1: Scottish text

Introducing Critical Reading Section 1: Scottish text

Target your thinking

- How should I approach answering shorter questions in Section 1: Scottish text?
- Do I need to answer in sentences?
- Do I need to use quotations in my answers?
- How is the final question marked?
- What is 'commonality'?

This section of the guide gives you detailed information and advice on how to approach Section 1 of the Critical Reading question paper, Scottish text. There is a detailed breakdown of the type of shorter questions you can expect, as well as advice on how to score well in the final 8- or 10-mark question. The guide uses examples from SQA exam papers.

Remember, the Critical Reading paper has two sections. For Section 1: Scottish text, you must answer questions on the work of one Scottish writer from the set list. There are 20 marks available for this section.

Exam tip

Important! You must not deal with the *same* genre in both Section 1 and Section 2 of the Critical Reading paper.

- If you answer questions in Section 1 on the work of MacCaig, you **must not** write an essay on poetry in Section 2.
- If you are planning on writing an essay on one of MacCaig's poems, then you **must** select questions on a work of drama or prose in Section 1.

Exam tip

The full SQA marking instruction is not included here. Instead there is guidance and suggested answers with explanations. You can find the full marking instructions on the SQA website.

Exam tip

The Scottish text question is sometimes called different things – the *Scottish textual analysis* or *Scottish set text*.

Approaching Section 1: Scottish text

Answering the shorter questions in Scottish text

Shorter questions: general advice for National 5 and Higher levels

- Each year, one of the poems from the MacCaig list is chosen for the exam. Generally, you can expect the whole poem to appear.
- The shorter questions in Section 1: Scottish text are worth 12 marks at National 5 and 10 marks at Higher. That's a large chunk of the 40 marks available in Critical Reading. The questions are on the poem which is printed in the exam paper for you to read and work with – it is not a memory test.
- Each question directs you clearly to a segment of the poem, using line references. You must select your answers from the lines requested: any answers from outside those lines, no matter how skilful, will gain no marks.
- The questions 'lead' you through the poem/extract, starting at the opening and working chronologically through the lines. It makes sense to start at the first question and work your way through, before tackling the final 8- or 10-marker, as the shorter questions help you prepare for that final one.
- You do not need to answer in full sentences: bullet points are fine.
- Technical accuracy is something that should always be aimed for, especially in an English exam. However, remember that in the Scottish textual analysis, the marker is assessing your knowledge and understanding of the literature and your analytical skill. As long as they can understand what you have written, spelling and punctuation errors will not lose you marks. It is a test of reading, not writing.

Exam tip

Sentences or bullet points?

Writing in bullet points in the Scottish text part of the exam can help you to focus your ideas and to be clear about how many points you are making in an answer. It also saves time. It will make no difference at all to your mark.

The only section in the Critical Reading paper where you must write in correct sentences is the critical essay. You must be technique accurate enough to communicate your ideas clearly – or you will lose marks.