

Scottish Poetry Library

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BROOKLYN COP by Norman MacCaig

Getting In

Before you read the poem, think about these questions:

1. What do you think a Brooklyn cop would look like?
2. How do you think this person would behave?
3. What would be important to this person?

Meeting The Text

You are about to read a poem about a character. As you read, work out how well the character, as described in the poem, fits the ideas that you just considered.

Brooklyn Cop

*Built like a gorilla but less timid,
thick-fleshed, steak-coloured, with two
hieroglyphs in his face that mean
trouble, he walks the sidewalk and the
thin tissue over violence. This morning, 5
when he said, "See you, babe" to his wife,
he hoped it, he truly hoped it.
He is a gorilla
to whom "Hiya, honey" is no cliché.*

*Should the tissue tear, should he plunge through 10
into violence, what clubbings, what
gunshots between Phoebe's Whamburger
and Louie's Place.*

*Who would be him, gorilla with a nightstick,
whose home is a place 15
he might, this time, never get back to?*

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

Thinking Through

Now consider your first impressions of the poem, and the character, using those questions you saw before.

1. What does this person look like?
2. How does this person behave?
3. What is important to this person?
4. So, how well does the poem match your earlier assumptions?

Let's Get To Work

As we study this poem, we'll look especially at how MacCaig's techniques allow him to build up a picture of the cop, and how he uses that picture to explore ideas about human nature. We'll work through the poem step by step, with teaching and commentary. Throughout the work, **key techniques** will be picked out in **bold** and there will be short questions for you to answer.

The Title

MacCaig's life, and his poetry, were closely connected to two places, Edinburgh and the north-west of Scotland. The two poems we'll study here are unusual therefore because

these poems, both written in April 1966, are very obviously set somewhere very different.

MacCaig's **word choice** of "*Brooklyn*" tells us this immediately. We are far from home, which can be exciting but equally can be strange or uncomfortable. The **word choice** of "*Cop*", which is an **American slang** term, underlines this. The fact that he tells us specifically that the cop is from "*Brooklyn*", not just America or New York, suggests an area that, at the time the poem was written, had a tough reputation. It implies violence and threat. By using the **slang** word "*Cop*" rather than a more formal word like "*officer*" or "*policeman*", MacCaig is, of course, using an appropriate Americanism, but he may also be hinting that this character does not deserve our respect.

Overall, the **title** should work to bring to mind a particular stereotype, one we might know from films or television. Your answers to the **Getting In** questions that you worked on before you read the poem probably fitted that stereotype.

Stanza One

The first stanza gives us a picture of the cop that fits that stereotype. He comes across like a stock character, rather than an individual. The poem begins with a **simile**, "*Built like a gorilla*" which is also a **cliché**, an unoriginal phrase.

Q1 What does the **simile** tell us about the cop?

Q2 What effect does MacCaig get from using a **simile** that is also a **cliché**?

MacCaig gets some **humour** from this first line, as we don't tend to think of gorillas as "*timid*". But when we think about it more carefully, this apparently funny line again suggests violence.

Line 2 doesn't just tell us about the cop's build and appearance. The use of "*fleshed*" and "*steak*" suggests bodies are just meat.

Q3 What does this imply about how the cop treats people?

Line three contains a **metaphor**.

Q4 What is a "*hieroglyph*"?

Q5 What are the "*two hieroglyphs*" on the cop's face?

Most of us don't know how to read hieroglyphs, as this requires specialist knowledge. They are foreign symbols, and hard to understand, so MacCaig reads these for us, telling us what to think, that they "*mean trouble*".

Now we know what the cop looks like, we find out what he does as he pounds his beat.

Q6 What real thing does the cop walk?

Q7 What **metaphorical** idea does the cop walk?

The expression "*thin tissue*" tells us how little separates the cop from violence. Tissue tears incredibly easily; it's not something you can walk on. There is also a **contrast** here between the real, hard "*sidewalk*" and the fragile, **metaphorical** "*tissue*".

The poet uses another **cliché** in line 6.

Q 8 Quote the cliché.

This might imply that there's a lack of real human emotion or relationship here. But, MacCaig uses a couple of techniques in line 7 that challenge this, and that make the cop seem human and vulnerable.

Q9 Which example of **word choice** does this? How does it have this effect?

Q 10 Explain how **repetition** in this line also humanises the cop.

He's a different man when he's at home. We realise for the first time that he may be afraid of the violence around him, and that he knows he could die during his day's work.

But, just as we catch this glimpse, the earlier stereotype returns even more strongly.

Q 11 Which earlier simile has now become a **metaphor**?

Q 12 What is the effect of this?

And if, as line 9 says, “*“Hiya, honey” is no cliché*” to the cop, he again seems to lack real humanity, especially in his interactions with any women he meets during his day's work.

Stanza Two

So far, MacCaig has mostly given us a realistic picture. In this second half of the poem, he moves more into conjecture, into making assumptions about the cop's life and behaviour.

Q 13 Which **repeated** word in this stanza tells us we're being shown a hypothetical picture?

We return again to the **metaphor** of the “*tissue*” that is the only barrier between the cop and violence.

Q 14 Which **sound effect technique** does the poet use to draw our attention to how fragile this is?

We're asked to consider what could happen “*should he plunge through*” this barrier. The **word choice** of “*he*” suggests that it could easily be the cop himself who initiates the violence, and that other, perhaps innocent, people could get hurt.

Q15 What does the **word choice** of “*plunge*” suggest about the cop's violence?

The violent **word choice** of “*clubbings*” and “*gunshots*” again suggests that the cop would be to blame for this - after all, he is the one who goes out each day armed with a firearm and a “*nightstick*”.

MacCaig's **repetition** of “*what*” makes us notice how excessive and over the top this aggression is. The cop seems to attack without much thought or question. We could be

kind and think this is because he wants to get home safe to his “*babe*”, but perhaps he’s just a thug.

Interestingly, MacCaig’s **word choice** for the name of the fast food joint, “*Whamburger*”, suggests both speed and violence, telling us about the neighbourhood the cop patrols.

Try reading the stanza out loud. It’s one long sentence, but it’s **not properly grammatical**. To have it be good English, we’d need to insert a few words, making it say something like “. . . *what clubbings, what gunshots there would be between Phoebe’s Whamburger and Louie’s Place.*” The stanza does function, but it’s incomplete, like the cop who is able to do his job but seems to have some of his humanity missing.

Stanza Three

Again, this is a one-sentence stanza. It’s also a **rhetorical question**, which has an effect on us as we read it.

Q 16 What does this question make us feel?

The gorilla **metaphor** is used yet again to dehumanise the cop, and we are told the animal has “*a nightstick*”. Surely, suggests the poet, it can’t be a good idea to arm such a powerful brute? In Britain we’d call this weapon a “*truncheon*”. MacCaig’s **word choice** reminds us of the poem’s American setting but also tells us the cop can be out working in the dangerous dark, at a time when he’d rather be at home.

By putting “*this time*” in **parenthesis** in line 16, the poet emphasises the risks the cop faces - tonight could be the night when he never does get safely back home. So, once more, we feel at least a little sympathy for this potentially aggressive character, as he could be injured or die just for going out to work.

There’s a deeper idea here too: the cop might never get back “*home*” to any kind of true humanity, he might be too far lost in hostility and aggression.

Stanza Four

The poem ends with another **rhetorical question**. Try reading it out loud. It’s really hard to get your tongue around. As in stanza 2, its **grammar is impaired** and unclear. This makes us read it carefully as we try to work out what the writer means.

Q 17 What does MacCaig mean here? Put the stanza into your own words to show you understand it.

Though there have been times in the poem where we might sympathise with the cop, it doesn’t end that way. The final word is “*victims*”, which suggests the cop deliberately causes harm. Did you notice that the stanzas got shorter and shorter as the poem went on? This **last line** is also the shortest in the poem: it all narrows down to one point of focus, that the cop can be an attacker, which is quite a bleak conclusion.

The message of the poem

As the title makes clear, the poem is a portrait of one character. But, that character is nameless, and is identified by his job and location - we have seen already how this makes him a stereotype.

So, we might think MacCaig is using this poem to say that American cops can be brutal. That's true, of course, and you will be aware of news reports about acts of US police violence.

But, if we think that's the whole message, we are letting ourselves off the hook. The cop is a person, a human being, and we are people too. He's the only person in the whole poem, and he's **not specifically named**, which makes him universal: he can stand for any or all of us; he can represent all humanity. And, he lives in one the most advanced, most highly-developed, richest, and most successful countries in the world.

Q 18 What is MacCaig's message in this poem?

Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through the material about '*Brooklyn Cop*' you should know the poem, and its techniques, very well. Here's a revision task.

Take a large piece of paper. Mark it up into a grid like the one below. For every technique, fill in a quotation from the poem, and explain the effect it has on the reader. Some boxes have been filled in for you as examples.

Point - a technique	Evidence - quotation	Explanation of effect
title	<i>Brooklyn Cop</i>	Brings to mind a stereotype the reader knows from films and TV
word choice	<i>Brooklyn</i>	Gives us the American setting, and suggest a tough area: threat and violence <i>Continue yourself...</i>

You can carry on the rest of the table yourself. You'll need a whole sheet of paper, maybe two, as you need to add the following techniques:

Give **each** of these examples of word choice a separate row on your table: *cop, fleshed + steak, tissue, truly, he, plunge, clubbings + gunshots, Whamburger, nightstick, home, victims*

Deal separately with **four** different uses of repetition: *gorilla, hoped it, should, what*

Deal separately with **three** different metaphors: *hieroglyph, gorilla and tissue*

Deal separately with **two** different clichés

Deal separately with **two** different examples of incomplete grammar

Deal separately with **two** different examples of rhetorical questions

American slang

simile

humour

contrast

alliteration

parenthesis

not giving the cop a name

short last line