

# Scottish **Poetry** Library

VISITING HOUR by Norman MacCaig

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## Getting In

Before you read the poem, think about these questions:

1. Have you ever visited someone in hospital? What was that experience like?
2. Have you ever been an in-patient in hospital? What was it like when someone came to visit you?

## Meeting The Text

You are about to read the Norman MacCaig poem '*Visiting Hour*'. As you read it for the first time, work out the answers to these questions.

1. How does the speaker seem to feel about the hospital itself?
2. What can we work out about the person the speaker is visiting?

## **Visiting Hour**

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

*What seems a corpse  
is trundled into a lift and vanishes  
heavenward.* 5

*I will not feel, I will not  
feel, until  
I have to.* 10

*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.* 15

*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.* 20  
25  
30

*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.* 35

## Let's Get To Work

As we study this poem, we'll look especially at the how the speaker feels about, and copes with, making a hospital visit to someone who is very ill. We'll work through the poem step by step, with teaching and commentary. **Key techniques** will be picked out in **bold** and there will be short questions for you to answer.

### Stanza One

We are given a number of details in this short opening stanza:

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

That opening mention of the "*hospital smell*" is very **evocative** - if you have ever experienced that smell, you'll remember it and will know exactly what MacCaig means.

Q 1 What do hospitals smell of?

It's a very pervasive smell, one that gets into every part of the building.

Q 2 Which **tense** is MacCaig writing in?

Q 3 Which **person** is he writing in?

The use of these two techniques together creates a sense of **immediacy**, a feeling that the whole poem is happening now, and that we are experiencing it alongside the speaker. Of course the poet is not actually writing and crafting his work during an actual hospital visit, but we do get a sensation of the event and the speaker's emotions coming to us without any filter on them. It reads like a **stream of consciousness**, as if we have direct access to the speaker's thoughts and feelings.

The **word choice** of "*combs*" gives us a sense of how powerful the smell is - the speaker can feel it spiking his nose.

The writer uses a slightly odd point of view here. His nostrils almost seem to have a life and existence of their own:

*"as they go bobbing along  
green and yellow corridors."*

It's unusual to be so aware of the movements of just one tiny body part. What MacCaig is doing here is using the technique of **synecdoche**.

If you were to say the name of this technique out loud, it would sound like this: *sin - ECK - doh - kay*. It means using one part of something to represent the whole of it. For example, if someone says they've just bought themselves "*some really nice new*

*wheels*” when they mean a while sports car, that’s synecdoche. Stage crew in theatres are often referred to as “*hands*”, a synecdoche that refers to whole people who use their hands - a part of themselves - to do their work.

MacCaig here is using the nostrils to stand for the whole person. Perhaps he does this because he is trying to protect himself. By not mentioning his whole self, but only a part, he may be keeping himself back from a potentially sad or difficult experience.

The **word choice** of “*bobbing*” may be another example of this self-protection. It’s quite a gentle, light-hearted word. He may be trying to tell himself that visit won’t be too bad.

His description of the:

*“green and yellow corridors”*

plays on the connotations of those two colours. In a hospital context, “*green and yellow*” suggest bodily fluids, green bile (an acidic fluid our body produces to aid digestion) and yellow urine. These aren’t particularly nice associations; they’re fluids the hospital would want to quickly dispose of to avoid infection.

## Stanza Two

The speaker now notices something even more disturbing:

*“What seems a corpse  
is trundled into a lift and vanishes  
heavenward.”*

Q 4 What might the speaker notice that makes him think that he’s seen “*a corpse*”?

This **word choice** introduces a note of mortality - the idea that we all have to die in the end. It is, of course, true, that many hospital patients are treated and healed, but some will die there, and the speaker is now confronted with this fact.

The further **word choice** of “*trundled*” suggests the body being shoved around as if it was an awkward piece of furniture. That word focuses on the hospital trolley rather than on the person lying on it. It feels undignified and almost callous.

“*Vanishes*” feels very final. Death is irreversible. But, there is perhaps a tiny note of hope, as the speaker says that the corpse “*vanishes Heavenward.*” While this **word choice** may at least in part be a way of saying that the lift is heading up rather than down, the mention of “*Heaven*” also has connotations of some kind of spiritual existence after death.

### Stanza Three

The speaker now tells himself:

*“I will not feel, I will not  
feel, until  
I have to.”*

The use of **repetition** here makes him seem absolutely determined to keep himself under control. This might seem rather cold-hearted at first, but he may be worried that he is going to break down and become over-emotional. His determination not to feel could be self-protection. It could also be kinder than that: perhaps he wants to stay calm so as not to hurt or upset the person he has come to visit.

### Stanza Four

The speaker now notices the staff:

*“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.”*

The choice of two **adverbs**, words about how something is done, in line 11 suggests that the nurses are skilled at their work, as if it comes easily to them and they do their job efficiently. These **adverbs**, especially “*lightly*” also imply that there is something easy and carefree about the nurses, which is a welcome and more cheering note after the sadder second and third stanzas.

MacCaig then goes on and uses **prepositions**, words about movement and direction, telling us the nurses move:

*“here and up and down and there”*

The fact that he uses four **prepositions** so closely together makes it feel as if the nurses are constantly in motion everywhere, and this is further emphasised by the **repetition** of “*and*” between these words.

This energy seems all the more unexpected when we consider their “*slender waists*”. They look too fragile, too delicate, to cope with the work they do, which involves “*carrying a burden*”.

This “burden” is a **metaphor**. MacCaig doesn’t mean that the nurses lift heavy things around the hospital. The nurses’ burden is made of **abstracts**, qualities or feelings that we know are real, but which we cannot see or touch.

Q 5 Which three **abstract nouns** in lines 15 to 18 tell us about the burden the nurses carry?

Lines 15 to 18 contain three almost-but-not-quite **repetitions**.

Q 6 Make a list of these.

The fact that lines 15 to 18 run along beside each other in **parallel**, and are so similar in their wording, makes them feel very strong. This lets MacCaig emphasise the challenges, and the potential for pain and loss, in the nurses’ work.

The nurses deal with “*so many farewells*”. It’s a common experience for them to lose a patient. The speaker is facing up to just one coming farewell, and is finding this very hard to cope with. He is filled with admiration for the nurses, who, unlike him, have to say “*so many farewells*.”

The **placing** of that word “*farewells*” at the end of the line and the end of the stanza draws attention to it. It reminds us that “*farewells*” in this poem means the end of life, as it’s at the end of the stanza. It also suggests that the speaker knows that his visit will be a farewell, and that he won’t get another chance to see the person he has come to visit today.

We’re now almost half way through this poem, but the visit in the title hasn’t happened yet. MacCaig spends half the poem sort of limbering up, getting ready. This suggests that the speaker is trying to put off the pain of the coming encounter.

## Stanza Five

It’s now time to make the visit at last:

*“Ward 7. She lies  
in a white cave of forgetfulness.”*

The stanza opens with a sentence that is **short**, and that is also a **minor sentence**, a sentence that isn’t properly grammatical because it doesn’t have a verb in it. Writers often use **short sentences** or **minor sentences** to create impact and drama. That’s effective here as we have reached the turning point of the poem. The speaker must now, at last, confront his fears and make the visit.

Line 19 has a **caesura** in it, a deliberate pause created by the full stop that breaks up the two pairs of words on this line. You can almost feel the speaker pausing one last time at the door before he can make himself go through into the ward to visit the patient.

The person has come to visit lies:

*“in a white cave of forgetfulness.”*

Though we previously read about the colourful *“green and yellow corridors”* there is now no colour, just *“white”*. It’s as if the senses have been tuned out or turned off. The **word choice** of *“cave”* implies isolation, as if the patient’s illness has cut her off from the speaker.

It’s important to notice that we never get told in the poem who this patient is. Apart from knowing that *“she”* is clearly female, we know nothing else about her. We aren’t told what her relationship to MacCaig is, how old she is, or what kind of illness she has. We do know from this stanza that she is in pain, and we do know she’s experiencing *“forgetfulness”*. Perhaps this is an old woman, whose memory loss has been caused by dementia. Perhaps she is younger, but suffering from an agonising illness where the pain is so severe that it takes up all her mental energy and makes her forgetful. All we can know for sure is that she is now suffering both physically and mentally.

This illness is so severe that it has taken away some of her humanity:

*“A withered hand  
trembles on its stalk.”*

Q 7 What is the woman being compared to here?

Q 8 Which very small word has a particularly dehumanising effect?

The poet’s **word choice** of *“withered”* and *“trembles”* makes the woman sound incredibly fragile. This, combined with the dehumanising effect that we’ve just looked at, tells us that the woman is close to death - something about her is already not properly alive. That fragility is underlined when we see that she now cannot even muster the energy to open her eyes - she has *“eyelids too heavy/ to raise”*.

We see again that everything bright and vivid about her has gone:

*“Into an arm wasted  
of colour a glass fang is fixed,  
not guzzling but giving.”*

That **metaphor** of *“fang”*, coupled with the fact that the *“fang”* has been *“fixed”* into the woman’s arm, should make us think of a vampire. A vampire is something frightening. These creatures suck the lifeblood from their victims. This apparent vampire is different though, because it is:

*“not guzzling but giving”*

and the writer draws our attention to this unusual idea by his use of **alliteration** of the hard -g- sound.

The fang is trying to sustain life, rather than to drain it. The intrusion into the patient's body comes from a good motive, although it doesn't seem to actually be doing her any good.

The speaker now steps closer to the patient.

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

He is physically close to her, but he cannot get close in any emotional or relational sense. The **repetition** of “*distance*” in these lines emphasises how far apart the two people are. Whatever the relationship between them is or has been, however close they were, her illness and pain have utterly divided them.

### Stanza Six

So far everything in this poem has come from the point of view of the speaker who has come to visit the hospital. And, we've been told that the patient seems lost and cut off in a “*white cave*” - a place without memory or sensation.

MacCaig now steps into the patient's point of view, and gives us the last stanza of the poem from her perspective. To do this in the final stanza is a little surprising, as he's previously made us think that she doesn't have much ability to perceive things.

*“She smiles a little at this  
black figure in her white cave”*

The **word choice** of “*little*” shows again how much her illness is limiting her: she cannot respond fully to her visitor. If he is just a “*figure*” to her, this implies that she no longer recognises him.

Q 9 The “*white cave*” has been mentioned before. Remind yourself: what ideas did those two words suggest?

As well as this, the colour **contrast** between the speaker as a “*black figure*” and her in her “*white cave*” tells us about the massive separation between them caused by her illness.

MacCaig also subverts the connotations that these colours usually have in our culture. In Britain, black suggests death - like the suit you might wear to a funeral - whereas white suggests life and happiness - like the dress a bride might wear for a wedding. Here, it is the woman in the “*white cave*” who is dying, while the “*black figure*” is alive and well.

The visit does not seem to last long. The speaker:

*“clumsily rises  
in the round swimming waves of a bell  
and dizzily goes off”*

The **word choice** of “*bell*” here has several meanings and connotations.

1. It’s just a factual detail. A bell rings in the hospital to tell people that visiting hour is over and they must leave.
2. It suggests a death knell, a bell rung to announce that someone has died.
3. It suggests a church bell being rung to say that a funeral is about to begin.

MacCaig is also suggesting **synaesthesia** here. This isn’t a literary technique, it’s a rare and fascinating blending of the senses. People who experience synaesthesia might hear colours, feel shapes, or taste sounds. The speaker here does not hear the bell with his ears, but rather feels it as “*round swimming waves*”. He may feel as if he is drowning in emotion. People he has realised that after he obeys the bell and leaves the hospital tonight, he will never see this woman alive again.

Q 10 Which **word** in line 35 also suggests that he is disorientated and confused?

The end of the poem focuses not on the speaker, but on the gifts he has left with the patient:

*“books that will not be read  
and fruitless fruits”*

Books and fruit are quite conventional gifts to bring to a patient in hospital. They are kindly meant, but in this case they are useless.

- “*Fruits*” suggest health and life, but this woman is very ill and about to die.
- “*Books*” take time to read, and a reader needs to have the mental capacity to be able to understand and follow the story. This woman is too lost in forgetfulness and confusion to appreciate a book, and may not live long enough to read to the end.

The poem ends with an **oxymoron** that shows the speaker has realised how pointless his gifts are. An **oxymoron** is a combination of words that is startling and thought-provoking because the ideas of those words clash with each other and don’t fit together. “*Fruitless*” means useless. It’s often used to mean that someone made a great effort, but that no good came of it. The speaker here has made what seems like a huge emotional effort to come to visit the woman in hospital, but after he’s gone she probably won’t even remember he was here. His visit, and his gifts, are “*fruitless*”.

## Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through all the work on 'Visting Hour' you should know the poem very well. It's time to revise your knowledge of MacCaig's techniques.

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 - a quotation	Explanation
First person	<i>"my nostrils"</i>	Works along with present tense to create a sense of immediacy, as if this is unfolding as we watch and we are being told about it
Present tense	<i>"combs my nostrils"</i>	Works along with first person to create a sense of immediacy, as if this is unfolding as we watch and we are being told about it  <i>Continue to complete your own table...</i>

Take a separate row on your table for each of these different examples of word choice: *combs, bobbing, corpse, trundled, vanishes, Heavenward, slender, burden, cave, withered, trembles, its, little, figure, dizzily, bell, fruitless*

Take a separate row on your table for each of the 3 references to colours

Then take a separate row on your table for each of these other techniques

evocative detail

stream of consciousness

use of first person

use of present tense

synecdoche

repetition of a phrase

use of adverbs

use of prepositions

use of abstracts

parallel phrases

positioning of word in stanza

caesura

a short and minor sentence

metaphor

alliteration

contrast

repetition of a single word

synaesthesia

oxymoron