Visiting Hour

By Norman MacCaig

Themes

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

Structure

- **The way a text is put together and the development of ideas in a text**

Structure of the poem

- **<u>Free verse</u>** 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).

- 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.
- Each verse reveals more of the poet's emotions.

- The poem is written in a <u>narrative structure</u>.
  - We are given an introduction, setting and character
  - We are then given further detail and development
  - Then the poem reaches a climax
  - Finally, we are given a sort of conclusion.

More on Structure

The structure of a MacCaig poem will tend to:

- have a startling opening (often humorous)

- set up a contrast (often starting with the negative side first)

- have a central point in the middle

- end with an opposite, or different, point of view

<u>Remember!</u>

- It is important to note the stanzas are structured in free verse and this almost as if we go on the journey with the speaker- we share his experience

Stream of Consciousness

- The poem is written in a **stream of consciousness style**. This means we are given the written equivalent of the character's thought processes *as he is*

  thinking them.
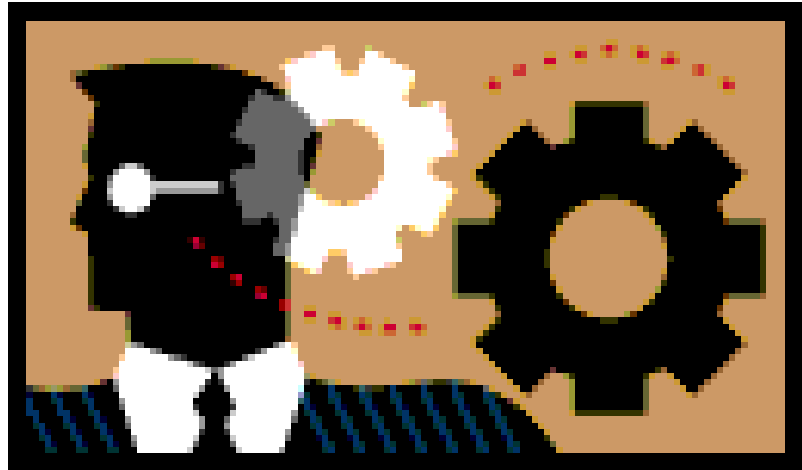
Tone

- The expression of the writer's feelings or attitude to his subject
- Starts off with a strong element of **nervous humour and progresses to sadness and despair**

Stanza 1

- <u>Summary</u> - The poet encounters the hospital smell and attempts to take his mind off what it means to him.

Introduction

- 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.

What is word-choice?

- The writer creates a mental picture for the reader by using words that are specific and accurate.

- The writer uses strong action verbs whenever possible to show the reader what is happening rather than *tell* the reader.

- **"combs my nostrils"** – **Word choice** is used to give a sense of the pervasive power of the smell, and his feeling of being invaded; showing his discomfort.

Synecdoche

- This is a <u>figure of speech</u> in which a part of something is used to refer to the whole of it. eg. "The **<u>hired hands</u>** are not doing their job properly"

- Or *Cat* referring to a lion

- **"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.

- **"green and yellow corridors"** – **word- choice** colours have connotations of sickness, urine and puss which further stresses the poet's discomfort in these surroundings.

Stanza 2

- **Summary-** However, he is immediately confronted by what hospitals are potentially about – death.

Enjambment

- **A line of verse that flows on to the next line without a pause.**

- **"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"** - **word-choice** – 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.

Imagery

- **A combined term for figurative language in the form of a simile, metaphor or personification**

- **"vanishes"** further stresses the poet's view that death is absolute.

- **"heavenward"** seems strange, - this is simply an example of MacCaig trying to avoid the seriousness of the visit by creating unusual images – **imagery**

Stanza 3

- **<u>Summary</u>** - He forces himself to keep his emotions under control.

- **"I will not feel, I will not/feel, until/ I have to."** – **Repetition and enjambment** is used to suggest the poet is chanting under his breath in order to avoid his emotions. <u>He trying to remain in control.</u>

Stanza 4

- **Summary**- He tries to occupy his mind by watching the nurses. But this, too, only turns his mind to what their job involves – suffering and death.

Syntax

- **The way in which sentences are constructed**

"here and up and down and there" – the unusual **syntax (word order)** is the poet trying to lighten the mood, while also emphasising the number of nurses he sees and their actions. It suggests MacCaig is looking all around to find a distraction from his thoughts

The unusual syntax on this line causes us to pause and consider its meaning.

- **"miraculously"** – **word- choice** suggests MacCaig's admiration for the nurses' abilities, while showing his own worry about the way he will cope with the emotions.

- **"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.

- **"farewells"** – the ending of the verse on this draws attention to the word, which underlines the <u>purpose of his visit.</u>

Stanza 5

- **Summary**- He arrives at the ward where his wife lies. He is shocked by what he sees – in a white environment, doped up with morphine and on a drip. He has difficulty making this fit with the woman he knows.

"Ward 7." **– caesura** is a pause that breaks up a line of verse.

– The **abruptness of this non sentence jolts the reader**, just as we can imagine it affected MacCaig. This is **the turning point of the poem**, as he has now reached his relative and must face his emotions.

References to structure

- **"What seems a corpse/ is trundled into a lift and vanishes/ heavenward"** – <u>**Enjambment**</u>

- **"I will not feel, I will not/ feel, until/ I have to."** – **Repetition**

- **"here and up and down and there"** – the unusual **syntax (word order)**

- **"so much pain, so/ many deaths …/ so many farewells"** **– Repetition**