



University of Glasgow Scottish Literature
in the Classroom

Poems by Norman MacCaig for National 5 and Higher
English:

‘On Lachie’s croft’



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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on poems by Norman MacCaig. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

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Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

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Context

Poem overview

‘On Lachie’s Croft’ explores themes of masculinity, vulnerability and the loss of power through the comparison of the speaker and a rooster. Although the title names the crofter, Lachie never appears nor is he described. His absence emphasises the theme of isolation.

- Stanza 1 introduces the rooster, with descriptions that reflect its appearance and character.
- Stanza 2 shifts inward, focusing on the speaker’s emotional state. By comparing himself to the rooster, the speaker highlights shared weakness and vulnerability.
- Stanza 3 observes the hens, whose attentive behaviour contrasts with the failings and isolation of both rooster and speaker.
- Stanza 4 moves towards reflection as the speaker acknowledges his lack of control.

By juxtaposing human and animal experience, MacCaig highlights the connection between self and environment. The poem suggests that loneliness and imperfection are shared across species.

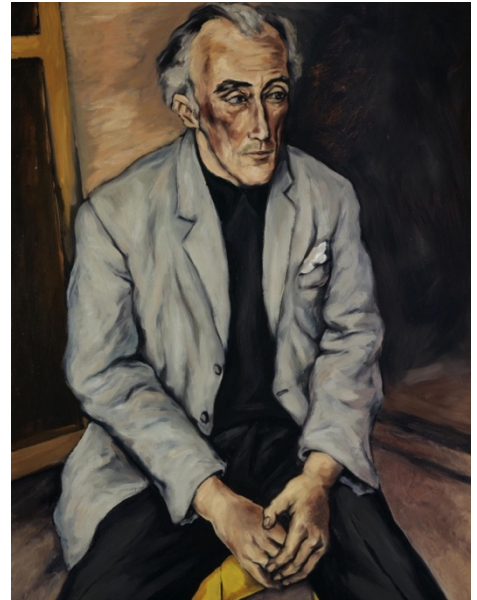
Author background

Norman MacCaig (1910–1996) was a Scottish poet and teacher. He studied Classics at the University of Edinburgh before working as a primary school teacher. His first poetry collection appeared in 1943, and he went on to publish a further fifteen volumes over his lifetime. In 1967 he became Edinburgh University’s first Creative Writing fellow and later served as a Reader in Poetry at Stirling University.

Although he lived and worked in Edinburgh, MacCaig was deeply connected to the Highlands and Islands. His maternal family came from Scalpay, a small Gaelic-speaking island off the coast of Harris in the Outer Hebrides. Visits to Scalpay in his youth had a lasting influence on MacCaig, who later said he felt ‘I belonged to people in a way that I hadn’t before’.

Across the sea from Scalpay is Assynt, a region of the North-West Highlands where MacCaig and his wife and children spent their summers. Many of his poems feature Highlanders and Islanders – including his aunt Julia, uncles Seumas and Roderick, and his friend Angus MacLeod – and their ways of life.

MacCaig held a deep appreciation for the natural world. He called landscape his ‘substitute for religion and politics’ and felt that ‘some kind of web’ connects landscape and people (‘Personal Pursuits: A Poet’s Workshop’, 1974). Animals and birds frequently appear in his poetry, often reflecting human nature and the connection between species.



‘Norman MacCaig 1910–1996. Poet’ (1968) by Alexander Moffat.
[National Galleries of Scotland](#)

Publication details

‘On Lachie’s Croft’ was written in 1986 and published in MacCaig’s final collection, *Voice-over* (Chatto & Windus, 1988). The tone of his later work is often that of an observer looking back on life, addressing the passage of time, the loss of friends, and his own encroaching mortality with a conversational, direct and sometimes self-deprecating voice.

Online resources

[BBC Bitesize](#) provides a revision guide for students on ‘On Lachie’s croft’.

[Norman MacCaig](#) on the Scottish Poetry Library’s website includes a biography, a bibliography of MacCaig’s work, and a selection of his poems.

[Norman MacCaig: A Man in My Position](#) (1977), a 30-minute film in which MacCaig talks about his work.

The version of 'On Lachie's croft' printed here and published on the [Scottish Poetry Library website](#) is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

'On Lachie's croft'

by Norman MacCaig

On Lachie's croft the cock stands
under the wheelbarrow. What's wrong? – He's bedraggled.
Where are his military elegance,
his gauleiter manners, his insufferable conceit?
I'll call him rooster, it seems more fitting. 5

I, too, feel bedraggled and haphazard; something
has filched my compass, I'm breathing black air.
I look at that rooster, I look at me.
His hens scratch the ground, step back
and peer at the scratches. They make 10
motherly sounds, so cosy, so fireside.

But he opens his gummy eyes, looks at me
and utters, no tortured trumpet call,
but a barren croak.

I breathe black air, I poke at 15
my rumpled feathers, I can't stand on tiptoe.
How I miss my cosy brown hens.
How I miss their motherly clucking.
I'm master of nothing I survey.

Croft

A croft is a small area of agricultural land, traditionally found in the rural Highlands and Islands of Scotland. It usually consists of a modest house with a small area of land used for growing crops and keeping animals.



Image: Croft land above the Kyle of Sutherland. Photo by Gordon Hatton.
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War and pacifism

Norman MacCaig was a committed pacifist and spent time in prison for refusing to fight in the Second World War. Pacifism rejects violence and also questions authority based on dominance and force.

‘On Lachie’s Croft’ reflects these views through the ironic use of military language, which presents authority as arrogant rather than admirable. The speaker’s admission that he is ‘master of nothing that I survey’ reinforces this pacifist perspective. It suggests that true understanding comes not from power over others but from humility and recognising shared vulnerability.

Alexander Selkirk

Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor and the real-life inspiration for *Robinson Crusoe*, was marooned alone on a remote island for four years. The poem 'The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk' (1782) by William Cowper opens with the line 'I am monarch of all I survey', which presents Selkirk claiming dominion over the surrounding land and animals. MacCaig inverts this statement in the final line of his poem, using Selkirk's story as a literary reference to explore themes of human fragility and the limits of authority.

Full analysis

Form and structure

'On Lachie's Croft' is divided into four stanzas, each functioning as a scene or a pause in thought. The poem is written in free verse with irregular, unrhymed lines and enjambment. This creates a conversational tone and allows the poem to shift between external observation and internal reflection.

Structurally, the poem moves from detached observation to personal identification, creating a clear progression in thought. It begins with the speaker describing the rooster from a distance, but as the stanzas develop, the focus shifts inwards until the speaker openly aligns himself with the bird. This gradual merging of observer and subject mirrors the speaker's growing self-awareness and emotional exposure.

Speaker

The speaker presents himself as disorientated and emotionally unsettled. Throughout the poem he emerges as vulnerable and introspective.

The speaker recognises in the rooster a reflection of his own powerlessness and loss of pride. He feels stripped of control and certainty, as though he no longer has mastery over his surroundings or even over himself. This sense of dislocation is particularly striking within the croft setting, a place typically associated with self-sufficiency and authority over the land. Here the speaker is 'master of nothing', highlighting his failure to inhabit that role.

At the same time, the speaker reveals a deep longing for comfort and belonging. While the hens appear secure and domesticated, he feels excluded from their sense of cosy assurance. His tone combines bleakness with dry self-awareness, suggesting that he recognises the irony of his own fallen pride.

Lines 1–2

On Lachie's croft the cock stands
under the wheelbarrow. What's wrong? – He's bedraggled.

The opening situates the poem in a rural, Scottish smallholding. Traditionally, a rooster symbolises pride and dominance. The enjambed line 'the cock stands / under' momentarily creates an expectation of authority, which is immediately undercut by the bird's position. This image of the rooster suggests confinement, weakness and a loss of confidence.

The question and caesura ('What's wrong? –') create an informal, conversational tone, as if the speaker is speaking aloud and expecting a response. 'Bedraggled' suggests disorder or neglect, setting a mood that is slightly comic but also sympathetic.

These opening lines establish the central comparison between the rooster and the speaker, and foreshadow themes of vulnerability and the loss of control.

Lines 3–5

Where are his military elegance,
his gauleiter manners, his insufferable conceit?
I'll call him rooster, it seems more fitting.

The speaker's list of exaggerated descriptions uses irony and humour to emphasise the rooster's fall from pride. 'Military elegance' suggests formal dignity, making the bird's current state even more striking and pitiable, while 'insufferable conceit' implies arrogance. 'Gauleiter' is a historical allusion to Nazi regional officials, suggesting not only authoritarian power but also localised tyranny. The rooster is imagined as the ruler of a small domain, much like a gauleiter presiding over a limited territory. This anticipates the speaker's later admission that he is "master of nothing that I survey", reinforcing the

theme of diminished authority. These phrases reflect traditional markers of masculinity – pride, authority and command – now undermined by weakness and disorder.

The speaker's decision to 'call him rooster' signals a deliberate return to reality. This anticipates his own self-reflection and recognition of his limitations.

Lines 6–8

I, too, feel bedraggled and haphazard; something
has filched my compass, I'm breathing black air.
I look at that rooster, I look at me.

The poem shifts from observation to personal identification. The phrase 'I, too' and the adjective previously used to describe the rooster ('bedraggled') signal that the speaker now sees a reflection of himself in the bird. This marks a turn from humour to empathy and introspection.

The use of a semi-colon maintains the flow of thought and links the speaker's emotional state with its cause. 'Something' is deliberately vague, creating ambiguity that mirrors the speaker's sense of powerlessness. The metaphor 'filched my compass' suggests a loss of direction of purpose, while 'breathing black air' evokes emotional oppression or existential heaviness.

The speaker's use of repetition ('I look at that rooster, I look at me') indicates self-reflection and highlights the mirroring relationship between animal and human.

Lines 9–11

His hens scratch the ground, step back
and peer at the scratches. They make
motherly sounds, so cosy, so fireside.

The possessive pronoun in 'his hens' reinforces the rooster's traditional role in the farm hierarchy. However, the hens' calm, methodical behaviour continues independently, suggesting that the rooster's authority is now irrelevant.

Gentle, precise imagery emphasises the hens' routine and self-sufficiency. The personification of the hens ('They make / motherly sounds') associates them with maternal nurture and safety. Repetition and assonance ('so cosy, so fireside') create a soothing rhythm and evoke warmth and domestic comfort, highlighting the speaker's longing for care and belonging.

Lines 12–14

But he opens his gummy eyes, looks at me
and utters, no tortured trumpet call,
but a barren croak.

The conjunction 'But' signals a shift in expectation. The reader might anticipate the rooster reasserting his authority with a loud, confident crow.

'Gummy eyes' creates an unpleasant image that suggests age, illness or weakness, stripping the rooster of vitality and dignity. 'Looks at me' creates a moment of shared vulnerability between bird and speaker.

The metaphor 'tortured trumpet call' evokes power and dominance. This contrasts with the reality: 'barren' implies emptiness, while 'croak' suggests weakness and even mortality.

Crowing is central to a rooster's identity; its failure to do so here represents a loss of purpose, mirroring the speaker's own sense of inadequacy.

Lines 15–18

I breathe black air, I poke at
my rumpled feathers, I can't stand on tiptoe.
How I miss my cosy brown hens.
How I miss their motherly clucking.

The speaker fully adopts the rooster's imagery, dissolving the boundary between human and animal experience. Repetition of 'I' creates a list-like structure, implying self-scrutiny and weariness.

The return of 'black air' is significant, suggesting that this sense of suffocation is persistent and inescapable rather than momentary. The image implies a contamination of both the speaker's environment and inner state. In a crofting context, it may also evoke the smoke-filled atmosphere of traditional dwellings, blending physical and psychological discomfort.

The speaker's 'rumpled feathers' symbolise lost dignity. His admission that 'I can't stand on tiptoe' suggests physical weakness but also implies an inability to rise or assert oneself.

The repetition of 'How I miss...' emphasises longing for care and nurture, which the hens represent. This reinforces the theme that belonging and comfort are more valuable than authority or control.

Line 19

I'm master of nothing I survey.

The final line alludes to 'The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk' (1782) by William Cowper, which opens with 'I am monarch of all I survey'. The original line expresses control and authority, even in isolation.

MacCaig's ironic reversal of Cowper's line exposes the illusion of such mastery. Instead of dominance, the speaker acknowledges powerlessness and humility. By comparing himself to a bedraggled rooster, the speaker acknowledges the fragility of authority. The poem ends in quiet self-awareness, reinforcing its central themes of vulnerability and human limitation.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What does the poem's title tell you about the setting and whose perspective the poem might explore?
- Who is Lachie, and why is he absent from the poem?
- How does the rooster's position 'under the wheelbarrow' influence your first impression of the bird?
- List any unusual words or references. How do they affect your understanding of the poem?
- How does the poem make animals seem like reflections of human experience?
- Why might MacCaig choose a rural croft as the setting for exploring human emotions? How might the poem feel different if set elsewhere?

Techniques

- Why does MacCaig use first-person narration in the poem?
- What is the effect of free verse and irregular lines?
- Identify examples of contrast and comparison in the poem. How do these relate to the poem's themes?
- Identify examples of repetition. What do these suggest about the speaker's feelings?

Themes

- How does the poem explore vulnerability and the loss of power?
- What does the poem suggest about masculinity and authority?
- How are isolation and loneliness presented? How do the hens' actions contrast with these themes?
- How does the poem reflect MacCaig's pacifist beliefs?

Practice Questions

National 5

Look at lines 1–4.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the poet creates a clear impression of the rooster. (2 marks)

Look at lines 6–8.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the poet makes the speaker's feelings clear. (2 marks)

Look at lines 9–14.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet shows that the hens and the rooster are different. (4 marks)

Look at lines 15–19.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet creates a sense of hopelessness. (4 marks)

By referring to this poem and at least one other poem by MacCaig, show how the poet explores the theme of isolation. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that Norman MacCaig's 'On Lachie's croft' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'Aunt Julia'
- 'Hotel Room, 12th Floor'
- 'Basking Shark'
- 'Landscape and I'
- 'Old Highland Woman'

Higher

Look at lines 1–8.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the speaker's identification with the rooster. (4 marks)

Look at lines 9–14.

Analyse how the poet's use of language contrasts the hens with the rooster. (2 marks)

Look at lines 15–19.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language creates an effective conclusion to the poem. (4 marks)

By referring to this poem and at least one other poem by MacCaig, discuss how the poet uses strong emotions to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Poems that Norman MacCaig's 'On Lachie's croft' might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- 'Aunt Julia'
- 'Hotel Room, 12th Floor'
- 'Basking Shark'
- 'Landscape and I'
- 'Old Highland Woman'

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.

