



University of Glasgow Scottish Literature
in the Classroom

Poems by Norman MacCaig for National 5 and Higher
English:

‘Old Highland Woman’



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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

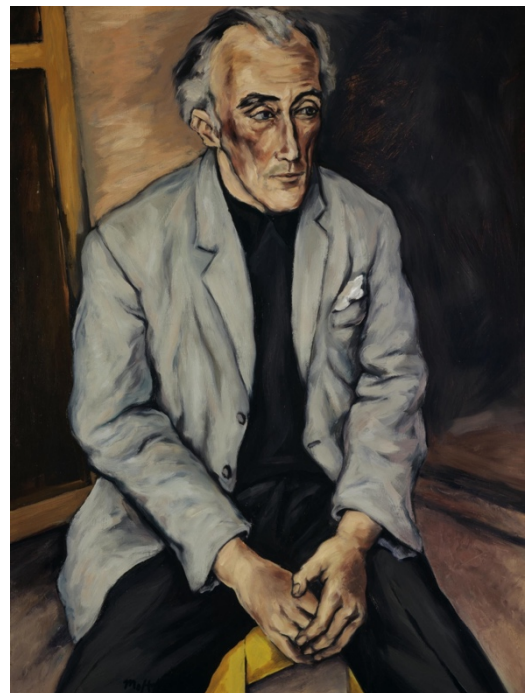
‘Old Highland Woman’ presents a portrait of an elderly woman from a rural Scottish community and explores the themes of ageing, memory, cultural heritage and the passing of time. The title is significant in its simplicity; the woman is not named, and ‘Highland’ gestures to a cultural identity rather than a specific location. This presents the woman as an archetypal figure who carries within her the experiences and traditions of her community. The poem moves between past and present, highlighting the contrast between the woman’s physical decline and the enduring weight of the history she embodies.

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.



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

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.

Publication details

‘Old Highland Woman’ was written in May 1984 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 ‘Old Highland Woman’.

[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 'Old Highland Woman' 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.

'Old Highland Woman'

by Norman MacCaig

She sits all day by the fire.
How long is it since she opened the door
and stepped outside, confusing
the scuffling hens and the collie
dreaming of sheep? 5
Her walking days are over.

She has come through centuries
of Gaelic labour and loves
and rainy funerals. Her people
are assembled in her bones. 10
She's their summation. *Before her time*
has almost no meaning.

When neighbours call
she laughs a wicked cackle
with love in it, as she listens 15
to the sly bristle of gossip,
relishing the life in it,
relishing the malice, with her hands
lying in her lap like holy psalms
that once had a meaning for her, that once 20
were noble with tunes
she used to sing long ago.

Cultural heritage

‘Old Highland Woman’ is deeply rooted in rural life and reflects the experience of traditional communities in the Gàidhealtachd (Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Islands) during the twentieth century. Life was closely tied to the land, and strong emphasis was placed on communal work and rituals, including music, storytelling, and religious practices. Over time, economic, social and religious changes contributed to the decline of some traditional practices.

The legacy of the Highland Clearances and subsequent depopulation also forms part of the historical backdrop, contributing to the long-term decline and transformation of traditional Highland communities.

Full analysis

Form and structure

‘Old Highland Woman’ is written in free verse, with no regular rhyme scheme or fixed metre. This form mirrors the natural rhythms of thought and speech, reinforcing the sense that the poem is rooted in lived experience. Short, declarative statements serve as structural anchors, highlighting key ideas about ageing and cultural inheritance.

Structurally, the poem progresses through a series of thematic movements:

- Stanza 1 focuses on the physical and stillness and confinement of the old woman in the present day.
- Stanza 2 offers a historical and cultural perspective, presenting the woman as the embodiment of Gaelic life.
- Stanza 3 blends the present and past, depicting the woman’s character alongside the loss of religious traditions.

Speaker

The speaker of the poem is a third-person observer whose tone is affectionate but unsentimental. Their intimate knowledge of the woman’s habits, personality and culture suggests familiarity, as though they are speaking from within her community rather than as

a detached outsider. The speaker's portrait does not romanticise or idealise the old woman, but rather acknowledges and values her lively, complex character.

The speaker's perspective blends the personal and the cultural, presenting the woman as a recognisable individual and as a representation of a wider Gaelic tradition.

Lines 1–5

She sits all day by the fire.
How long is it since she opened the door
and stepped outside, confusing
the scuffling hens and the collie
dreaming of sheep?

The poem opens on an image of a woman that immediately establishes her physical stillness and age. The phrase 'sits all day' suggests routine and comfort, but also emphasises the extent of her inactivity. The fire evokes warmth, home and domesticity.

The open-ended question draws attention to the indefinite passage of time, highlighting the woman's disconnection from the outside world. 'Confusing' implies that leaving the house would now be a disruptive and unusual event, underlining how restricted her life has become.

The stillness of the woman's home contrasts sharply with the lively natural world outside. 'Hens' and 'collie' situate her home in a rural setting, while 'scuffling' and 'dreaming' show that life continues its rhythms without her. This reinforces the gap between her inner life and the external world.

Line 6

Her walking days are over.

The short, blunt statement underscores the woman's physical decline. Its unsentimental simplicity highlights the inevitability of ageing.

Beyond the physical, this line signals the end of her independence, connection to the land, and active participation in communal life. In traditional rural communities, walking was central to social and economic life – for work, travel, and social bonding.

This simple sentence encapsulates both personal limitation and cultural separation.

Lines 7–10

She has come through centuries
of Gaelic labour and loves
and rainy funerals. Her people
are assembled in her bones.

‘She has come through’ contrasts with the woman’s present physical stillness and highlights her endurance and agency. ‘Centuries’ links her to the weight of tradition, suggesting that she embodies the collective experience of many generations.

The list ‘labour and loves and rainy funerals’ compresses life, work, relationships and grief into a succinct, almost ritualistic sequence. The preceding ‘Gaelic’ frames these experiences as communal, historic, and culturally specific, rather than purely personal. The patterned phrasing also carries an incantatory quality, perhaps echoing older poetic or oral traditions. At the same time, images such as ‘rainy funerals’ draw on a wider cultural imagination of Highland life, suggesting experiences that are both lived and culturally remembered.



A Highland Funeral (1882) by Sir James Guthrie.

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The metaphor ‘Her people / are assembled in her bones’ conveys that her body carries ancestral memory and tradition, emphasising intergenerational continuity.

Lines 11–12

*She’s their summation. Before her time
has almost no meaning.*

The short statement ‘She’s their summation’ positions the woman as the culmination of her people’s history, a living repository of her community’s culture. It may also suggest her role in sustaining oral traditions, which were often preserved through women’s voices. This idea is developed in the following lines, where her enjoyment of gossip reflects participation in an ongoing communal form of storytelling.

The phrase ‘before her time’ is a common idiom. The italics signal a degree of distance between the speaker and the phrase, which may represent the uninformed view of someone unaware of the deep historical and cultural knowledge the woman carries.

Lines 13–18

*When neighbours call
she laughs a wicked cackle
with love in it, as she listens
to the sly bristle of gossip,

relishing the life in it,
relishing the malice,*

Despite her physical confinement, the woman remains socially active and mentally alert. The active verbs ‘laughs’ and ‘listens’ signal her engagement with others is ongoing and lively.

The description of her laugh combines mischief and warmth, portraying the woman as a complex, lively character. ‘Bristle’ implies sharpness, while ‘sly’ conveys secrecy and amusement.

The repetition of ‘relishing’ highlights her active enjoyment of human interaction. She savours both the vitality (‘the life in it’) and the darker side of social life (‘the malice’). This characterisation refuses a sentimental or idealised portrayal of old age, and challenges stereotypical assumptions that old age dulls the spirit.

Lines 18–22

with her hands
lying in her lap like holy psalms
that once had a meaning for her, that once
were noble with tunes
she used to sing long ago.

Although the image of the woman’s hands ‘lying in her lap’ evokes stillness, the simile comparing them to psalms links her body to communal life through shared ritual and tradition.

‘Holy’ and ‘noble’ carry sacred connotations, emphasising the spiritual and cultural significance of the psalms and tunes. However, we learn that these no longer hold ‘a meaning for her’. The phrase ‘long ago’ and the repetition of ‘once’ emphasise the passage of time, showing that her active faith belongs to a distant past.

This loss is not presented as purely personal: as the ‘summation’ of her people, the woman’s disengagement from religious practice suggests the erosion of faith within Gaelic society itself. This may also reflect broader demographic change: the poem’s focus on a solitary elderly figure, with only a brief reference to ‘neighbours’, hints at the decline of younger generations and the fragmentation of once close-knit communities. In this way, individual ageing links to long-term cultural change.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What does the title ‘Old Highland Woman’ suggest about the poem’s focus? Why might MacCaig choose not to name the woman?
- What do you know, or what can you find out, about traditional Highland ways of life that might help you understand the poem?
- How does the poem establish a sense of place?

Techniques

- Why does MacCaig use a third-person speaker? How does this affect our response to the woman?
- What is the effect of the poem moving between present-day observation and historical reflection?
- How does the poem use imagery from everyday rural life to develop character and theme?
- How do similes and metaphors link the woman’s body to culture and memory?

Themes

- In what ways is the woman presented as both an individual and a symbol of her community?
- How does the poem explore the passage of time?
- How does the poem challenge stereotypical or idealised portrayals of old age?
- To what extent is the poem about loss, and to what extent is the poem about endurance?

Practice Questions

National 5

Look at lines 1–6.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet shows that the woman is physically inactive. (4 marks)

Look at lines 7–12.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet shows the woman's strong connection to her community. (4 marks)

Look at lines 13–16.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the poet creates a clear impression of the woman's lively character. (2 marks)

Look at lines 17–22.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the poet makes clear that the woman has changed over time. (2 marks)

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

NB. Poems that Norman MacCaig's 'Old Highland Woman' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'Aunt Julia'
- 'Hotel Room, 12th Floor'
- 'Basking Shark'
- 'Landscape and I'
- 'On Lachie's croft'

Higher

Look at lines 1–6.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language presents the woman as disconnected from the outside world. (4 marks)

Look at lines 7–12.

Analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the woman as a symbol of her community. (2 marks)

Look at lines 13–22.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys different aspects of the woman's character. (4 marks)

By referring to this extract and to at least one other poem by MacCaig, discuss how the poet uses setting in time and/or place to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Poems that Norman MacCaig's 'Old Highland Woman' might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- 'Aunt Julia'
- 'Hotel Room, 12th Floor'
- 'Basking Shark'
- 'Landscape and I'
- 'On Lachie's croft'

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.

