



University of Glasgow Scottish Literature
in the Classroom

Poems by Norman MacCaig for National 5 and Higher
English:

‘Landscape and I’



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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

‘Landscape and I’ explores the themes of nature, communication and the relationship between people and the environment. The poem portrays MacCaig’s love and respect for the natural world, a common theme in his work.

In the opening stanza, the speaker establishes a relationship with the landscape based on listening and attention. Although the speaker is ‘talkative’, he recognises that the natural world communicates in quieter, more indirect ways. This introduces the poem’s central idea, that meaning in nature is revealed through careful observation and openness, and establishes the theme of interconnectedness between people and the environment.

Stanzas 2, 3 and 4 focus on specific moments in nature:

- the movement of the loch
- the flight of the lark
- the hawk’s act of predation.

Each image reveals a different aspect of the natural world, from continuity and renewal to transience and instinct. Together, these moments show that nature is complex and multi-faceted, and that understanding it requires patience. While individual moments are fleeting, the natural world itself endures.

In stanza 5, the speaker recognises that Schiehallion – the place from which he has observed these moments – is ‘more than mountain’. The landscape holds personal and philosophical meaning. The final stanza turns this insight into a direct message for the reader: opportunities for meaning exist everywhere, but they require effort. The poem ends with a clear imperative to actively engage with our surrounding environment.

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

'Landscape and I' was written in May 1972 and published in *The World's Room* (Chatto & Windus, 1974).

Online resources

[BBC Bitesize](#) provides a revision guide for students on 'Landscape and I'.

[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 'Landscape and I' 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.

'Landscape and I'

by Norman MacCaig

Landscape and I get on together well.
Though I'm the talkative one, still he can tell
His symptoms of being to me, the way a shell
Murmurs of oceans.

Loch Rannoch lapses dimpling in the sun. 5
Its hieroglyphs of light fade one by one
But re-create themselves, their message done,
For ever and ever.

That sprinkling lark jerked upward in the blue
Will daze to nowhere but leave himself in true 10
Translation – hear his song cascading through
His disappearance.

The hawk knows all about it, shaking there
An empty glove on steep chutes of the air
Till his yellow foot cramps on a squeal, to tear 15
Smooth fur, smooth feather.

This means, of course, Schiehallion in my mind
Is more than mountain. In it he leaves behind
A meaning, an idea, like a hind
Couched in a corrie. 20

So then I'll woo the mountain till I know
The meaning of the meaning, no less. Oh,
There's a Schiehallion anywhere you go.
The thing is, climb it.

Loch Rannoch and Schiehallion

The places referred to in the poem are located in the Central Grampian Highlands of Perthshire. Loch Rannoch is a long, narrow freshwater loch. It is thought that the name of the loch derives either from the Scottish Gaelic *raineach*, meaning bracken, or *ratheanach*, meaning watery. Loch Rannoch is located along the historic main route north to Scotland's west coast, known as the Road to the Isles. The area is sparsely populated, with small settlements dotted along the north side of the loch.

To the south-east of Loch Rannoch is Schiehallion, a Munro (a Scottish mountain over 3000ft) that rises in isolation from its neighbouring peaks. Its name derives from the Gaelic *Sìth*, meaning fairy, and *Chailleann*, meaning Caledonia (an ancient name for Scotland). Schiehallion is an ecologically diverse mountain, with a range of habitats from heather-covered slopes to rocky summit areas and small patches of woodland. This variety supports many species of birds, mammals and insects.



Image: Schiehallion from Loch Rannoch.

Photo by Anne Burgess, licensed under [CC By-SA 2.0](#)

Full analysis

Form and structure

‘Landscape and I’ is written in six quatrains (four-line stanzas). Each stanza follows a distinctive rhyme scheme: AAAB, CCCD, etc. The first three lines of each stanza are relatively long (9–12 syllables), allowing ideas to unfold in a measured, reflective way. The final line of each stanza is shorter (5–6 syllables) and does not rhyme. This slows the reader down and draws attention to a key image or idea. This pattern reflects how the poem works overall: sustained observation followed by moments of insight.

The poem uses enjambment throughout, allowing images and ideas to flow across line breaks despite the strict stanza structure. This mirrors the continuous movement of the natural world and suggests that meaning is not delivered neatly, but gradually.

Structurally, the poem progresses:

- from general statements about the speaker’s relationship with the landscape
- to specific observations (loch, lark, hawk)
- to a philosophical conclusion, ending with an instruction: ‘The thing is, climb it.’

Overall, the balance of control and variation reflects one of the poem’s central ideas: nature has order, but understanding it requires patience, attention and active engagement.

Speaker

The poem is written in the first person. The speaker is thoughtful and observant, seeking a meaningful relationship with the natural world.

The speaker describes himself as ‘the talkative one’, which suggests a human tendency to explain and dominate through language. However, the speaker also recognises the importance of listening. The landscape communicates quietly and indirectly, and the speaker shows respect for this.

As the poem progresses, the speaker’s role develops:

- first as an observer of nature
- then as an interpreter, drawing meaning from what he sees
- finally as a teacher, addressing the reader directly.

By the end of the poem, the speaker suggests that understanding nature – and life more broadly – requires effort and engagement rather than passive observation.

Lines 1–4

Landscape and I get on together well.
Though I'm the talkative one, still he can tell
His symptoms of being to me, the way a shell
Murmurs of oceans.

The opening stanza establishes an intimate, almost conversational relationship between the speaker and the landscape. The tone is reflective and warm. Notably, the landscape is personified using masculine pronouns. This subtly challenges the more familiar idea of nature as feminine (for example, Mother Nature); rather than a nurturing or maternal presence, landscape is presented as a companion.

The speaker's self-description as 'the talkative one' suggests a tendency to fill silence with words but also indicates the speaker's self-awareness. In contrast to the speaker, the landscape communicates quietly but still reveals to him its 'symptoms of being'. This suggests there is a mutual openness between them.

The phrase 'symptoms of being' suggests that nature expresses itself subtly rather than directly, an idea that is reinforced by the speaker's use of simile ('the way a shell / murmurs of oceans'). This line illustrates the way that small details can reveal vast truths.

Lines 5–8

Loch Rannoch lapses dimpling in the sun.
Its hieroglyphs of light fade one by one
But re-create themselves, their message done,
For ever and ever.

Stanza 2 grounds the poem in a real place, Loch Rannoch. The verb 'lapses' suggests both gentle movement and the passing of time – the loch continuously shifts yet endures. The verb 'dimpling' gives the loch a soft, almost human quality.

Sunlight on the water is described as ‘hieroglyphs’, suggesting a coded language. Nature has meaning, but must be interpreted carefully. The patterns ‘fade’ then ‘recreate’, highlighting the cyclical and self-renewing nature of the landscape.

Repetition (“for ever and ever”) emphasises the enduring rhythms of nature. While individual moments are transient, the natural world continues indefinitely.

Lines 9–12

That sprinkling lark jerked upward in the blue
Will daze to nowhere but leave himself in true
Translation – hear his song cascading through
His disappearance.

The focus shifts to a lark in flight. ‘Sprinkling’ suggests lightness and fragmentation, likening the bird’s movement to water scattering. ‘Jerked’ contrasts with this delicacy, introducing a sudden motion that captures the unpredictable energy of the bird in flight. ‘Daze to nowhere’ suggests disorientation and elusiveness. The bird – and nature more generally – cannot be fully grasped or pinned down.

The exploration of language and meaning continues. The rhyme ‘blue’ and ‘true’ links what we see with what we understand. The lark’s flight in the sky becomes a symbol for the way nature can communicate meaning.

Although the bird disappears, its song remains. The phrase ‘true / Translation’ suggests that even fleeting experiences can communicate lasting meaning. The instruction to listen (‘Hear his song’) reflects one of the poem’s central ideas that understanding nature requires active engagement.

Lines 13–14

The hawk knows all about it, shaking there
An empty glove on steep chutes of the air

Unlike the speaker, who must reflect and interpret, the hawk instinctively understands how nature works. For example, the flight or disappearance seen in stanza 3 is a natural

process that, as a predator, the hawk understands. The two stanzas suggest interconnected cycles of movement, presence and absence in nature.

‘Shaking there’ conveys tension, control and physical effort. The hawk does not drift passively; it actively holds itself in position against the air. This presents a moment of suspension before the hawk strikes. The metaphor ‘an empty glove’ suggests the outline of wings and body held open. This gives the hawk a weightless quality, as if the bird were being worn by the sky itself.

‘Steep chutes of the air’ reinforces the height at which the hawk operates. It also suggests that the sky has contours or gradients, like a mountain.



Image: Red kite.

Photo by Kevin Clarke. Licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

Lines 15–16

Till his yellow foot cramps on a squeal, to tear
Smooth fur, smooth feather.

When the hawk strikes, the language becomes sudden and physical. ‘Cramps’ suggests an abrupt, involuntary tightening, highlighting the instinctive nature of the hawk’s movement. The prey, which is reduced to a ‘squeal’, lacks a visual description, which avoids sentimentality and presents predation as a natural process rather than a moral event. The verb ‘tear’ is blunt and visceral.

‘Smooth fur, smooth feather’ links and blurs distinctions between animals. This reinforces the idea that nature is impartial. The repetition of ‘smooth’ also suggests unbroken surfaces, which are suddenly disrupted by the hawk’s attack, highlighting the collision between predator and prey. The line remains emotionally restrained, however, mirroring the speaker’s objective, observant stance.

Lines 17–20

This means, of course, Schiehallion in my mind
Is more than mountain. In it he leaves behind
A meaning, an idea, like a hind
Couched in a corrie.

The speaker reaches a moment of insight. The phrase ‘of course’ suggests that this understanding now feels obvious, that careful and sustained observation naturally leads to knowledge.

The personified landscape of the opening stanza is identified as Schiehallion. It is from this mountain that the speaker has observed the loch, lark and hawk. Alliteration (‘in my mind / is more than mountain’) emphasises the speaker’s belief that Schiehallion is not merely a physical place but a site of personal and philosophical significance.

Schiehallion exists ‘in’ the speaker’s mind, just as the speaker exists in the landscape, showing a two-way relationship between them. The mountain ‘leaves behind / A meaning, an idea’, just as the lark leaves its song earlier in the poem. This highlights the lasting impression that nature makes.

The simile ‘like a hind / Couched in a corrie’ suggests that meaning is hidden but present, waiting to be discovered. A hind is a female red deer. The term ‘corrie’ comes from the Scottish Gaelic ‘coire’, meaning cauldron, and refers to a steep-sided hollow on a mountainside. ‘Couched’ means ‘lying down’, but also refers to something expressed carefully, which links this image to the poem’s wider concern with language and how meaning is communicated.

Lines 21–22

So then I'll woo the mountain till I know
The meaning of the meaning, no less. Oh,

'So then' signals continuation. This suggests that the speaker's understanding of the landscape is part of an ongoing journey, rather than a final conclusion.

The phrase 'I'll woo the mountain' personifies the mountain through metaphor, presenting the idea that understanding must be pursued patiently and respectfully. Knowledge cannot be forced; it has to be earned through sustained attention and commitment.

The speaker's desire to 'know / the meaning of the meaning, no less' suggests that he wants to move beyond surface observation towards a deeper, more abstract understanding. The interjection 'Oh' suggests a moment of realisation or quiet pleasure.

Lines 23–24

There's a Schiehallion anywhere you go.
The thing is, climb it.

The statement in line 23 universalises the speaker's experience. It suggests that opportunities for meaning exist everywhere, not just in this specific landscape.

The use of direct address draws the reader into the poem for the first time. This positions the speaker as a mediator between the landscape and the reader, transforming personal insight into shared wisdom.

The final short sentence clearly states the poem's central message: meaning and understanding cannot be gained from a distance. It must be actively pursued through effort, engagement and experience.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What do you know, or what can you find out, about Schiehallion and its surroundings?
- What does the title suggest about the poem's focus or perspective?
- Why might MacCaig describe the landscape as a companion rather than just a setting?
- List any unusual words or phrases in the poem. How might you interpret them?
- How does the poem make nature seem alive or capable of communicating?
- Would the poem feel different if it were written about an urban environment instead of the Highlands? Why or why not?

Techniques

- Why does MacCaig use first-person narration? How does this affect the way we understand the landscape?
- What is the effect of the poem being written in present tense?
- What is the effect of the short final lines in each stanza?
- Identify the imagery and metaphors used to describe the loch, the lark and the hawk. How do they differ from one another?
- Why does the speaker address the reader directly at the end of the poem?

Themes

- How does the poem explore the relationship between humans and nature? In what ways is it personal and in what ways universal?
- How does the poem explore the idea that meaning in nature comes from careful observation and engagement?
- What does it mean to 'woo the mountain' or 'climb it' in the context of the poem? How might this apply to experiences outside of nature?
- How does the poem suggest that understanding comes through experience rather than explanation? Can you relate this to moments in your own life when close observation or sustained attention revealed something new?

Practice Questions

National 5

Look at lines 1–8.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet makes the landscape seem human. (4 marks)

Look at lines 9–16.

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

Look at lines 17–20.

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

Look at lines 21–24.

By referring to one example of language, explain why this is an effective ending. (2 marks)

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

NB. Poems that Norman MacCaig's 'Landscape and I' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'Aunt Julia'
- 'Hotel Room, 12th Floor'
- 'Basking Shark'
- 'On Lachie's croft'
- 'Old Highland Woman'

Higher

Look at lines 1–8.

By referring to two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the sense that nature communicates with the speaker. (4 marks)

Look at lines 9–16.

Analyse how the poet's use of language conveys nature as powerful. (2 marks)

Look at lines 17–24.

By referring to two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the speaker's admiration of the natural world. (4 marks)

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

NB. Poems that Norman MacCaig's 'Landscape and I' might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

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

